

DINA NAYERI'S *THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE*:
A MIGRANT'S "HYPHENATED" IDENTITY IN BETWEEN TRADITIONS
AND NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses *The ungrateful refugee: What immigrants never tell you* (2019) by Dina Nayeri, an Iranian-American writer. Nayeri narrates her "hyphenated" identity as developing in between countries, religions, Iranian and American myths, and within transnational and liminal spaces. Even though Nayeri initially views her refugee experience as disrupting her temporality and rupturing her sense of continuity, she can transform it into an opportunity to refigure her narrative identity and construct new, reparative self-constancy, as in the Ricœurian type of *ipse* identity (Ricœur 1988: 246–247, 1992: 114–116). As she weaves together her personal narrative with her family memoir and several other stories of refugees, she comments on non-Western narrative patterns and Iranian storytelling customs, which are inequitably considered non-standard and incoherent by Western immigration officials. Nayeri uses several techniques that distinguish her narrative, such as straying into digressions and incorporating fragments of reportage and storytelling.

The title of Nayeri's book provokes a discussion on who is considered a "good immigrant" and what attitude "the ungrateful refugee" can take to protect their integrity and identity in the refugee camp and in the "host" society. Nayeri employs a rebellious, persistent voice and a sarcastic style to defy the social discourse that almost inconspicuously racialises refugees and migrants, and shapes expectations of immigrant "gratitude". Although she struggles to come to terms with her refugeehood in Italy and migration to the United States, she recognises national and ethnic differences and celebrates them as an element of a hybrid, transnational life that does not have to divide people.

Keywords: refugee, migrant, narrative, identity, race, racialisation, embodiment, hyphen, transnationalism, citizenship, time.

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1. Introduction

The article discusses Dina Nayeri's *The ungrateful refugee: What immigrants never tell you* (2019). It may be categorised as an autobiographical memoir with elements of biographical reportage. The idea for the book was first developed as an extended essay titled "The ungrateful refugee: 'We have no debt to repay'" published in *The Guardian* in 2017. The essay became one of the most popular articles in the newspaper in 2017, and it is a set text for a number of school and university courses in English. The book memoir with the changed subtitle earned Dina Nayeri the Geschwister Scholl Preis and the Clara Johnson Award, both in 2020; it was also a finalist for several other international literary awards. It was widely praised by numerous reviewers and other authors (Nayeri & Brink 2024).

Dina Nayeri is an Iranian-American author; she was born in Isfahan, Iran, in 1979 to well-educated parents. The author is a successful scholar and writer. She is a graduate of Princeton, Harvard, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She currently teaches at the University of St Andrews in Scotland.

Dina Nayeri's mother, a doctor, converted to Christianity, which turned her into a *persona non grata* in Islamic Iran and subjected her to police persecution. Her religious change, her husband's violence, and the dilapidation of the country towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war forced her to flee from her homeland with her daughter, Dina, and son, Daniel², in 1988. Together, they spent approximately ten months in Dubai as sponsored visitors on tourist visas. Later, they moved on to live in a refugee camp in the suburbs of Rome, Italy. About two years after escaping from Iran, they were granted asylum and travelled to Oklahoma in the United States. Dina Nayeri's father lives in Iran.

In *The ungrateful refugee*, Nayeri narrates her experience and attempts to emplot the fractured timeline of her family. Even though she initially views her refugee experience as disrupting her temporality and rupturing her sense of continuity, Nayeri can transform it into an opportunity to refigure her narrative identity and construct new, reparative "self-constancy", as in the Ricœurian type of *ipse* identity (Ricœur 1988: 246–247, 1992: 114–116). The stories she tells and the problems she discusses in her memoir demonstrate that the United States of America as a cultural and political construct is not a country closed only within its borders. Following the title of the 2023 Polish Association for American Studies Conference: "America's Deep Time: Alternate Geographies, Histories, and Temporalities", one could argue that the United States reaches far beyond the borders of the country and its history and that America as a concept is extended by contemporary migrations and refugee movements (Dimock 2006).

² The real Farsi name of Dina Nayeri's brother is Khosrou.

2. Historical contexts

To introduce Dina Nayeri's *The ungrateful refugee: What immigrants never tell you*, one could first look at the historical event inextricably related to the issues discussed further in this article: the Islamic Revolution in Iran of 1978 and 1979 and its influence on women's lives. The revolution removed the last Persian monarch of Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and established a Muslim theocracy led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Axworthy 2013). Laurence Paul Elwell-Sutton, the renowned late professor of Persian and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh, concludes his article published in the summer of 1979, several months after the revolution, with a very pessimistic opinion: "Iran is likely to be a very unhappy place for a long time". He enumerates not only religious and social changes but also a mounting economic crisis in Iran as the major causes of the upheaval (1979: 405–407). Michael Axworthy in *Revolutionary Iran: A history of the Islamic Republic* (2013) states that the reapplication of the religious law of shari'a "reimposed traditional values" of Islam on Iranians. However, the Islamic government's acts were not as conservative as its early assertions would suggest and "were in fact rather less traditional than they seemed" (Axworthy 2013: 152).

