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**Laughing With an Iranian American Woman:
Firoozeh Dumas' Memoirs and the (Cross) Cultural Work of Humor**

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Abstract: This essay critically analyzes Firoozeh Dumas's humorous memoirs and locates them in the multiple contexts of post-9/11 Muslim American responses to Islamophobia, women's humor, and Iranian American women's life-writing. Drawing upon philosophical, feminist, ethnic, and contemporary scientific theories of humor, and the methods of literary criticism, it argues that Dumas employs the beneficial and inclusive (not malign and exclusive) positive mode of humorous personal storytelling to build connection through laughter via the emotional and cognitive shifts structurally central to humor. Dumas addresses multiple audiences and engages in important (cross) cultural work in a particularly fraught political and cultural climate of anti-Muslim sentiment and tense Iran-U.S. relations.

Laughing With an Iranian American Woman:

Firoozeh Dumas' Memoirs and the (Cross) Cultural Work of Humor

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Iranian and Iranian American women's memoirs have earned deserved international acclaim.¹ But not very many are funny, nor, if they are, have scholars devoted attention to their deployment of humor as a serious tactic.² This essay closely examines Firoozeh Dumas' distinctive use of humorous autobiographical storytelling to explore how this Iranian American Muslim woman writer makes important (cross) cultural interventions in the context of fraught relations between Iran and the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11.³ Critical humor theory is the central lens through which I read Dumas' writing, which I locate in relation to the genres of post-9/11 Muslim comedy and Iranian American women's autobiographical writing. Drawing on theories of humor from contemporary psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, and feminism, I argue that Dumas deploys a complex form of benign inclusive humor, or humorous personal storytelling, to laugh *with*, not *at* people,⁴ to laugh *about* an issue raised, and to instruct by building connection through laughter, not to malign, depreciate or ridicule. Using the methods of literary analysis, I show how her writing engages in two kinds of frequent shifts—shifts in the target of her humor, and conceptual shifts that make visible and challenge readers' assumptions—both, as I explain, designed to elicit an emotional and cognitive response conducive to constructive relearning and rethinking.

In the urgent context of increased worldwide Islamophobia post-9/11, humor has become a vital mode for Muslim writers, artists, and culture workers as a way to engage with power, to re-educate, to push back, to interrupt and redirect dominant western /Eurocentric epistemologies and cultural understandings.⁵ Scholars across many disciplines are now beginning to pay attention to the rise of Muslim comedy in Europe and America as a response to post-9/11 Islamophobia. Within Iranian or Middle Eastern studies however, humor has not been fully recognized as more than mere entertainment, as a strategic mode of resistance or way to undo tension or address dominant discourses. Muslim comedy in the west is not new, but it has taken a distinctive turn since 2001, notes sociologist Mucahit Bilici, in particular because Muslims have

often been cast by Westerners as lacking a sense of humor. Since “humor usually stands for humanity” and “intolerance of humor ... equated with cultural inferiority,” this putative lack is taken to signify that Muslims are less than human.⁶ Such claims of Muslim inability to “take a joke” fail, among other things, to recognize global and historic *power* inequalities, to distinguish between the satiric debunking of power by the relatively disempowered and the hate speech or racist ridicule enacted by those with relatively more power against those with less (such as impoverished immigrants). A recent *New York Times* writer valuably differentiates the “countercultural” humor of racial minority comedians like Richard Pryor who “pushed [up] against” established forms of power, from the “punching down” humor of Charlie Hebdo (criticized by “the dean of American satirical cartoonists,” Garry Trudeau, after the Paris shootings) “for aiming its mockery at the vulnerable and the powerless” and thence re-enacting “a pattern of racist and anti-Muslim bigotry.”⁷

Demonstrating that Muslims can produce and respond to humor thus becomes a way to re-emphasize the humanity of Muslims as a stigmatized and dehumanized group. Muslim filmmakers, stand-up comedians like Azhar Usman, Dean Obeidallah, Maz Jobrani, and Aamer Rehman on television, social/entertainment media, and the Internet, and sitcoms like the Canadian *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, have sought to change public discourses and perceptions of Muslims in north America precisely through the use of humor. By establishing the humanness of “the other,” Muslim American comedy turns “the world of Islamophobia upside down.”⁸ More than pushback, the use of certain kinds of humor can yield additional educational benefits. Laughter enables a shift from fear to reason and good feeling, “allowing us to see the world through the eyes of the other.”⁹ Post-9/11 comic “Muslim cultural interpreters” in the West, like Dumas, are uniquely positioned because they belong in and have “knowledge of both worlds: ethnic and mainstream,” and as “field-guides to a contact zone” they can “‘leap’ from one side to the other, practic[ing] simultaneously the two ways of seeing things.”¹⁰ This double vision, or “simultaneous activation of two incompatible scripts” is also key, as I elaborate below, to the cognitive dimension of humor, the “essence of humorous incongruity.”¹¹ The public use of

humor by Muslims in the West post-9/11 has thus become a form of resistance and re-education, a way to counter racialized stereotypes, and pose alternative ways of seeing. It can enable “code-switching in the face of situations where the language of reason is overtaken by a wrong common sense” because such humorists can understand the codes of both dominant mainstream and ethnic or racialized and marginalized groups.¹²

