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## How to Chisel an American Self: The Second-Person Narrative and Self-Help in Roya Hakakian's *A Beginner's Guide to America* (2021)

Esbozar un yo americano: Autoayuda y la narración en segunda persona en *A Beginner's Guide to America* (2021) de Roya Hakakian

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**ABSTRACT:** This article offers the first critical reading in English of Roya Hakakian's *A Beginner's Guide to America: For the Immigrant and the Curious* (2021), which is addressed to a generic migrant, newly arrived in America. Written in the second-person narrative style typical of self-help guides, Hakakian's book serves as a guide for the reader through her journey of becoming an American. Echoing the idea of American exceptionalism, it recounts a tale of historical progress woven through anecdotes of violence and injustice against marginalized communities throughout American history and represents these episodes as essential milestones toward freedom. The narrator teaches the unknowing migrant addressee that struggles for freedom throughout American history were endeavors to submit to the rule of law and the Constitution. The narratee is then invited to stoically and resignedly wait until her naturalization ceremony when her liberties will be protected by the Constitution. Tracing the story's intertextual links and exploring its formal aspects, this paper argues that the emergence of the free subject at the story's conclusion reflects the dominant ideology of assimilation and conformity to American society.

**Key words:** second-person narrative, intertextuality, American Exceptionalism, Iranian-American Literature, Roya Hakakian, *A Beginner's Guide to America*.

RESUMEN: Este artículo ofrece el primer análisis crítico en inglés de *A Beginner's Guide to America: For the Immigrant and the Curious* (2021) de Roya Hakakian, dirigido a un migrante genérico recién llegado a Estados Unidos. Escrito en el estilo narrativo en segunda persona típico de las guías de autoayuda, el libro de Hakakian sirve como una narrativa personal que guía al lector a través del viaje para convertirse en estadounidense. Haciéndose eco de la idea del excepcionalismo estadounidense, relata una historia de progreso histórico entrelazada a través de anécdotas de violencia e injusticia contra comunidades marginadas a lo largo de la historia estadounidense; el narrador representa estos episodios como hitos esenciales hacia la libertad. El narrador le enseña a la narrataria que las luchas por la libertad a lo largo de la historia de Estados Unidos fueron esfuerzos por someterse al estado de derecho y a la Constitución. Luego se invita a la narrataria a esperar estoicamente y con resignación hasta su ceremonia de naturalización, cuando sus libertades estarán protegidas por la constitución. Al rastrear los vínculos intertextuales de la historia y explorar sus aspectos formales, este artículo sostiene que el surgimiento del sujeto libre al final de la historia refleja la ideología dominante de asimilación y conformidad con la sociedad estadounidense.

*Palabras clave:* narrativa en segunda persona, intertextualidad, Excepcionalismo estadounidense, Literatura iraní-estadounidense, Roya Hakakian, *A Beginner's Guide to America*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*A Beginner's Guide to America: for the Immigrant and the Curious* (2021) employs an omniscient narrator to apostrophize a generic, migrant protagonist. This second-person narrator follows the migrant narratee from the moment she arrives in the United States until her story, and that of the book, come to an end when she achieves American citizenship. The story can be read in terms of an omniscient narrator familiar with the complexities of the migration journey as she herself has traversed it. Such a reading is encouraged in the book's prologue where the author, Roya Hakakian, delineates the urgency of writing the story with respect to Donald Trump's legacy of anti-immigrant hostility. Extratextually, the prologue helps to set the story's dynamic. In it, Hakakian represents her text in terms of a guidebook, that she wishes she had had when she first arrived in the United States as a refugee from Iran, to help her navigate the "whirlwind of emotions in whose eye" she remained for a long time (2021: xiii). The prologue, signed in October 2020, establishes the timeliness of the book and connects a personal story to the collective story of migrants in the United States. This connection to Hakakian's own position as a former refugee allows her "unmediated access to a narrative that has become disfigured by overzealous emissaries on both sides of the political debate" (Hakakian, 2021: xv). After decades of living in the U.S., it is therefore the former migrants' "weathered eye" that casts a discerning light on the ongoing challenges that migrants face in contemporary America.

The story begins with a description of the American landscape in front of the migrant, guiding her to observe "the outlines of her riches, the green of her lush woods, [and] the blue of her leviathan waters" (Hakakian, 2021: 3) as the plane carrying her

approaches a United States airport. As it pictures a welcoming America to a new migrant, for whom “[i]t has been a long time since [she has] been welcomed anywhere” (Hakakian, 2021: 3), the narrator instructs her on how to respond to her new circumstances. *Guide*'s narrator tells a naturalization odyssey in eight chapters, each opening with a quote from books that similarly deal with immigration to the United States at different times in American history. Ranging from the nineteenth to the twentieth century (see section 4), the books that provide these quotes, which are either written by former immigrants or addressed to immigrants, further contribute to the myth of the United States as the land of opportunity and freedom that *Guide* blatantly implies. Mirroring these quotes, the narrator illustrates a mythical portrait of America and guarantees belonging on the condition that the narratee follows the provided instructions.