The most conservative laws that changed women's legal status were the reinstitution of mandatory veiling and, as Axworthy explains, "[p]erhaps the most important change entailed in the removal of the law of 1967 was that women lost [child] custody rights in the event of divorce" (2013: 151). As Axworthy elaborates, the shari'a law's regulations concerning women were not unanimously accepted by Iranians. Some women protested against "the reimposition of the veil" and questioned the traditional reforms by asserting their right to education and performing professions that require making public appearances. According to Axworthy, the religious and social changes that came with the Iranian Revolution "were a bitter disappointment to many of the women who had demonstrated for the removal of the Shah in 1978" (2013: 152–153). Despite this, many Iranian women perform prestigious professions without obstacles. They are successful lawyers, doctors, professors, teachers, artists, filmmakers, and public activists (Esfandiari & Seay 1997). Overall, if one considers the actions of the Iranian government, the social and educational changes since the Revolution "meant that the status of women in the Islamic republic improved in a variety of important respects" (Axworthy 2013: 153).

Another significant historical context for Nayeri's memoir is the so-called "Global War on Terror" (Global war on terror 2024, capitalisation in original) that the United States initiated by invading Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran's two closest neighbours. The war on terrorism, which is an umbrella term denoting a number of military actions and interventions, started after the terrorist attacks

of September 11, 2001 in the United States. The actions of the United States military resulted not only in routing the terrorist organisation called al-Qaeda and killing its leader, Osama bin Laden, but also in arousing social discrimination against and racialisation of people of Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and other Middle-Eastern ethnicities in North America and other westernised regions around the world (Countering discrimination against Muslims [2024](#)).

3. A refugee's narrative identity

Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity and narrative refiguration of a person's self-constancy is used more and more often in the context of migration and refugeehood narrative studies (see Andrews [2010](#)). Ricœur reflects on the creative tension that exists between raw life's "discordance" and the unity and coherence of narrative "concordance". He believes that the "synthesis of the heterogeneous", which is constructed when the chaos of time and lived experience is configured into a narrative form, might be one of the processes that help people understand the meaning of their life events and possible traumas (Ricœur [1984](#): 66–70). Ricœur argues that a person's life is characterized by a "pre-narrative" comprehension, whereas if lived experiences are configured as a story, their narrative refiguration changes one's perception of them, which may lead to rebuilding their sense of identity (Ricœur [1984](#): 70–75, [1988](#): 246–247).

Ricœur's definition of narrative identity implies that it is an *ipse* identity, which means that it is not set in stone: it is mouldable and open to configuration and refiguration due to the intervention of the narrative into the disrupted and disjointed elements of life. In contrast to the *idem* identity, which is based on the permanence and sameness of one's character through time, the *ipse* identity is not a product of unchangeable logical coherence and absolute consistency. Ricœur's idea of narrative identity includes changeability and allows for the re-evaluation of one's beliefs, assumptions, and belonging. As a result, personal identity does not appear as "sameness" but as reconstructed "self-constancy" and narrative "selfhood" (Ricœur [1988](#): 246, 1992: 114).

In *Through other continents: American literature across deep time* ([2006](#)), Wai Chee Dimock asks rhetorically: "[D]o modern human beings always experience time as a measuring tape, uniform and abstract, untouched by locality, and untouched by the differential weight of the past?" ([2006](#): 2). The scholar argues that the historical time of the clock and the linear axis of measurable centuries are limiting perspectives on literature. Moreover, within a spatial perspective, if one considered American literature to be closed only within the national borders of the United States and limited by its relatively short national history, the development of literature and, by extension, of human knowledge and perception would be stifled. She believes that "loosening up the chronology

and geography of the nation” and seeing American literature through the “deep time” of other nations’ and continents’ narratives and temporalities enables one to notice “a much more complex tangle of relations” (2006: 3–4). To Dimock’s reflection, I would like to add that migrations, either of refugees or economic migrants from non-Western locations or the Global South, can be a force that supports the distention of American and Western literatures and perceptions of time, space, and identity.

In *The ungrateful refugee*, Dina Nayeri tells a story of migrant identity constructed and positioned between countries, religions, and Iranian and American myths. When she and her closest family members become refugees in Italy, the first emotions they experience are relief and a sense of freedom. However, after a certain time, refugeehood in suburban Rome begins to feel like constant waiting in confinement. The inactivity and boredom, the lack of school for children or work for parents engender a need for stories, a narrative desire that sharpens the author’s attentiveness to detail. The multicultural community of Hotel Barba, an old hotel which was turned into a refugee camp, makes it possible for Nayeri to witness customs and habits other than those of her native culture. She can also hear other languages and new stories. Together with her mother and brother, she is free in Hotel Barba, and yet, she is made to “stay put” (Nayeri 2019: 4–5) and daydream about “a better life” in the Global North. The new life is, in simple terms, not better but poorer since Nayeri’s parents are well-educated people who practised prestigious professions and lived in a beautiful apartment in Isfahan. Even when they move to the United States, the author’s mother cannot go back to practising medicine. She works in factories where her education is either undermined or not recognised at all. As a converted Christian and a refugee, she tells her migration story at many church meetings. Nayeri comments that her mother’s narrative of a “miraculous” escape from Islamic Iran has become a defining factor for her identity formation. She says: “For two decades, our escape defined me. [...] Our story was a sacred thread woven into my identity” (2019: 7). She adopts her mother’s narrative identity as her own. At first, she does not recognise that this story includes imposed gratefulness, which Nayeri later denounces and rejects.

