Embodying Diversity: Malaka Gharib’s Graphic Memoir

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Malaka Gharib’s *I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir* (2019) uses humor and a child’s perspective to narrate the author’s experience of growing up Filipina and Egyptian American in Southern California. Gharib is a journalist and works as the editor and digital strategist on National Public Radio’s (NPR) global health and development team, writing about health, gender equality, and developmental issues (“Malaka”). *I Was Their American Dream* (2019), her first graphic memoir, won the Arab American Book Award and was named one of the best books of the year by NPR. She has also written a second graphic memoir, *It Won’t Always Be Like This* (2022).

Gharib’s first young adult memoir reveals how cultural and religious differences within a family can affect a child’s development—physically, emotionally, and mentally. For Gharib, being mixed-race meant a constant negotiation of her racial and religious identities. The strategy she used to survive resembles what Kerry Rockquemore, David Brunsma, and Daniel Delgado call the “ecological approach,” in which “mixed-race people construct different racial identities based on various contextually specific logics” (19). For example, with her Catholic Filipino family, Gharib ate rice and Spam; with her Muslim Egyptian family, she learned to belly dance. Using food metaphors, recipes, guessing games, checklists, and activity pages for children, as well as a self-deprecating and ironic tone, Gharib playfully documents the different ways she performed her hybrid identity, revealing how “the parameters of racial identity are socially, culturally, and politically constructed” (Rockquemore et al. 22) and how her identity shifted as she grew older.

My article, divided into three parts, examines the techniques Gharib uses to show racial, religious, and ethnic differences in her life; the traumas she experienced as a person who did not fit in; and the ways she negotiated her identity in a predominantly white culture. As a 1.5-
generation immigrant from the Philippines to North America who now teaches English and specializes in Asian American literature, graphic novels, and life writing, I read Gharib’s work through the lenses of literary, cultural, postcolonial, Asian American, and comics studies. As the graphic memoir is a multimodal text, I examine the visual and aesthetic techniques Gharib uses to narrate her story. I also discuss the sociohistorical and cultural contexts of Asian, particularly Filipinx, immigrants to the United States and use insights from trauma studies to illuminate Gharib’s experiences of unbelonging.

**Representations of Diversity**

The term *diversity* is traditionally used to refer to the practice of including people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, and other identity characteristics in an organization. In Gharib’s case, I suggest that she embodies diverse cultures and religions within her. Her book is advertised as a typical story of “immigrants who come to America in search for a better life for themselves and their children” (Penguin). However, scholars such as María Paula Ghiso and David Low point out that for children of immigrant backgrounds, the American dream entails a negotiation of “identities along a preconceived model of what it means to be American” as they attempt to shed their ethnic identities and smooth over their struggles (26). Ghiso and Low’s study of children of immigrants shows how comics can be used by students to “represent the complexity of their experiences and convey cultural hybridity” (27). These comics can provide alternative stories of the American dream of rugged individualism and success through hard work.

Though Gharib’s graphic memoir is structured like an immigrant bildungsroman, beginning with her parents’ meeting, her childhood, and her experience growing up as an
outsider in Cerritos, and ending with her integration into American society, her path to assimilation and success is complicated. Her story is different because instead of just one originary culture, she has two; instead of growing up with one religion, she has to deal with two. Gharib remarks, “[E]ven amongst minorities, I was a minority” (79). In high school, she did not know which sports to play as the students were divided into ethnic groups into which she did not fit. Her textual narrative articulates a sense of alienation: “Everyone in high school hung out with people based on clubs, sports, ethnicity. Who’d be my friend?” (79). The visual image of this isolation provides a “social map” of Cerritos High School, in which ethnic groups (e.g., Pakistani jocks, Indian jocks, Portuguese mafia, Filipino dancers, cheerleaders, Korean girls from the United States, Korean girls from Korea, anime kids, Mexican punks) are divided into squares and shown clustered around tables, planters, lockers, and in the classroom (79). Instead of being separated by panels, the map has lines that simulate folds or grids, showing the groups as together but apart. The map reflects simultaneity, rather than a temporal unfolding of events, and Gharib is excluded from it all.