I read Dumas’ writing as belonging to and participating in this emergent body of contemporary Muslim ethnic American comedic cultural work, necessitating that we take her use of humor as serious, not trivial. However, in comparison to Muslim male stand-up comedians’ work, I see Dumas’ work as distinctive for two other reasons. First, as a *woman*, she seems more aware of (and addresses) gender inequalities than do most of her Muslim-American male counterparts. Her work includes a subtle critique of sexist and patriarchal systems in both Iran and America. Second, as a *writer*, she calls on different strategies of storytelling and audience engagement than comedians who can also rely on bodily presence, gestures and facial expression. Hence, in addition to situating Dumas as a (secular) Muslim, Iranian American female memoirist, member of a multiply marked ethnic community in a deeply embattled context, I want to emphasize the need to read her humor work *intersectionally*, to see how these multiple dimensions of her identity and experience intersect, and how she works on several fronts to use humor in constructive ways for community building.¹³ I thus also read her work via feminist scholarship on gender and humor. In many patriarchal traditions, from China to Anglo-America, women have been discouraged from laughing and inciting laughter, initiating or responding to humor, because humor was (rightly) understood as subversive, debunking authority and challenging hierarchy.¹⁴ “A smile, especially for a woman, is seen as an act of supplication, whereas a laugh is often read as a challenge.”¹⁵ Across cultures, a woman’s laughter was also associated with lack of control or sexual promiscuity, linked, via her open mouth, to her open sexuality.¹⁶ Twentieth century western feminists, however, have also been caricatured as too serious, “humorless,” “angry,” unable to laugh or take a joke, when they refuse to appease men who try to bolster their power by using mockery.¹⁷ Of course, having a “sense of humor” has

meant different things for men and women: that men produce jokes, women laugh in response.¹⁸ If women are castigated for both laughing and not laughing, this poses an inherently contradictory, no-win situation for contemporary women humorists: how is a woman to position herself if she laughs or attempts to evoke laughter? Like critical race theorists, many feminist scholars note that humor can be an important strategy for feminists in any cultural tradition: as a coping mechanism or cathartic alternative to feelings of outrage or helplessness, it can reduce discourses of power to absurdity (relief and superiority theory); as a means of exposing incongruity and contradiction, it can unmask and shift perspectives on forms of oppression (incongruity theory); as a way to reach those otherwise not prepared to listen, it can build trust, support, and community. Using laughter or humor does not mean that we do not take something seriously; rather it can be an effective mode of communication, solidarity-building, and tool of social activism. It also suggests that women who can laugh or initiate humor can distance themselves from the ugliness (of sexism or misogyny) that they face. Women across cultures have used humor and satire as a subversive, innovative tool of resistance and critique, from 18th c British (Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Fanny Burney) to 20th c American lesbian (June Arnold, Rita Mae Brown) and postcolonial (Zadie Smith, Kiran Desai) writers.¹⁹

The use of humor always entails the exertion of power, especially for those who initiate humor, whereas those who respond to humor may either join in the put-down of something else, or laugh to appease the initiator of the joke. Studies show that in the contemporary American workplace, “higher status” individuals are “much more likely to use humor” on lower-status individuals like “junior staff” than vice versa to send a “critical or corrective message,” whereas lower status individuals use humor less frequently in the presence of superiors, as self-deprecation; hence “men tend to produce humor more than women, whereas women tend to laugh more in response to men’s humor.”²⁰ For women to initiate or create humor, then, and not merely respond to it, is to claim higher status, to break deep-seated norms, and, argues Barreca, is in itself a “feminist gesture.”²¹ “Making your own jokes is equivalent to taking control over your life—and usually that means taking control away from someone else.”²² I locate Dumas’ work in

this mode. But, as Barreca and Martin add, this retrieval of control does not necessitate ridicule or self-elevation at others' expense. Dumas' humor acts not only as pushback and resistance; it actively reaches out to be constructive. It uses inclusive humor to cement social bonds, disallow easy targets, and build connections through laughter across difference.