The mother’s story of fleeing Iran and immigrating to the United States may also include a neo-Orientalist image of Iran as an “exotic” and “dangerous” country governed by Islamic fundamentalists. In such a narrative portrayal, Iran would become a place from which “civilised” Christians want to escape. It seems that Nayeri, too, falls into the trap of neo-Orientalism in some parts of her autobiographical story. Certain tropes of a neo-Orientalist discourse of Iran are present in Nayeri’s memoir, especially when she discusses her primary school as a place of strict obedience and indoctrination, and when she uses the veil as a symbol of Iranian women’s oppression.

Dina Nayeri's mother decided to abandon her husband and leave Iran because she had been arrested and threatened several times by the morality police, also called the "Guidance Patrol" of Islamic law enforcement. Nayeri claims that her mother's conversion to Christianity in the theocratic state of Iran was officially seen as apostasy. Nayeri's mother holds a medical degree from the University of Tehran: she used to be a gynaecologist in her homeland, which, as Nayeri depicts it, gave her significant social prestige (Nayeri 2023). She was known in her town and well-respected. Despite her religious conversion, she wore a headscarf to avoid drawing attention in the street.

Several times throughout the memoir, Nayeri uses the veil as a symbol of women's position in Iranian society, which may arouse controversy and criticism. For instance, she recounts a situation in which her mother risked her life to save the author's brother when he got out of the car onto a street full of traffic. When she was running after her son, "her scarf slipped back a few inches revealing half a head of loose hair. Then we heard the shouting, a *pasdar* [guard] was pointing and ranting at Maman. 'Watch your hijab, woman!'" (Nayeri 2019: 37, italics original). Moreover, Dina Nayeri experienced the educational system of an Iranian girls' school. As a seven-year-old girl, at school, she had to wear a chador: a piece of clothing covering her head, neck, and shoulders. She also remembers that the atmosphere of the school she went to in Iran was harsh and competitive: the female teachers were demanding and required obedience.

The problem of other Iranian-American writers' depictions of Iran as a "demonic" country hostile towards women is discussed by Hossein Nazari in *Representing post-revolutionary Iran: Captivity, neo-Orientalism, and resistance in Iranian-American life writing* (2022). He states that "the dominant Western representations of Iran and Islam can be read as manifestations of a sustained and long-standing Orientalist discourse formulated in and popularized by the West" (Nazari 2022: 2). He analyses three memoirs written by Iranian-American women and observes that they view the Islamic Revolution as "a traumatic encounter" (2022: 13) and use "the veil as the emblem of Muslim women's alleged oppression" (2022: 23). In the self-narratives interpreted by Nazari, "discursive strategies such as negation, affirmation, oversimplification, dehistoricization, decontextualization, feminization, infantilization, exoticization, and eroticization" serve to construct a neo-Orientalist image, which strengthens the Western discourse of classical Orientalism and its binary oppositions and Othering with new motifs and themes (2022: 21–23). It appears that certain aspects of neo-Orientalism permeate Nayeri's memoir. However, it also seems that neo-Orientalism does not inform the entire portrayal of Nayeri's Iranian upbringing. Nayeri's story also includes such themes as the authority of women as teachers and successful professionals, the love of a father who protects his daughter from injustice, and the beauty of Iranian family life and of Iran's

nature, architecture, and culture. Moreover, the focal point of Nayeri's memoir is not an image of Iran but a complex itinerary of a refugee and an Iranian-American migrant, whose identity links multiple points of Eastern and Western traditions and stories.

As one of the most significant points, Nayeri recounts that asylum officers abused her family's migration narrative. She remembers that as refugees, still in Italy, "with the sweat and dust of escape still on our brows, we had to turn our ordeal into a good, persuasive story or risk being sent back" (Nayeri 2019: 8). Furthermore, while discussing other refugees' oral narratives and written works, Nayeri argues that asylum applicants are frequently misunderstood by immigration officers because the narrative compositions that they produce do not meet the cultural "requirements" of good storytelling accepted in the Global North (2019: 242–243). Referring to her native culture and the Iranian practice of composition, she states that an Iranian person would "start [a story] long before the beginning" of the main event in question. Nayeri claims that an Iranian refugee's answer to the question: "Why did you leave [your country]?" could start with the words: "Let me tell you about modern Iran", or even "begin with the creation of the universe" (2019: 243). These examples might illustrate how important the Iranian Revolution and the Muslim religion are for the national identity of Iranians. An attempt to emplot a story of one's escape from Iran is almost bound to refer to these themes or make them the story's backdrop.