**Comic Style**

In general, Gharib’s depictions are simple, using only a few colors. Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey use the term *graphiation* to talk about the “visual enunciation” or “graphic expression” of the artist (137). Baetens and Frey note that each artist has a “highly subjective style in which the personal expression of the author takes all priority over the representation itself” (137). In Gharib’s case, the overall effect of the style or graphiation is lighthearted and cheery rather than sombre and heavy. Elisabeth El Refaie writes that autobiography has an essentially intertextual character: “[T]he way we understand our experiences and how we convey
them to others is always at least partly influenced by our own and other people’s accounts of events in our lives, as well as by other life stories we encounter” (18). Gharib experiences difficult situations, such as her parents’ divorce, her family’s economic struggles, the special family living arrangement in which she had to spend the school year with her mother and summers abroad with her father, and the experience of being bullied and called names at school. However, she chooses to remember and retell these dark moments in her life in an upbeat and entertaining way. In so doing, Gharib shapes her life narrative so that it becomes one of plenitude and mild discombobulation, rather than one of alienation and trauma.

One notable technique Gharib uses is her limited color palette. On the cover, the colors red, white, and blue, especially in the protagonist’s eyes, which are in the shape of stars, are appropriate for a memoir with the words American Dream in the title. But Gharib plays with the shades of these colors, deliberately using an orangey red, turquoise blue, navy blue, gray, and white. Her colors are a little off—the red is faded and the blue is greenish—suggesting that Gharib’s family story is close to but not quite the American dream. In an oft-quoted article, Homi Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). He explains, “A desire that, through the repetition of partial presence, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority” (129). The colors used in the memoir reveal Gharib’s story as a kind of mimicry or repetition and her family as a product of US colonialization, politically and culturally.

Before he comes to America, Gharib’s father is culturally colonized (the extension of colonization through institutions and media) by the Hollywood movies of the 1970s, which
makes him love and want to move to America (Gharib 13). After half a decade of learning English and applying to graduate schools, he finally succeeds in getting a visa. His delight is shown on the full splash page where his figure is drawn larger than life, dancing on the street and yelling, “Alhamdulillah!” (“Praise be to God;” 16). Reality in the United States is not so wonderful, however. Though he has an MBA, he has to start out as a night manager in a Best Western hotel. That is where he meets Gharib’s mother, whom he then marries. Her mother had moved to California to escape the growing civil unrest in the Philippines, which had been colonized by the United States until 1946 (9). With some irony, Gharib notes that after their marriage, they were “on their way to the American Dream” in terms of their material desires. They wanted “a big house with a white picket fence, a two-car garage, credit cards, luxury handbags, enough money to send back home to the parents, ...kids that were American but not too American” (22). On the next page, however, Gharib corrects her narrative by acknowledging that, actually, “things were tense at home” and that her parents were only “almost on their way” (23). Her parents eventually divorced, and she reflects, “My parents had so many hopes for themselves. The reality was they were so far from what they wanted” (25). I suggest that they lived only momentarily the semblance of the American dream, and that Gharib’s choice to use shades of red, white, and blue suggests the ambivalence of their mimicry, that their lives were only imitations of a fantasy.

Using these limited colors also resolves issues of racial skin tone, hair coloring, and realism. In a narrative about race and ethnic mixing, it is tempting to scrutinize phenotypes of the characters for accuracy. Gharib notes that when she was born, her father noticed she was “so brown” (19). But instead of coloring herself and her family members different shades of beige, brown, and olive, she colors them all the same pinkish rose, while white people have no color.
Similar to her choice of skin tone, Gharib renders her mother’s hair orange, while her father’s is blue. Her own hair is gray and puffy in the graphic novel. Gharib’s choice to not be realistic is notable. In his article about how we look at and understand images in comics, Stuart Medley points out that “in experiments intended to determine what kinds of images allow for easy identification of objects, the most realistic image has been persistently demonstrated not to be the most communicative” (55). Medley argues that “it is not a realistic use of colour” that communicates but a color consistency that helps the reader establish “character identity” (61). Comics “reduce the detail of the visible world in terms of texture and colour,” but this actually helps readers achieve “closure” (63) by filling in the gaps where some details are missing. Instead of looking for realistic skin tones or hair color, readers look more at gestures, outlines, and the expressions of the characters to understand the story. In doing so, we see that what a character does, how she acts, is more important than what she looks like.