*Guide* is a second-person narrative and is “modeled on instructional discourse” (Fludernik, 1994: 459) where the protagonist learns what to expect to find “Upon Arrival in America the Beautiful” (Hakakian, 2021: 3). “For a text to be considered as a second-person narrative”, Monika Fludernik argues, “there has to exist a (usually fictional) protagonist who is referred to by an address pronoun” (1994: 302). The addressed ‘you’ is considered the “central agent in the sequence of events being recounted” (Margolin in Fludernik, 1994: 287). In Hakakian's story, this addressee is generic and takes the shape of a collage of different migrants, particularized through references to their past lives or certain experiences in the new American surroundings. The addressed protagonist oscillates between various migrant identities, ultimately embodying a blend of nationalities and genders. In the story, “‘you’ is inherently unstable, constantly threatening to merge with another character, with the reader, or even with another grammatical person” (Richardson, 1991: 312). In Hakakian's *Guide*, the ever-shifting referent of ‘you’ emerges as one protagonist, since, despite their distinct past lives, all the implied addressees end up becoming an American. The narrative thus corroborates Brian Richardson's claim that the second-person stories are narrated to ‘a single protagonist’ (1991: 311). The protagonist's universality, this article contends, has a homogenizing effect that is at odds with the story's overall take on migration in terms of a second chance given to migrants to reconstruct their identities. The second-person in Hakakian's story is employed to guide the migrant in how to shape a reductively desirable American identity.

In *Guide*, which is modeled on self-help literature, the external narrator likely represents the migrant's future self. Despite the lack of any deictics to moor the narrator, this assumption stems from a guide's inherent authority, which is rooted in its knowledge of a journey and mirrors a seeker's quest for guidance. Thus, the narrator's acquaintance with the particularities of migration suggests its having traversed the migrant's path to becoming an American. No more the old self, the migrant's future American self teaches the migrant how to work hard, persevere, and be open to the freedom of becoming the person she chooses. The guide's voice, therefore, effectively reiterates the American dream and can be analyzed in terms of its message of self-help. For Mercè Mur Effing, self-making and self-help are interconnected and integral to the American identity:

The concept of self-help is related to self-making and taking charge of one's destiny, and this aspect undoubtedly helped to shape what we call the American self-identity which is also closely linked to the belief in canonical American values such as the search for justice, liberty, fairness, democracy and equality.

‘Self-making’ or being ‘self-made’ suggests that anyone can be whatever he or she wants to be if they work hard enough to achieve their goals, summarised in the expression the American Dream. (2009: 127)

Written from the perspective of those “who dream of becoming American”, as the author claims in the prologue (Hakakian, 2021: xiv), the story reflects the tenets of the American Dream. Interestingly, the author’s first name, Roya, which signifies ‘dream’ in Persian, suggests this transition from migrant to American by means of only dreaming. From somewhere at the end of the road to Americanness, ‘the American Dream’ is recounting a successful story of becoming. *Guide* instructs the migrant to see her new circumstance as a second chance to shape a new identity. Even though the story begins *in medias res* of the migrant’s life, it is nevertheless the birth of the new American in the making.

Considering this ideological dismissal of obstacles in the way of shaping an American identity, the deliberate choice of employing a second-person narrator prompts an exploration into its purpose within the narrative framework. Contrary to the belief that second-person narratives humanize the narratee protagonist by addressing her directly, Hakakian uses this technique reductively to guide the narratee toward a path where the desire to become American is synonymous with becoming American. Through an analysis of the narrative structure and intertextual references, this article endeavors to problematize the liberated American subject that emerges by the story’s end. It posits that this liberated subjectivity is a product of neoliberal ideologies, intertwined with the notions of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. The argument will proceed by first providing an overview of second-person narrative structure and its bearings, followed by an examination of a particular kind of second-person text, namely the self-help genre. Subsequently, it will guide the reader through the intertextual links within the story to explore their significance in shaping the narrative frame. Consequently, it concludes that Hakakian’s text constructs and reinforces the notion of the American Dream.