On the microscale of personal stories, Nayeri discovers fundamental differences in perceiving the world and understanding it through narrative patterns of various traditions. She indicates that culturally specific Iranian ways of self-expression and narrative identity formation may be stifled by the Western world's desire to hegemonically impose its principles of logic and narrative coherence on ethnically diverse and hybrid narratives. Nayeri shows that this culturally insensitive practice may result in rejecting asylum applications and thus seriously harm already traumatised individuals. It can also be the reason why she positions her memoir between Iranian and American narrative traditions. By doing this, she attempts to extend the scope and formal characteristics of Western life writing. Contemporary American literature—together with its narrative forms, cultural contexts, and its geographical reach, liminal spaces, and specific locations—goes beyond its conventional reference points thanks to refugees' and migrants' contributions.

Still re-living her story of escaping Iran, Nayeri decides to "*prove, repay, [and] transform [herself]*" in Oklahoma (Nayeri 2019: 9, italics original). She dreams of going to Harvard. To achieve her educational goal, she takes up Taekwondo, a physically demanding martial art, and pushes herself to extreme weight loss. She wants to be a student at an Ivy League university because she believes that this can give her a sense of belonging and make her a "good"

and “palatable immigrant” (2019: 9). It is not only an educational aspiration. Nayeri admits that “[her] great project was about transforming, becoming someone unrelated to Iran, my family, my dramatic circumstances. It was about proving my worth in every sphere” (2019: 293). She wants to demonstrate her gratitude to her new country by re-making herself and embracing an American myth of success. When she wins a national Taekwondo tournament, she quits the sport as it is only a means to an end: being admitted to a university.

However, when she attends Princeton, then Harvard, and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she comes to realise that the gratitude that refugees feel might be imposed on them. The “host”³ society expects a migrant to be grateful and assimilate. In the 2017 essay in *The Guardian*, Nayeri notes that she felt threatened and manipulated to display gratitude. She says: “If I failed to stir up in myself enough gratefulness, or if I failed to properly display it, I would lose all that I had gained, this western freedom” (Nayeri 2017). In this way, gratitude becomes a form of control that the “host” society can exert on a refugee. If a refugee succeeds on their own, without the rescue and help of the new country, the “host’s” authority is undermined. Through symbolic ingratitude, Nayeri can reconstruct her identity with a new sense of integrity. Being “the ungrateful refugee” allows her to feel genuinely thankful and to connect her happy memories of good and beautiful Iran with her new life in the West. Eventually, she is empowered enough to know that she does not need to “repay” anyone for saving her life (Nayeri 2017). The “ungratefulness” is a form of resistance against the myth of the United States as a welcoming “host” country for immigrants. What is oppressive in this myth is the expectation that immigrants should assimilate: blend in the “melting pot”, lose their cultural identities, and be grateful for new opportunities in the United States. Although the “salad bowl” theory, which “maintains the unique [cultural] identities of individuals that would otherwise be lost to assimilation”, has gained influence since the 1960s (Berray 2019: 143), Nayeri and her family still experience certain expectations of assimilation in the community that hosts them in Oklahoma in the early 1990s.

³ Jacques Derrida in his article “Hostipitality” (2000) and in the book *Of hospitality* (2000) argues that the idea of hospitality is “self-contradictory” when juxtaposed with the meaning of the word “hostility” (2000: 5). Similarly, by way of deconstruction, the word “host” can refer both to a nation’s or a community’s capability to be hospitable and to their power to be hostile. Such an analysis indicates that the notions of “hospitality” and “host” are political and ethical ones. Thus, the concept of “host” is also entangled in the aporetic pair of hospitality/hostility, which, if related to a country that receives migrants and refugees, may denote inclusiveness and the willingness to welcome “the Other”, as well as a desire for control and a reluctance to invite difference. In Derrida’s analysis, these two meanings coexist and are inseparable. For this reason, I put quotation marks around the word “host”. This noun might carry a negative meaning and harmful implications as it frequently refers to a country, community or person who generously welcomes and hosts, but also desires to control a migrating person.