Instead of seeing mixed-race people as not fully one race or another, recent scholars argue it is more productive to emphasize the “social, cultural, and spatial context” of individuals (22). Rockquemore and colleagues write of mixed-race children, “Some identify exclusively with one of their races, some blend the two to create a hybrid identity, others shift between several different identities depending on where they are and whom they are interacting with, and still others refuse any racial identification whatsoever” (21). For most of her childhood and adolescence, Gharib’s mixed-race origins shaped her day-to-day life. She says, “My family didn’t look like the ones on TV,” which had just a father, mother, and two children (26). Instead, her family consisted of a large extended Filipino network that included aunts, uncles, a grandmother, and a grandfather on her mother’s side, and on her father’s side, his new wife and their children (her stepsiblings).
**Immigrant Foodways**

One way Gharib illustrates the differences between the two sides and “American” families is through what I refer to as “foodways,” the food practices and cooking methods specific to cultures. At one point, she draws a half-page panel comparing Filipino food (rice and fried or stewed fish/meat) on one side and Egyptian food (pita bread and kebab) on the other (38). The two place settings are not separated by panels, but only by a squiggly line, indicating the fluidity of the boundary between two cultures in her life. In another example, she gives the recipe for *monggo*, a Filipino stew of mung beans flavored with shrimp paste, which she says she ate regularly instead of Hamburger Helper. Her Filipino family loves pork chops but pork is absolutely forbidden in her Egyptian Muslim family. She takes positive pleasures from both sides of the family. When she visits her father’s family in Egypt, she enjoys “long, leisurely breakfasts on the balcony” consisting of falafel sandwiches (49) and a much slower pace of life. Her father talks to her about things her family in California never discussed: “politics, the news, world affairs, history” (54). Her stepmother “[teaches] her how to be a woman,” helping her “tame” her “thick, curly hair” and buying Gharib her first pair of heels and teaching her how to walk in them (55). Taking the ecological approach (Rockquemore et al. 19), she constructs her racial identity based on social situations and contexts without necessarily “privileging one type of racial identity over another” (19).

Through the use of food and food metaphors, Gharib shows the nostalgia she felt for home and family when she was in college. In a panel in which she confesses that she “missed home,” she talks to a figure of herself in the mirror who accuses her of selling out. In another scene, she eats hot dogs and brown rice in the cafeteria and imagines that she is eating fluffy white rice and Spam, a popular meat product among Filipinos (101). In her fantasy, drawn on a
two-page spread, she is like a child again, sniffing her plate of rice with delight and lying down on a fluffy cloud with her bunny slippers (100–101). These two pages suggesting extreme happiness are not bordered by panels; instead, the individual images bleed into the next page to suggest ecstasy. The way Gharib uses food here is similar to the way diasporic people use food to “route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland” (Mannur 13). Anita Mannur points out that food “becomes a potent symbol for signifying the ethnic integrity of Asian Americans, serving both as a placeholder for marking cultural distinctiveness and as a palliative for dislocation” (13).

Ironically, one food that Gharib associates with her Filipino family is actually a product of the United States that was brought to the Philippines during the Second World War. As Ty Matejowsky explains, “SPAM became the meat substitute of choice for civilians during the lean years as few other protein sources were available…. The luncheon meat has remained a battlefield staple in every major US combat operation since World War II” (25–26). Because of its price and market exclusivity, “[i]n the Philippines, there is an intense affection for SPAM as both a commodity and cultural symbol… Viewed more as a dietary staple of the affluent and moderately affluent than that of the poor” (Matejowsky 28–29). Gharib’s choosing Spam as a nostalgic food that reminds her of her family reveals the “complex history, politics, and socioeconomic processes” that link the Philippines to the United States (Matejowsky 28).