## **2. SECOND-PERSON NARRATION: AN OPEN CALL FOR TRANSFORMATION**

The second-person point of view is indeed very rare and its usage serves different purposes. Sometimes, employing this narratological technique is connected to its compelling effect as it addresses the reader directly and involves her in the story rather than merely recounting the story to her. Contrary to the general storytelling trend where migrants are the subjects of stories and thus knowledge is produced *about* them, here, Hakakian impedes the distanced comfort of a disengaged reading about migrants with the choice of second-person narration. The use of this narratological technique is thus likely related to an attempt to recover the humanity of the migrants, which has been eroded by prevailing discourses of migration in the United States. It underscores that only an acknowledged individual ‘I’ can be the referent of a ‘you’. Apart from creating a sense of universality and collective experience, the diversity of this referent drives “the actual reader [...] to feel the pull of the addressee role” (Phelan, 1996: 138). Engaging the reader directly as part of this collective “you”, the story invites her to see herself as part, or

observer, of a broader community navigating similar challenges and journeys. As Fludernik argues,

Whereas the typical story-telling mode allows the reader to sit back and enjoy a narrative of another's tribulations, hence instituting a basic existential and differential gap between the story and its reception, second-person texts (even if only initially) breach this convention of distance, seemingly involving the real reader within the textual world (1994: 457).

Thus, the narrative strategy suits its purpose of engaging active participation from real readers about the migrant's experience. In spite of the assertion that the address becomes so compelling that the reader and the narratee protagonist eventually align, the phrase "even if initially" suggests that the reader may not necessarily find herself at the receiving end of address. Even though the narrative has the capacity to captivate the reader and cultivate empathy, characterization, as James Phelan argues, eventually drives the reader not to identify with the protagonist and instead occupy the place of an observer:

the fuller the characterization of the you, the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that you, and thus the more fully they will move into the observer role-and the less likely that this role will overlap with the addressee position. In other words, the greater the characterization of the you, the more like a standard protagonist the you becomes, and, consequently, the more actual readers can employ their standard strategies for reading narrative.

(Phelan, 1996: 137)

While Phelan correctly complicates the reader's identification with the addressee, Hakakian's use of diverse backgrounds for the narratee-protagonist expands the scope of the potential readers who can identify with the migrant protagonist. The multiplicity of the narratee's experiences multiplies the referents of 'you' and increases the number of readers who at some point in the course of reading identify with the narratee. And even if the reader is positioned as the observer, that is, as the "curious" in the book's subtitle, and therefore does not find herself as the narrator's addressee, she is witnessing an address to such a multitude of referents that she is nevertheless driven to empathize with the protagonist.

In deviating from both third and first-person narratives, *Guide* stands out within Iranian-American literature. Unlike the autobiographical accounts prevalent in this literature, such as *Saffron Sky* (Asayesh, 2000), *Funny in Farsi* (Dumas, 2003), *Lipstick Jihad* (Moaveni, 2005), *The Rose Hotel* (Andaliban, 2012), *The Ungrateful Refugee* (Nayeri, 2019), which are predominantly written in the first-person narrative form, Hakakian adopts a second-person narrator addressing a narratee-protagonist. In Iranian-American autobiographies, a consistent narrating 'I', the author's autobiographical self throughout the story, recounts the peculiarities of living as an Iranian migrant in the United States. Unlike Hakakian's story where little is known about the identity of the migrant protagonist, the first-person narrators in those memoirs struggle to make sense of their hyphenated identity by focusing on the difference between the world inside and outside their homes in America. In contrast to these tales, which focus on their second-generation narrators and aim to both depict the struggles of integration into American

society and shed light on Iranian customs for their audience, and in contrast to Hakakian's own memoir, *Journey from the Land of No* (2007), which chronicles her life in Iran, *Guide* lacks a singular protagonist. Despite the clear presence of Hakakian's autobiographical self, Roya X, and the reappearance of episodes from her memoir, the Iranian is only among many other migrants that are the referents of the narrator's 'you'. 'You' can be "a man from a chauvinistic culture" (Hakakian, 2021: 34), or "from a communist or other anti-American stronghold" (Hakakian, 2021: 18), or "a country in the throes of civil strife," (ibid) or "a nation with a record of fist pumping and sword brandishing in front of television cameras—Iraq, Syria, Yemen," (Hakakian, 2021: 19). Hakakian's main focus is not on the first person who arrives but on the second person who emerges as a result of transformation. She emphasizes that the individual at the beginning and end of the book are not identical. The narrator distinguishes between the two identities shaped by migration and the subsequent transformation experienced by the migrant. Regardless of the identity of the addressed 'you,' the narrative emphasizes its transformation into an 'I' by the story's conclusion.