Another problem that Nayeri mentions in her book is migrant citizenship and its relation to one's cultural identity. Lily Cho, while reflecting on minority and majority literatures in Canada, recognises the "unfitness" and "uneasiness" which exist in the relation between diasporic subjectivity and national citizenship (Cho [2007](#): 94). When Dina Nayeri receives her American citizenship at the age of fifteen during a large event organised on the 4th of July, she shares the sheer joy of many other migrants present at a football pitch that day. She also remembers that most of them represent diasporic, marginalised, or racialised ethnic groups. Nevertheless, when she reflects on the meaning of the naturalisation ceremony and her citizenship, she remarks that many migrants have a desire to prove themselves to their new society. In consequence, they might view citizenship as a reward or as a declaration that they are worthy of being Americans. Even though Nayeri meets other Iranians in the United States, she hardly ever mentions diasporic mobilisation or diasporic belonging in her memoir. For instance, Nayeri's mother is almost fully accepted and assimilated as a Christian: her cultural identity as an Iranian woman is virtually overlooked by other church members and simplified to popular slogans in conversations. Nayeri suggests that a refugee who receives citizenship in the United States may be socially pressured to suppress their first cultural identity. Although she is perfectly aware of the social influence exerted on refugees and migrants, she still finds herself in a space of "uneasiness". At a certain point in her life, she wants to be seen only as an American citizen. Nayeri notices that for her, official citizenship is not as important as the words "welcome home" uttered by an officer at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York. The word "home" and the officer's assumption that she is American constitute intangible proof of her new identity. How society perceives her becomes her "practical" citizenship, and her already hybridised cultural identity may remain hidden (Nayeri [2017](#)).

Nayeri's construction of her narrative identity in *The ungrateful refugee* starts with an image of a fractured identity. As a girl, she is taken away from her father and the familiarity of her hometown, its culture, schools, and even food. Although she travels to London as a child and knows Europe through this experience, she feels that her timeline is disrupted by the time she spends in Dubai and the utter stagnation of her refugeehood in Rome. In the United States, she sets a clear goal for herself. However, her actions seem abrupt and illogical for others. Despite the time and effort that she devotes to Taekwondo, she gives it up as soon as winning a national tournament provides her with the achievement and credits necessary for her university application. On the one hand, she is painfully aware that she has started to fulfil the desire of her new American community to forget Iran, assimilate, and be grateful. She is determined to succeed in higher education and demonstrate her extraordinary intelligence and talent in America. She feels compelled to break up with her previous identity and "thrive according to western standards" (Nayeri [2017](#)).

On the other hand, when she abandons her first husband in Amsterdam, goes to Iowa City to study at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and starts writing a story that would later become her first novel, Nayeri meets people who help her realise that her experiences can be narrated even though her life appears to her as discontinuous, incoherent, and inconsistent. Nayeri comes to terms with her origin by cooking Iranian food for her new Iranian-American friends in Iowa City, using the Farsi language again after several years, and, most importantly, by working on her novel. She decides to merge her American education with her Iranian heritage. She embraces the insecurities of a former refugee together with her sarcasm and irony. The arduous process of narrative identity refiguration and rebuilding a sense of self-constancy results in regaining pride in being born in Iran. She revisits home in her writing and memory, albeit aware that it is only an image of home: a romantic reconstruction of a non-existent Iran. When asked by her father if she would sponsor her Iranian half-sister as a refugee in Europe, she refuses and reflects: "[...] yes, I am selfish. I don't want to go backward. I don't want to witness the ugliness of assimilation again. I don't want to see my family ashamed, hiding tics, posturing gratitude as they carry out an endless search for home and identity" (Nayeri 2019: 363).

The refiguration of her identity and her newly rebuilt narrative continuity might not be perfect. Nayeri admits that at one point, her brother calls her "a chameleon" and accuses her of developing a protean self. He thinks that she possesses "a creepy ability to choose a person [she] want[s] to be, then transform into that person so accurately that the overall effect [is] something sinister" (Nayeri 2019: 350). Nayeri responds that she has never desired to create an artificial sense of coherence in her life story. One could argue that what is available to her as a former refugee is the Ricœurian narrative "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricœur 1984: 66) or Édouard Glissant's "nonuniform whole" of a folktale (Glissant 1999: 85). Both these ideas seem to indicate that temporal non-linearity and narrative fragmentation might contribute to one's narrative identity re-evaluation. Dina Nayeri turns her exile, the itinerary of a child refugee, and her other itineraries of an adult wanderer in the United States, Europe, and the British Isles into "a nonuniform whole" (Glissant 1999: 85), which liberates her writing from the totalising Western standard of narrative coherence and linearity. She refigures her identity partially thanks to the fact that she can connect her writing with the Iranian patterns of narrative composition.

Moreover, the language and style that Nayeri uses in her memoir can sometimes seem sarcastic and ironic. Although she discusses serious matters, such as death, starvation, the loss of one's home, and dislocation, at certain points, she employs a semi-serious tone to distance herself from her own experience. Colloquialisms and occasional swearwords allow her to sound accessible to the reader and, at the same time, they guard her from the overwhelming weight of

what she went through as a child refugee. Additionally, as Nayeri finds her voice and style, she rebuilds her personal boundaries and integrity. How Nayeri chooses words demonstrates that even though her first language is Iranian Persian, also called Farsi, she is well-read in English, and she can develop her style with a clear purpose. Also, the authors to whom she makes references and from whom she takes inspiration, such as Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin, may remind the reader that Nayeri is not only a writer but also a scholar. Therefore, one might assume that her language, style, and narrative devices are selected and used advisedly and deliberately. Nayeri's linguistic and literary choices also constitute a part of how she structures her narrative identity in her memoir.