**Religion**

What becomes slightly baffling is religion for Gharib. She says, “My dad was a devout Muslim. He went to the mosque on Fridays, didn’t drink alcohol, or eat pork… My mom was a devout Catholic. She lit candles and brought flowers to the Virgin Mary statue at church” (43).
Out of respect for them, she prays with both her mother and father, separately, taking the parts that she likes out of each religion. She loves the “forgiveness, peace, and mercy of the Virgin Mary” as well as the “greatness and absoluteness of Allah” (46). In the end, she “smushed” the religions together and made “one faith” (47). What Gharib reveals in her memoir is a kind of autoethnographic account of how a child deals with conflicting teachings. Instead of getting totally frustrated or confused, she handles the situation by respecting “multiple perspectives simultaneously” and by choosing to hybridize the religions (Maria Root, qtd. in Rockquemore et al. 19–20). Her example is important because she not only is mixed-race but also belongs to two religions. Yet, she is able to handle contradictory edicts and rules with equanimity and humor.

**Traumas of Unbelonging**

A technique Gharib uses to convey her experiences of cultural discontinuity and racialization is the inclusion of children’s games and activities. Melinda de Jesús has looked at the memoir through the lens of Pinay girl studies and suggests that “mestiza-ness and mestiza consciousness are major tropes in contemporary Filipinx American cultural production” (151). De Jesús notes that Gharib, like Lynda Barry, author of *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), occupies a liminality that comes from her mestiza-ness, which she expresses by incorporating different forms, including “quizzes, checklists, bingo cards, recipes, samples of old zines, and directions for making one’s own zine” (150). Two interesting examples in the memoir showing how Gharib transforms potentially sensitive or hurtful practices into amusing exercises are her code of conduct chart and microaggressions bingo card (39, 111).

The code of conduct chart covers a full page, and Gharib has drawn herself in pencil as a child standing in front of it. In the chart, she tries to figure out the differences between Filipino,
Egyptian, and American social customs. Here, we discover that there are, in fact, more similarities between Filipino and Egyptian customs than between them and “American” ones. For example, some common practices between her ethnic origins include “eating with hands; kissing as a greeting; serving elders (not children) first” (39). Rather humorously, she puts “being on time” as a trait only under “American” (39). The cultural differences range from everyday quirky practices (e.g., wearing slippers in the house) to those that are rooted in Islamic tradition (e.g., sitting separately from men). Although this chart functions to inform readers of cultural differences in a diverting way, the everyday life practices in it are important because they make us intelligible to the world. Sociologist Pierre Mayol underscores the significance of “propriety” in our interactions in our neighborhood:

“To go out into the street is to constantly run the risk of being recognized, thus pointed out. The practice of the neighborhood implies adhesion to a system of values and behaviors forcing each dweller to remain behind a mask playing his or her role. To emphasize the word behavior indicates that the body is the primary, fundamental support for the social message proffered, without knowing it, by the dweller” (de Certeau et al. 16).

For children growing up in a multicultural family and society, getting these codes and behaviors right means the difference between a well-integrated and accepted child and one who feels socially ostracized and “pointed out.”

The microaggression bingo card shows how Gharib has experienced various taunts and racist attitudes for not being white, for not being racially intelligible to her peers. She is mocked for being Egyptian, Filipina, and other: “Can you walk like an Egyptian?” “Where’s that accent from?” “Do ya’ll eat dog?” “Where’s your hijab?” “Your English is great!” and “You are so
exotic” (111). She writes that if these were arranged on a bingo card, she would “win, win, win!” (111), suggesting that she has experienced all of these taunts at some point in her life. But the bingo card changes depressing facts into one that seems triumphant—she has won, won, won. Psychologists point out that “racism in North America has undergone a transformation, especially after the post-civil rights era when the conscious democratic belief in equality for groups of color directly clashed with the long history of racism in the society” (Sue et al. 272). Derald Wing Sue and colleagues observe that racism today is more likely to be “disguised and covert” (272). Instead of “overt racial hatred and bigotry,” racism has evolved into a “more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge” (Sue et al. 272).