The narrative sculpting of the protagonist's identity that mirrors the aforementioned 'humanizing' of the migrant foregrounds the active role of the reader/protagonist in shaping the narrative and asserting their identity within American cultural norms. This theme is underscored by the significance attributed to pronouns and self-expression and aligns with the book's overall perspective on migration as an opportunity for renewal, which will be examined in more detail below through the lens of the book's central metaphor, the odometer. The choice of the second-person narrative, which reflects the narrator's desire for the migrant protagonist to learn about self-expression, is exemplified in the section "Where I is King" (Hakakian, 2021: 87), wherein the recurrence of the pronouns "I" and "you" in English is connected to American identity. There, the narrator informs the migrant about the significance of assertiveness to facilitate her journey towards reclaiming individuality within the American cultural landscape:

You should learn sooner rather than later that "you" and "I" are America's most celebrated pronouns. "He," "she," "it," "we," or "they" cannot begin to compete. In fact, "you" and "I" are among the most frequently used words in the English language. Schoolchildren are taught to avoid vague usages like the passive voice, or sentences whose subjects are obscure. However clumsily, they learn to boldly begin with "I" and forcefully state what the "I" sees, hears, feels, and believes in. "I" might loathe the pressure of this, or have nothing printworthy to report, but will eventually come to speak directly, however poorly, learn to articulate his hopes and expectations, even if insignificant. You, on the other hand, had to dodge the censors and other bureaucrats all your life.

(Hakakian, 2021: 87)

As the narrator distinguishes between the oppressed "you" of the past and an assertive "I" as an American subject, it offers the potential for transformation and a promise of autonomy and self-determination.

It should be noted that throughout the story, the narrator's deictic center, "the locus of a speaker's embodied subjectivity, which determines his or her view of the world from that particular perspective" (Fludernik, 2011: 103), remains unknown. This prompts

questions about her role and standpoint within the narrative and reminds us that in second-person narration, while the apostrophe primarily invents an intrinsic you, it also “deflects the reader’s interest onto the speaker’s position” (Fludernik, 1994: 289). Even though the narrator assumes a position of authority and knowledge to guide the narratee through the intricacies of American life, she remains conspicuously absent in terms of personal identity. Nowhere in the story does the narrator refer to herself as an ‘I’, or an ‘American’. Explaining the American attitude toward life and death or the reason why Americans choose joy over gloom and look forward to happier days to come, the text states: “Americans mourn differently from most” (Hakakian, 2021: 68) or “Americans have an uncanny ability to plan and organize for the future” (Hakakian, 2021: 69). This ethnographical narration culminates in the chapter “Selfistan”, where the narrator offers insights about the foundational principles that underpin American culture: “the American himself and his most basic interactions are blessed by the original guiding principles that shaped this society” (Hakakian, 2021: 80). The narrator’s omniscience is evident in the complete absence of indeterminacies, such as ‘maybe’ or ‘perhaps’, as she passes her judgment on American life. While one could argue that the narrator represents the future self of the narratee reflecting on her own journey as a newcomer, the enigma surrounding its identity prompts us to question the reason why it remains ambiguous. As outlined in the following section, and suggested by the blurred statue of liberty on the book’s cover, the decision to leave the narrator unmoored reflects the story’s promise of freedom that migration offers the migrant to construct her identity as she desires.

### 3. GUIDEBOOK NARRATIVES: AMERICA’S PARADOX OF SELF-REINVENTION

There are two reasons why this story is written as a guidebook. The first one is related to the potentiality that migration embodies. As Hakakian’s “imperative mode foregrounds enunciation over story, highlighting the constructedness and processual engendering of a story on the make”, the story “is no longer ‘past’ but pure potentiality in an indefinite present or future” (Fludernik, 1994: 460). This potentiality is evident in the frequent use of the conditional form: “If you are lucky, the officer will look up with a smile and say, ‘Welcome to America!’” (Hakakian, 2021: 5); “If you disobey her and, say, not show for an appointment, she can cut off all your funds and other supports and then you will have to gravel and beg her for forgiveness” (Hakakian, 2021: 36); “If you stay among them for too long, you will miss this drab hole, which is filled with lost beloved things” (Hakakian, 2021: 131); “If the job you perform brings little pay, you may feel unsure of yourself and your own significance” (Hakakian, 2021: 184). The guidebook format, therefore, helps to report and predict the migrant’s story and is consistent with the over-arching theme of the story presenting migration to the United States as a second chance given to the migrant to shape her new American identity.

This avenue for a new beginning is exemplified in one of the text’s boxes, where various migrants’ experiences are showcased. These boxes interrupt the general second-person narrative, as the narrator shifts to a third-person perspective to include examples from different migrants’ journeys. The excerpt in this particular box tells the story of a migrant named Roya X, whose story mirrors that of the author’s autobiographical self as depicted in her memoir, *Journey from the Land of No* (2007). Taking the example from

Roya X's experience, the second chance given is symbolized through the metaphor of a used car's odometer:

Being perfectly disoriented, Roya and her mother believed that if only they dressed their minds in the right metaphor, their dizziness would end. In the new country, they knew they had to begin anew. To make themselves do so, for a while the daughter invented her own metaphor. Not a beautiful metaphor, but a practical one. She imagined herself a secondhand car whose odometer had been reset to zero by exile. With all the old parts, she was recast as a brand-new human engine. Within her was all the clanking, hissing, and racket of past rides, but she had to learn to muffle them and press on.