Another issue that can be touched upon while discussing the author's narrative identity is the seemingly insignificant punctuation mark that one may insert when they introduce Dina Nayeri as "an Iranian-American author". The hyphen in between these adjectives might make it possible for Nayeri to think of and design new narrative devices that can only exist in the metaphorical "hyphen". As the Canadian writer Fred Wah claims, the hybridisation and in-betweenness: the cultural hyphenation can become the space of creative freedom for a migrant's self-expression (Wah [2000](#): 52–61, 73–74, 87). Dina Nayeri's identity can be represented (or misrepresented) as hyphenated; however, she can use the "hyphen" to her advantage. Even though she wants to assimilate into American culture when she is a teenager, she matures and starts to consider assimilation to be unjust and painful. She reaches the point where she can fully acknowledge and celebrate the many differences that she encounters in her life: different religions, cultures, ethnicities, and eventually, the inner conflict of being Iranian and American, and, at the same time, being permanently based in Europe.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Nayeri devotes several digressive chapters of her memoir to a scattered literary reportage describing other refugees' life stories. These fragments, which are devoted mainly to two men of Kurdish and Iranian origin, constitute a vital part of *The ungrateful refugee*. In one of them, Nayeri describes the story of Kaweh Beheshtizadeh, an Iranian Kurd who entered the United Kingdom via Turkey, Greece, and continental Europe as an "illegal" migrant without documents or identification. Even though Kaweh is interrogated several times by British authorities and made to change his name for several years, his story comes to a positive outcome: he is granted asylum, gets married in Britain, finishes university, and establishes a legal practice (Nayeri [2019](#): 55–71, 205–216). The story of Kambiz Roustayi never reaches a "happy ending". Kambiz also crosses Europe but, unlike Kaweh, he is transported to the Netherlands. He struggles with his asylum application because he does not have a "compelling" story. He claims that he met a married woman in Iran; he was

accused of adultery and threatened by the morality police. When he tells other refugees, his acquaintances, that he is connected to a group of Iranian journalists, they advise him to lie and tell Dutch authorities that he is a Christian. Kambiz refuses to do so, and his application is rejected several times. He becomes an “illegal” immigrant in the Netherlands; he lives and works without permits or documents. When he wishes to re-open his asylum case, he is arrested and imprisoned in a detention centre for almost a year. Kambiz Roustayi commits suicide on the 6th of April, 2011, by self-immolation in Dam Square in Amsterdam (2019: 55–71, 217–228). These two and several other stories that Dina Nayeri gathers in the Netherlands and in the refugee camps she visits in Greece as a journalist for *The Guardian* allow her to use her Iranian experience as well as her Western education to explore the liminal spaces of asylum, refugeehood, and her own memories from Dubai and Rome.

Thanks to narrating other refugees’ stories, Nayeri begins to understand that “[e]very memory falters, skips, adorns; the story takes on mythic or hagiographic qualities because the mind is thirsty for meaning” (Nayeri 2019: 233). Only when Nayeri draws on all the traditions that have shaped her can she accept and embrace the fact that memories and stories are imperfect and fragmented and that lives may seem ruptured and discontinuous. In this way, although it can still be used to discriminate against individuals and ethnicities, the metaphorical “hyphen” of transcultural experiences becomes a tool of freedom and a sign of hybrid creativity that perhaps only a migrant or refugee can recognise, reinterpret, and use to refigure their own narrative. Nayeri does not construct Kaweh’s and Kambiz’s stories as one coherent chapter. Instead, she fragments their stories: she does not tell them as whole, continuous narratives. Their stories interweave and are completed several chapters later in separate sections. Such a structural choice gives the reader an impression of disjointedness and suspense. Arguably, narrating stories of other asylum seekers and refugees enables Nayeri to revisit her own story and re-understand its “gaps and contradictions” (2019: 233).

The ungrateful refugee contains many flashbacks, digressions, and afterthoughts. Although it starts with the private family narrative of the Nayeris, it also tells a story about the contemporary Iran. The story of Dina Nayeri’s obsession with Harvard is told and re-told in a few parts or versions (Nayeri 2019: 204, 285). The book is not only an autobiography or a memoir; it is also a literary reportage on other people’s life stories as well as an intimate and disenchanted reflection on migrants’ and refugees’ subjectivity in the “host” countries. As Nayeri explains, to be granted asylum in Europe or North America, one needs to know and employ the storytelling patterns and motifs of the country they arrive in. However, she immediately adds: “Iranian storytelling doesn’t satisfy any of these requirements [...] No narrative rules. Iranians have no problem with spoilers – the ending isn’t the pleasure of a story for them” (2019: 242).

In a certain way, the composition of *The ungrateful refugee* demonstrates that Nayeri's narrative is a product of both Iranian cultural upbringing and Western creative writing courses. This might also indicate that the author attempts to tell her own refugeehood story which is different from the one her mother would like her to tell, and which does not adhere to American or European rules of narrative composition, deference, or gratefulness. Thanks to this, Nayeri can refigure her transcultural, transnational, and interpersonal experiences and begin to discover a sense of self-constancy within her life story.