Sue and colleagues define **racial microaggressions** as “‘subtle insults’ directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (273), and they list three different forms of racial microaggression including microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation (274). An example of microassault, an “explicit racial derogation ...meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling,” (Sue et al. 274) is the question “Why are Muslims terrorists?” (Gharib 111). Examples of microinsults, “characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” (Sue et al. 274), are “Were you born here?” and “You don’t act like them” (Gharib 111). These comments reinforce the belief that non-white persons are not American. Examples of microinvalidations, which are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al. 274), are “Your English is great” and “I don’t see color” (Gharib 111). On the surface, Gharib’s bingo card seems to be fun and games, but it serves as a good catalogue and record of the racial microaggressions she has faced. Sue and
colleagues argue that “the power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, and oftentimes, the recipient” (275). Gharib makes the microaggressions visible, and by articulating them, making them seem laughable, she negates their power and ability to hurt her.

**Scrapbooking**

In her analysis of Lynda Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Nancy Pedri talks about the importance of scrapbooking as a way to cope with trauma. Pedri notes, “Scrapbooked photographs often consist of layered additions to personal photographs, whereby the original photographic artefacts are altered and reformulated” (4). She writes, “Scrapbooking is an art of gaps, condensations, and substitutions,” which help to fill in gaps in a life that lacks coherence (4). Although Gharib did not experience sexual abuse and trauma in the same way as Barry, her graphic memoir also reveals the confusion and incoherence that affect a child brought up in two different cultures. Excerpts from her diary show conflicts, the highs and lows of her teens, and how she was deciding what career to go into. She makes a list of the pros and cons of being a journalist, advertising, stockbroker, and magazine editor. She also writes about how she falls in love and how she is depressed (77). The inclusion of these diary excerpts functions to validate her feelings and represent herself and her insecurities to others.

Furthermore, by including a photograph set against writing from her journal, Gharib adds “poignant layers of meaning to it” (Pedri 12). As Pedri argues, “The scrapbooking of photographs… not only comments on the way in which personal identity is established through visual representation; it also comments on how representation restricts and, at the same time, expands upon what is seen and known of the self” (11). In Gharib’s case, the photograph appears...
to be a high school ID photo, one that shows her pretty with a soft smile. What it does not reveal is her struggles and her unhappiness. In the collage just to the left of the photograph, a note says, “high school sucks” (77). The handwritten texts which are underneath and around the photograph and presumably from her diary, show the turmoil and drama of adolescence which the photograph does not show. As Pedri concludes, “[S]crapbooked personal photographs function to reveal subjectivity in its full processural dynamics; they accentuate its instability, its unknowingness, its temporality, its fictiveness. Scrapbooked photographs evoke layered selves, selves who constantly struggle to understand self through acts of visual representation” (12).

**Negotiations with Dominant White Culture**

One major issue that Gharib has to come to terms with during her teens and in college is that of cultural assimilation and racial abjection. At the beginning of high school in Cerritos, she is “heavily influenced by TV, movies, and pop culture” (68), which lead her to believe that white people are superior to what she is. According to her “high school” self, white people are cool because “they’re real Americans, they do normal stuff like eat sandwiches for lunch, they’re on TV and in the movies, they’re cute ...they have clean, perfect, huge houses” (71). By her sophomore year, she is accused by her friends of being “whitewashed” and a “poser” (73), which confuses her because she feels she is much more culturally mixed than just a “banana” or “Twinkie” (75). Unlike her sister, who is “full Filipino” (80), she is not invited into Filipino clubs. Instead, she hangs around with a group of “punk kids” from all different backgrounds (81), playing punk music and making zines. Fortunately, she resolves the issues of her racial identity by settling for the title of “most unique” in her yearbook (82). This narrative of wanting to be white recurs in many stories by immigrant and racialized children, for example, in Gene
Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006), but Gharib particularizes her story by including actual excerpts from her diary and the photograph of herself from her high school days.