(Hakakian, 2021: 65)

This revelation, that life must be experienced firsthand and understood through the metaphor of a second-hand car's odometer reset to zero, crystallizes for Roya following an encounter with a black Metropolitan Transportation Authority staff named Gloria. In a pivotal moment that defies conventional migration metaphors and deflates the warnings from her racist relatives to stay away from black people, Roya encounters Gloria's compassion and aid in bringing her lost mother home. The first time Roya X is forced to separate from her mother since their arrival in the United States is on a day she has to stay longer in the city for a job interview. She accompanies her mother to the train station but as the train carrying her leaves the platform, she realizes she has put her on the wrong train. After a few hours of futile search, a haggard Roya returns home but is reassured to see her mother and the African American Gloria who has helped her to find her way back home and ends up staying for dinner. This incident opens her eyes to the richness and complexity of American life. "Watching Gloria try her mother's cooking, and ooh and aah with every bite, Roya realized that as new immigrants, they were not birds or plants but, indeed, used cars, here to discover the vast new American road without anyone's instructions, all on their own" (Hakakian, 2021: 67). It is a moment of reckoning, where Roya X realizes that her journey is not just about following instructions but about navigating the unpredictable terrain of life in America. Both the name and the profession are appropriately chosen by the writer for Gloria, the transportation officer, who miraculously appears as the North Star to guide the "disoriented" migrants toward the path to America. This fits well with the metaphor of the odometer, which can be defined as not just a practical visualization of starting anew but also as recalibration of the migrant's understanding of her new environment in terms of a chance to forge her own path forward. The narrative structure of a second-person perspective intertwines with the motif of migration as a second chance for renewal and self-reinvention. Thus, Roya X's metaphorical journey serves as a reflection of the transformative paths migrants undertake upon their arrival in the United States and underscores their potential for personal growth.

While Hakakian engages with the self-help genre as a vehicle for guiding her character toward self-transformation and happiness, there are other recent narratives that critically interrogate the very promise of transformation that the genre offers. Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) is one such text that draws on the conventions of self-help literature to critique its underlying assumptions. Adopting the genre's familiar framework to underline its reductive narratives, he similarly employs

second-person narration to initially mirror the genre's optimism through a step-by-step guide to achieving material success. As he parodies the seductive promise of transformation at the heart of the self-help genre, he draws our attention to its similarity with the aspiration at the heart of the novel phenomenon for self-making. For Angelia Poon, Hamid "fuses conventional rags to riches story and its predictable narrative pattern with the immediacy and yet future-orientation of the self-help book, disclosing both the self-help book and the novel as competing technologies of the Self" (Poon, 2017: 142). Hamid's novel demonstrates that the kind of personal growth the genre champions is often built on unattainable ideals, and leaves behind individuals trapped in an unrelenting cycle of self-improvement that leads to emptiness rather than fulfillment. In her study of the self-help genre, Beth Blum includes an analysis of Hamid's novel, situating it within a broader discussion of the genre's Janus face. While she highlights the nuanced and potentially positive aspects of self-help, including its capacity for stimulating personal growth and collective consolation, she does not shy away from its criticisms. She corroborates "self-help's contribution to our culture of anxiety and overwork" as well as its "erasure of the systemic and subsequent dampening of the people's ardor for social reform" (2020: 32). She also underlines "the ethos of individual accountability" embodied by the genre, which "must be overcome in order for the welfare state to prove its necessity" (2020: 32). Thus, Blum points to the genre's complicity in reinforcing neoliberal ideologies and its creation of an endless cycle of self-improvement in line with capitalist demands. *How to Get Filthy Rich*'s parody captures this duality. Through his protagonist's journey—which paradoxically ends up in a very similar situation to where his story begins about six decades earlier—Hamid shows the way this ideal of self-making ultimately proves hollow, as the pursuit of wealth and status leads to a recognition of the price of success. By mimicking and then dismantling the genre's conventions, Hamid's use of self-help is a critique of the very foundation of its promise—that anyone, through hard work and determination, can transform their life. Unlike Hamid, however, Hakakian's text continues to follow the conventions of the genre, guiding her protagonist toward an idealized version of American success, and thus reinforcing rather than critiquing the genre's promise of transformation.