It seems that a refugee lives in between temporalities and narratives. They desire to make it whole, to give their life a unifying principle and a closure because they are "thirsty for meaning" (Nayeri 2019: 233). Nevertheless, Dina Nayeri observes that many refugees feel that they "[have] to relive that story again and again, to earn our place, to calm casual sceptics" (2019: 8). Becoming entrapped in a narrative identity which tells one to be grateful and silent can happen in two ways, among others. One can believe that their story of escape and migration is miraculous and that they owe much to the people who have helped and welcomed them; therefore, they need to prove their worth to their new society. Their story becomes a coherent whole, in which inconsistencies and discontinuities caused by trauma are "patched up", sewn together and reconciled. Like Nayeri's mother, they contend that gratitude and hard work should characterise their response to the new world. Other migrants might assume that they are intruders and should remain unnoticeable and camouflaged. As a result, they remain silent; they never tell or write down their migration stories, and they bury their narrative identities lest they should be discovered and ridiculed. Dina Nayeri narrates and examines the processes in which she experiences, lives through, notices, and finally liberates herself from similar reactions of her body and mind. Her narrative identity constructed in *The ungrateful refugee* undergoes changes that enable her to review the discontinuities of migration in order to regain her integrity and create a sense of renewed understanding of the raw facts of her life.

In a sense, Nayeri allows herself to be a "chameleon" and to adjust and transform herself. She does not view inconsistency in life as inappropriate or discordant. She quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that consistency is "foolish" and proves only one's narrow-mindedness (Nayeri 2019: 351). Nayeri does not want to build an artificial sense of "sameness" of her identity in her life and, thanks to this, protects her freedom and resists the hegemonic influence of Western cultures' narratives. She is aware that she was raised and educated almost entirely in the United States and only partially in Iran. Still, without denying the West's influence on her writing and identity, she can revisit her Iranian memories. With developed self-awareness, Nayeri accepts the changes that happen in her cultural positioning, geographical location, and narrative identity. Her narrative: her "nonuniform whole"

(Glissant [1999](#): 85) or “synthesis of the heterogeneous” (Ricoeur [1984](#): 66) becomes a form of cultural resistance and personal freedom.

4. Embodied racialisation and its influence on identity

Dina Nayeri uses the space of her memoir to reflect on the condition of refugeehood in wider terms. Even the title, *The ungrateful refugee: What immigrants never tell you*, sparks controversy. It forces one to reflect on the meaning of the labels that are attached to migrating people. It seems that Nayeri deliberately employs the words “refugee” and “immigrant” in close proximity, as if they meant the same. This creative “mix-up” might indicate the fact that these terms are frequently misused and mistaken for one another in popular media. It may also suggest that there is a strong connection between being socially recognised as a refugee and as an immigrant. Moreover, in popular discourse, these words might denote an outcast, a racialised person pushed to the social margin. Thomas Nail, an American philosopher, describes “the figure of the migrant” by stating that it is “a political concept that identifies the common points where these figures are socially expelled or dispossessed as a result, or as the cause, of their mobility” (Nail [2015](#): 11).

Nayeri also shows how racism and racial embodiment influence refugees’ and migrants’ identities. The Latin-American scholar Linda Martín Alcoff regards “race” as a “socially constructed, historically malleable, [and] culturally contextual” category which is “produced through learned perceptual practice” (Alcoff [1999](#): 17) and exists in the form of culturally constructed meaning attached to skin tone ([1999](#): 16–19). Alcoff believes that racial embodiment is a type of “reading” or interpretation that is socially and contextually attached to one’s body and felt by the body’s owner. Following Frantz Fanon’s seminal work *Black skin, white masks* ([1986](#)), Alcoff states that the fact that other people attach maledictory meaning to one’s skin colour changes a person’s self-perception. Alcoff and Frank Chouraqui define racialised “visibility” as “the experience of being exposed to a world organised by racial interpretations” (Chouraqui [2021](#): 188–189) which form “a structure of contemporary perception” and entrap an individual (Alcoff [1999](#): 20, 23). William C. Pamerleau’s research on racialising narratives suggests that a racialised person may experience problems with their ability to construct a stable narrative identity. A lack of socially available narrative structures can undermine racialised people’s capability to construct narrative identities that are meaningful for them (Pamerleau [2021](#): 217–219).

Refugees and migrants might feel inferior and ashamed in their “host” societies also because of how their bodies are racialised. Nayeri points out that if they believe that such a situation is natural or “fair”, they try to “earn their way into the good graces of the well-placed white man” (Nayeri [2019](#): 338).

She also quotes her grandmother's saying: "*How society sees you makes your personality*" (2019: 340, italics original). Such an attitude might lead a refugee—for example, a Persian person in the United States—to follow an instinct that tells them to avoid being seen, to be so inconspicuous for society that they are invisible (2019: 342). Such behaviour, in turn, transforms a person's identity and their self-image. It also illustrates the workings of racialised embodiment: a racialised person senses their "hypervisibility" and the gaze of others on their body so much that they internalise the racialisation. They change and distort their personality so that it fits the racist assumptions about them.