Ironically, Gharib jokingly turns the popular saying “all Asians look alike” on its head when she recounts her early college days. She leaves the diversity of Cerritos to go to Syracuse, New York, for college as her family thought that sending her to a “white school” would be beneficial because in “the real world” she has to learn to “eat like them, dress like them, act like them” in order to succeed (88). She observes, “In the dorms, I couldn’t tell the girls apart. I thought they all looked the same” (92). The illustration shows girls with white faces and orange hair, named Sara, Kat, Kim, Ali, Aly, Niki, Erica, etc. They seem indistinguishable from each other, and except for what she saw on TV and read in magazines, she says, “I quickly realized I didn’t know crap about white people” (92). Her outline sketches of their faces and use of minimal colours contribute to the humour of the role reversal of a commonplace racist statement in this case.

Looking back at her college experiences, Gharib makes us aware that for her, fitting in was a matter of mimicry. She was determined to follow Tito Maro’s advice about trying to “learn from white people” (94). She finds the lyrics of pop songs that other students like, tries to be more “outgoing and confident” (94), and tries to “look more like them” (96). To illustrate the gender performativity that is required to fit into college, she draws herself as a paper doll and several outfits with folding tabs that are suitable for different occasions such as game day, a frat party, and a business school event (96–97). For game day, she draws a logo shirt and logo hat, ripped jeans, a large tote bag, and a pizza. For the frat party, she suggests a “party top with lots of cleavage, jungle juice in a solo cup, miniskirt, knee-high boots, condoms, just in case,” while the accessories for the business school outfit includes a “Wall Street Journal, Starbucks skinny
chai latte, black leggings” (97). While the clothing that she dons for each occasion is meant to be somewhat funny, there are serious implications to her observations about the normalizing practices that occur in universities and colleges.

Performativity occurs not just in what she wears, but what she eats, what she reads, which team she supports, and her sexual practices. In their study of normalizing practices at school, Wayne Martino and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli discuss common self-fashioning practices: “These involve the presentation of a social identity or performance in a public ‘world’ that may be out of harmony with a private identity or desire.... performance strategies include silencing, editing, imitating, masking, manufacturing, and parodying” (90–91). Students can “construct and perform some form of alternative fictional gendered and sexual self in order to ‘pass’ or they may selectively present/perform only certain aspects of their self to an audience of peers, teachers, and parents” (91). What Gharib shows with her paper dolls is an awareness of what is expected of her. She performs this college “self” to pass, but she also reveals the inadequacy of this self.

The negotiation with her ethnic identity continues even after college. The pronunciation of her name creates confusion for colleagues at her first job, and she is used as a token ethnic employee when workplaces need diversity (110). But, on the whole, she integrates well into her new career and surroundings in DC. She ends up meeting and marrying a white “dude” (126) named Darren, to her father’s consternation. Her humor and exuberance prevail even in her representation of her choice of a partner. Still using a list, she observes that as a Southerner, Darren is a lot like Filipinos and Egyptians because “(1) religion is very important, (2) they are very generous and hospitable, (3) they have a good sense of humor” (132). Her graphic memoir concludes in a traditional happy ending through marriage. Importantly, she resolves that she and
Darren want to “stay connected” to their cultures (143), which is an affirmation and acceptance of her hybrid identity.

**Conclusion**

Gharib’s graphic memoir reconfigures the painful moments of nonbelonging, misrecognition, and of being a minority into recognizable practices through humor and a semblance of order. Using lists, charts, games, and bingo cards, she is able to deal with people’s expectations of cultural, gender, and religious differences in her own way. As she grows older, she survives by constructing and performing different racial identities based on the people she is with, by recording and making fun of racial microaggressions to lessen their power, and by accepting that, unlike her peers, she is always going to be “most unique” (82). Her graphic memoir is lighthearted in tone, but it reveals important issues about how diversity affects one’s body and mind. By exploring and illustrating her past in her graphic memoir with cheerfulness and equanimity, Gharib mitigates her struggles and her experiences of being “other,” even within minority communities, so that they are no longer overwhelming but a part of her distinctive identity.
Works Cited


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