Considering the narrative's framework, this promise of transformation may seem paradoxical, for a guide, by its very nature, is designed to provide instructions. The narrator undermines her own authority as a guide by encouraging the reader not to take its instructions wholeheartedly. This apparent contradiction is consistent with the broader ideology of the book, which promotes the idea of individual agency and self-reinvention in America. It also aligns with the narrator's aim to remain unknown, for the migrant is encouraged to see the potential for limitless transformation and self-determination in her new life in this country "where I is king" (Hakakian, 2021: 87). However, what must not go unproblematized in this transition from a restricted 'you' throughout the story toward the assertive 'I' that is coronated in the naturalization ceremony at the story's conclusion, is the oppressive quality of this mode of narration (Margolin, 1990: 444). The migrant is not heard throughout the story and, regardless of her identity, she is a silent receiver of the narration. The unvoiced addressee is an observer, incapable of comprehending what is happening in her surroundings and thus in need of this intermediation by the narrator to translate the new place as well as her ambivalent feelings toward it. The narrator not only molds a specific migrant persona but also exerts control over her mindset as it articulates her thoughts through a cinematic voice-over. Thus, while the narrative

suggests infinite potentials for self-determination, the second-hand car is eventually driving on a road that, much like any other road, has coordinates that determine both the journey and the destination and paradoxically imposes constraints on the migrant's voice and agency. This is the second reason why the story is written as a guidebook, which has to do with the genre's compelling address, as it tends to have subjective, imperative, or conditional forms (Richardson, 1991: 319). As the peculiarities of America are recounted to the migrant, the narrator guides her about ways to respond to them: "Remember that soon the customs officers will glance at the photograph [...] here you must do your best to remember that the officers in the booths have little in common with the ones you used to fear" (Hakakian, 2021: 4-5). Therefore, the instructions not only describe the story, but as they are imperatives, they drive the narratee to oblige the narrator's bidding.

It is because the narrator draws the migrant along the lines of the path toward assimilation that this narrative mode is selected for storytelling. It also explains why in spite of the diversity of migrant protagonists, they emerge in the homogeneous unit of 'you' addressed by the narrator: "if you are arriving at night" (Hakakian, 2021: 3), "if you are a refugee" (Hakakian, 2021: 25), "if you are from a nation ruled by theocracy" (Hakakian, 2021: 71); "if you plan to enrol in college" (Hakakian, 2021: 89). The narrator is inviting a broad group of addressees to have their eyes on the prize and go forward. The plurality of the protagonists mirrors the story's pluralist perspective on ethnicity. Despite its difference from the old assimilationist, Anglo-conformist model, whereby migrants dissolved and disappeared in the melting pot, the narrator's pluralist perspective allows the migrants to maintain their ethnicities, celebrate their holidays and eventually "find their place in a society of hyphenated Americans" (Ramírez, 2020: 7). In *Guide's* pluralist America, as Catherine S. Ramírez would argue, "ethnicity is the path to assimilation" (2020: 9). Yet, "differences notwithstanding, both perspectives assume a unilinear process of integration" (2020: 9). The fact that the second-hand car has all the "racket of past rides" in it and yet "presses on" (Hakakian, 2021: 65) mirrors this unilinear process. The idea of the progression of history, which reflects that the migrant is given a second chance to start anew and should charge forward, explicates why the narrator does not shy away from recounting injustices woven into the tapestry of American history. Retelling examples of ostracization and inequality against migrants, native Americans and African Americans, the narrator positions the narratee as an heir to America's complex past and educates her in a teleological approach to history. Through passages like "centuries since their tragic arrival, the wicked legacy of injustice and inequality still marks this nation" (Hakakian, 2021: 169), the story acknowledges the enduring impact of historical wrongs on contemporary America. Yet, it frames these injustices as milestones in the nation's progression and presents them as necessary steps toward the fulfilment of America's grand destiny: "American democracy began as an imperfect ideal. Every battle against its flaws perfected it a little more, and the hardest of those battles have been and continue to be fought by African Americans"—another reason to select a black transportation officer to bring the disoriented migrants home (Hakakian, 2021: 170). This staunch belief in perfectionism is woven in the texture of American society and can be traced back to as early as the eighteenth century. The ideas of such Enlightenment thinkers as Rousseau—who introduced the concept of human perfectibility in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754) and later expanded by N. de Condorcet into a foundational idea of social progress (Ugleva and Vinogradova, 2019: 116)—were subsequently adopted in America and shaped its intellectual movements. The reflection of this thought in America can be visibly traced in