Dina Nayeri demonstrates the painful awareness of the racialisation of Iranian people in the United States with a situation she and her brother experience at a Texan airport:

In 2009, my younger brother Daniel and I were travelling together in Texas. In the airport security line, an officer waved us through while choosing the old white woman behind us for a random check. I breathed a sigh of relief, since the 'born in Tehran' in our American passports always got us a pat-down, at least. As we passed, Daniel said to the officer in a jokey American tone, 'I don't feel safe on this flight.' The officer looked up. I thought, *What the hell is happening right now?* [...] He smiled at the officer and said, 'You're checking *her*? Isn't the random checking for guys like me?' (Nayeri 2019: 349, italics original)

The position the author and her brother find themselves in, the location, the birthplace information in their passports, and the thought that other people judge them by their appearance frighten Nayeri for a while and bring her to the realisation that she and her brother live "in a menacing universe" where their cultural and national belonging, their value and identity are projected on them by other people just because they look "brown" [sic] (2019: 349–350). Daniel's words do not provoke any response from the guard except laughter. What the situation does, however, is help Nayeri become aware of how racialisation influences her behaviour and identity positioning in America. Even though she holds an American passport for many years and is well-known for her fiction and journalism around the world, she still experiences the effects of racism and prejudice, which make her insecure and cause her to assume that she cannot take her safety for granted. Therefore, racialisation is another form of power and control that is supposed to make a refugee grateful and deferent towards their "host".

Furthermore, the guard's reaction or the lack of it might be as meaningful as Nayeri's concern. What it might indicate is that the United States is not only America. The cultural and political geographies of the country are altered by many factors, including refugees' and migrants' transnational social fields: places and communities which "cut across geographic, cultural, and political borders", and where diasporic cultures can thrive (Quayson & Daswani 2013: 12).

Migrants' private and social spaces, whether organised as traditional diasporic movements or spontaneous and informal, extend the borders of the United States. The transnationalism of refugees and migrants makes national borders permeable and relocates frontiers beyond the physical geography and national history of the United States. The geographical names, maps, stories, folktales, and histories of newcomers begin to transform Americans, their identities, and worldviews. This might be the reason why the airport guard only laughs at Dina Nayeri's brother's remark: "Isn't the random checking for guys like me?" (2019: 349).

5. Conclusions

Eventually, "what immigrants never tell you" is perhaps the social manipulation of gratitude and the danger that one faces if they do not display it. What is equally important is that the experience of time and the understanding of temporality and identity in narratives may differ between stories and myths. Culturally specific narrative patterns, hybridised customs, and traumas of refugeehood can alter one's comprehension of time and, unexpectedly, open up the possibility for a creative reconstruction of one's identity. Learning about Iranian stories and folktales that do not follow clear narrative guidelines gives Nayeri a cultural standpoint from which she can develop her own voice and her private narrative of who a refugee from Iran is. Combining her experiences with stories of other migrants and refugees in the United States and Europe provides her with the space to discuss shared traumas, rejected asylum applications, unjust interrogation techniques and criteria, as well as the pain of assimilation and compliance.

Moreover, Nayeri does not forget about the effects of racism and racial embodiment on refugees and migrants who come from the Middle East. The sensation that her body is visible and "read" by other people affects how she experiences her cultural identity and migrant citizenship. Nevertheless, Nayeri knows that she can take advantage of her American passport. She is aware that as an educated woman, a published writer and journalist, and a former refugee, she can speak from a position of privilege. Combining social, political, cultural, as well as narrative- and identity-related issues in her writing can give her the power to provoke new ideas and create awareness of how important refugees, migrants, and their stories are for the development of contemporary literature in North America and, by extension, around the world.

All things considered, Nayeri's autobiographical memoir transgresses the traditional boundaries of the United States, Europe, and their conventional histories. Nayeri's "deep time" consists in experiencing her incoherent life events anew through her narrative, which reaches for private as well as public memories and histories. Multiple points of Nayeri's itinerary as a refugee and migrant, and her numerous geographical, political, and cultural identity positions are

configured and refigured by Nayeri to create representations of time and history which are contemporary and individualistic, and at the same time, reach back to Middle Eastern antiquity, communal memories, and modern history of revolutions, wars, and migrations. Nayeri's story distends the boundaries that nation-states would like to impose on citizenship and birthright. It also interrogates the regulations that governments establish to declare who is "a good immigrant": a believable victim.

The present article, in turn, should be concluded with an invitation to conduct more research on migrant and refugee life writing, fiction, and non-fiction. If one would like to theorise and analyse world literature, they also need to understand that different cultures tell their stories in different ways and follow their own narrative patterns. Gathering and disseminating knowledge on non-Western stories, narratives, geographies, and temporalities would mean enriching the canons of American and other Western literatures.

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