the works of Benjamin Franklin such as in a letter to John Lathrop, a Boston clergyman, where he speaks of “the growing felicity of mankind, from the improvements in philosophy, morals, politics and even the convenience of common living” (Bruce, 1917: 115). Perfectibility continued to be embraced by movements and ideologies that emphasized moral, social, and individual improvement in the nineteenth-century United States. Providing the fuel for the revolutionary fervour of Romantic America, which viewed humans as “a reservoir of possibilities”, reform and regeneration were possible through a removal of “impediments to natural perfection” (Thomas, 1965: 656). It was the “unfettered will” that was “the proper vehicle for reform” and because “social evils” were deemed as “individual acts of selfishness compounded, and since Americans could attempt the perfect society any time they were so inclined, it followed that the duty of the true reformer consisted in educating them and making them models of good behavior” (Thomas, 1965: 659). This explains why the guide encourages the migrants not to “set their clocks to the Standard Time of the Displaced” (Hakakian, 2021: 33) but to the rhythm of their newfound lives. Much like Roya X, who embraces the prospect of a fresh start, the migrant protagonist is guided not to become her own primary obstacle on her way of controlling her narrative. Thus, this narrative strategy aligns with the broader American ethos of self-help and personal improvement, with the ultimate goal being “the achievement of happiness” (Effing, 2009: 127). In simultaneously questioning the past while also reinforcing the narrative of historical progress, the narrator guides the migrant to see her own story as part of the history of the United States and its Manifest Destiny to become the greatest nation on Earth. Hakakian’s narrative implies that immigrants must embrace this ethos of expansion and cultural assimilation to fulfil their own American destinies. This approach, namely that the onus is on the immigrant to conform to the dominant culture and institutions, ultimately reinforces the narrative that America is a land of opportunity for those willing to assimilate to its values. The way the story molds the archetypal migrant’s assimilation and transition into an American identity is analyzed through its use of intertextuality in the following section.

#### 4. INTERTEXTUAL JOURNEYS AND THE MIGRANT ARCHETYPE

It is in a naturalization ceremony, whence the rights of the migrant are sanctified in the constitution, that the ‘you’ of the migrant narratee reaches her final destination where her story ends. Focusing on the books’ intertextual links, it becomes evident that, for the narrator, the road to American freedom is necessarily paved by assimilation. Intertextuality begins with the book cover, where a blurred Statue of Liberty against a blue backdrop bears a striking resemblance to the *US Citizenship Test Study Guide*. This visual connection suggests that the true guide to America transcends mere factual memorization, as depicted in the *Citizenship Test* booklet. Considering the cover in tandem with the unmoored narrator, it can again be argued that Hakakian undermines the guidebook genre by resisting its prescribed narratives. However, as mentioned above, this very notion of self-determination reflects the ideology of American exceptionalism, which posits that the United States is inherently unique and distinct from other nations (Hodgson, 2009: 10). Repeating the trite characterization of America in terms of its commitment to individual liberty, democracy, and opportunity for social and economic advancement (Shafer, 1999: 446), Hakakian encourages the migrant to ponder about the way she can achieve freedom in the land of the free. As American Exceptionalism reflects

the notion that individuals can achieve success and self-realization through their own efforts, regardless of their background or circumstances, Hakakian perceives the primary hindrance to successful assimilation to be within the migrant's control.

The invitation to assimilate is reflected in the opening quotes to every chapter, which respond to larger debates and discussions about immigration and identity in contemporary American society and reinforce narratives of American exceptionalism. Examples are chapter one, which opens with "A newcomer can do much to teach himself" (Hakakian 2021, 3), from *Handbook for Immigrants in the United States* (1927), written by Marian Schibbsby, the Danish-American editor of *Monthly Review* or chapter two's opening quote from Cecilia Razovsky's *What Every Emigrant Should Know: A Simple Pamphlet for the Guidance and Benefit of Prospective Immigrants to the United States* (1922). Also written as a second person narrative, Razovsky's instructional booklet begins thus: "Today in your town the post has brought many letters from America. One letter is for You. It comes from your husband who has been living in the United States" (1922: 1). In the introduction, Razovsky's narrator tells what the reader can expect to find in the book and warns her not to embark on the journey unless they are fully prepared. This book is similarly rife with advice on what the immigrant narratee must do, such as learn how to read and write so that they would not fail the "literary test" and not be "sent back after their arrival on Ellis Island" (1922: 9). *Guide's* selected quote from Razovsky's book reads "America wants people who are clean: Because clean people do not bring sickness with them" (Hakakian, 2021: 15). This warning to the immigrants to come clean was given because Razovsky's Eastern European audience was deemed to have suffered from Trachoma and, on entry, they would be subject to close screening before being allowed into the United States. Hakakian's selection of this quote becomes clear as we read on. By the end of the chapter "Genesis Redux", the sickness to which she is referring is 'homesickness', that wistful, backward look that paralyzes the migrant into stasis: "People who are not homesick set their clocks to the standard time of their own region. But in exile, when homesickness is at its peak and every thought chases the next in a loop of regret, the hours pass according to the standard time of the Displaced" (Hakakian, 2021: 33). Both Razovsky and Hakakian's guides aim to prepare their migrant narratee for what lies ahead of her. But rather than such border screening processes in Razovsky's account, it is the immigrant's own nostalgic thought that could send Hakakian's migrant back to where she comes from. According to Howard Markel, however, less than one percent of the immigrants arriving at the ports and borders of the United States suffered from Trachoma, but "for most Americans living during the Progressive Era, the newly arrived immigrant personified the threat of trachoma" (Markel 2000, 526). Trachoma and nostalgia are related in this context, particularly in the way they are portrayed as barriers to immigrant integration. Trachoma, despite its relatively low prevalence among immigrants, was exaggerated and politicized to reinforce xenophobic attitudes and was used as a justification for excluding immigrants from entering the United States. Similarly, nostalgia, portrayed metaphorically as a 'disease' in the text, is depicted as a psychological barrier that prevents immigrants from fully assimilating into American society.

It is not just Hakakian's portrayal of nostalgia as a crippling and essentially 'un-American' affect that intersects with the concept of American exceptionalism, which, rooted in the idea of moving forward and manifest destiny, promotes a narrative of progress and advancement. Rather, this is evident in the way the text briefly touches on the harrowing experiences of migrants arriving through perilous means, such as crossing the U.S.-Mexico border: "There is no place on a résumé for swimming across the Rio

Grande several times to make a final safe passage, or surviving the crossing on foot despite the crooked ‘coyotes’” (Hakakian, 2021: 37). While this admission highlights the violence and danger many migrants face, it is ultimately subsumed under the banner of progress. The suffering and hardship become mere stepping stones in the broader narrative of overcoming obstacles to reach the promised land and reinforce the ideology of the American Dream and the idea that both the migrant and the nation improve in an uninterrupted, straight fashion. In framing violent border crossings as part of the migrant’s eventual success, the book subtly minimizes the brutal reality of border violence, including sexual assault and exploitation that migrants, especially women, endure at the hands of smugglers and U.S. border officials (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Morales, 2019). This omission further perpetuates the myth of an uncomplicated, linear path to freedom and success, masking the systemic violence inherent in the process of immigration.

Just as nostalgia, with its backward-looking sentiment, contradicts this ethos of continual progress, the other text from which Hakakian selects a quote champions practicality as a necessary trait for migrants seeking to thrive in America. Warning clerks against expecting to find similar jobs in the United States, the American Social Science Association’s *Handbook for Immigrants to the United States* (1871) suggests that they should be prepared for any kind of work: “Clerks ought not to think of coming to the United States unless they have thoroughly made up their minds to lay down the pen and take to the spade or the plough” (Hakakian, 2021: 34). This focus on practicality conveys a clear message to migrants: success requires adaptability, even at the cost of personal aspirations or professional identity. Such advice underscores the demands of a system that often prioritizes immediate utility over intellectual pursuits or individual ambitions. The advice to be practical and live in the present is further reinforced by including another quote from the text: “Americans are uncommonly intelligent. Their minds are not given to abstract thought. Nor are they to be called a philosophical or imaginative race. But in practical matters, in dealing with men and things as they are, surmounting obstacles and working out results, they show a wonderful smartness, another word for ingenuity” (Hakakian, 2021: 156). In this context, the second-person narrator seems to echo this sentiment and encourage migrants to prioritize pragmatism and compliance over critical reflection to pass as American through adherence to these cultural norms. This book, which contains descriptions of the United States’ geography and climate, political system, and other useful information for a newcomer, notably characterizes the people of the United States as follows: “First and foremost among the character of the American is independence. The American is born free, he lives free and he dies free. His government regards him not as a subject but as a citizen. His laws treat him equal as everybody about him” (1871: 45). Echoing this book’s directive to those “who have suffered in their native country” and “who seek a more liberal government or a freer people than their own” (1871:113), Hakakian guides those “who dream of becoming American” (2021: xiv) about the coordinates of the American identity. By the time the narrator congratulates the immigrant narratee who has arrived at the end of the book by saying “America has chosen you” (Hakakian, 2021: 212), the reader is not only familiar with the conditions of belonging in the United States but also what American freedom entails. Therefore, the admonition against looking back falls into a broader narrative of historical progress to which Hakakian owes her conception of freedom, which compels migrants to conform to a certain mold to access America’s promised freedom.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In the self-help tradition, the generic protagonist of Hakakian's story, who has recently arrived in America, is encouraged to focus on her new life and the freedom that living in the United States offers her. Instructing the migrant not to obstruct her way of achieving freedom by remaining trapped in the past, it defines liberty in negative terms as the absence of obstacles to freedom. Then it represents America as the place where external coercions gradually disappear as its democracy perfects itself. In doing so, the narrative reflects the progressive movement from bondage to liberation as a reconfiguration of American Exceptionalism suggesting that the country is on its destined road toward perfection. Alluding to the history of America and setting it side by side with old stories of migration also allows the narrator to reassure the migrant addressee that their arrival in the U.S. is only a part of this manifest destiny to play their historical duty. Thus, she weaves the texture of the American nation's body as a migrant nation. The thesis this study has intended to advance is that the second-person narrator of *A Beginner's Guide to America* (2021) acknowledges episodes of injustice in the history of the United States but reinforces the dominant ideology of assimilation and conformity to American society with the aim of convincing the silent migrant narratee that the nation is continuing its journey toward progress and perfection.

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