Born in 1965 in Abadan, Iran, Firoozeh Dumas (originally Jayazeri) moved with her family in 1972 to Whittier, California, returned to Tehran for two years, and moved back in 1976 to settle in southern California. After graduating from U.C. Berkeley, she married a Frenchman, Francois Dumas, had three children, and began writing humorous vignettes about her life and family. Consisting of these essays, her two memoirs *Funny In Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003) and *Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen* (2008), have won popular acclaim in the U.S. and Iran. *Funny in Farsi* was a finalist for a PEN Center USA award in 2004, for an Audie Award for best audiobook in 2005, and for the Thurber Prize for American Humor in 2005 (a first for a Middle Eastern woman writer), on the bestseller lists of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*, selected for many Community Reads, assigned in many middle and high schools in the U.S., translated into Persian and became a bestseller in Iran, where it won the Readers' Choice Award.²³ In the U.S., Dumas has been invited to speak at libraries, schools, universities, churches, and Jewish and Islamic community centers. Though not aspiring perhaps to the status of the "literary," her popular writing does important cultural work, as it aspires instead to reach a wider audience.²⁴

Dumas' memoirs offer the dual perspective of a girl growing up in two very different cultures, a product of both, understanding, negotiating, and mediating between both. Written in the context of threats of imminent war between the U.S. and Iran, her humorous stories about herself and her family's adventures learning to live in the U.S. explicitly seek to reduce tension, to shift perspectives, to offer correctives, to humanize both Iranians and Americans for each other, to build bridges. As a genre, memoir is often assumed to record individual private or interior experience; how then can memoirs do cultural work? Theorists of life writing have long recognized that autobiography—especially by women and people of color—is also relational

(selves and identities are defined, experienced, lived, in relation to others, especially family and community), and constitutes a valuable (though necessarily partial) window into the individual's historical moment and social, cultural world.²⁵ Dumas' stories present her experiences of late twentieth-century Iran and America, offering unexpected angles on both from an insider-outsider perspective of liminality, or double belonging.²⁶

As an Iranian American writing in English, Dumas addresses multiple audiences: mainstream Americans whose preconceptions she hopes to unsettle; Iranians reading her work in translation who may also have negative preconceptions about Americans;²⁷ Iranian Americans like herself and her family, placed in-between, belonging to and vulnerable in both cultural arenas; and, ultimately, a transnational Anglophone readership from the global south and north that has access to international publishing circuits.²⁸ A challenge for her as the producer of humor then is to speak to all without alienating one group at the expense of another, to avoid making any one group the target of the jokes, particularly Iranians in a global context of unequal geopolitical power where Muslims are demonized and a history of hostility persists between Iran and the U.S. Contemporary theorists of humor tell us that humor depends on an exchange among three usually separate positions: the maker, the recipient, and the object or target (of the joke).²⁹ As I show below, Dumas keeps *shifting* the locations of maker, recipient and objects of humor, destabilizing those categories, making her readers, herself and her family share and switch those roles in unexpected, un signaled moments, so that no one occupies any one position alone. She does not allow any reader to settle into a stable site of complacency or removed superior sense of "self" in relation to an "other." The audience, the putative recipient, can very quickly become the object of the humor, as can the maker herself. At the same time, Dumas also casts herself as recipient, for she laughs along, or reports herself laughing at stories she retells, even at her own expense, just as her family can laugh at her or at American absurdities. In consequence, we are all asked to laugh at ourselves, so that "we" becomes inclusive of maker, recipient, and target, producing that "we" in the act of laughing together. Shared laughter itself builds camaraderie, and can (at least temporarily) dissipate mistrust. One does not laugh with the enemy.

Dumas notes that she was very careful, when writing her first book, to avoid making her family members appear ridiculous, to “not cross the line into anything embarrassing or insulting:” “My goal was to have the subjects of my story laugh with me” (*Laughing*, 4). Instead of laughing at a common enemy, she asks readers to laugh with her and her family, and then at themselves, as if to say, ‘I may laugh about and with my parents, and ask you to laugh with me, because guess what, they’re just like yours. Moreover, in reading what I’ve written, my parents laugh too, about you and themselves, so they’re as capable of laughter as you are.’ An Iranian magazine editor speculated on why *Funny in Farsi* was such a success with young people in Iran, revealing also the anxieties and vulnerabilities of people in the global south to misreadings from the global north: “‘Your stories are funny, but the way you write about nationalities—you don’t make one bad and one good. We don’t hate Americans.’ He told me that he wanted Americans to know this. ‘I’ll tell them that,’ I said” (*Laughing*, 10).

“Seeing Red,” a chapter in *Laughing Without an Accent*, offers a good example of Dumas’ shifts. She begins by introducing her Jewish American high school friend Susan:

Aside from being very, very funny, Susan deserves credit for teaching me everything I know about Jewish culture. Even though I already knew the nuts and bolts of Judaism, it was at Susan’s house where I first tasted a latke, and realized that any religion where fried potatoes is part of the tradition is good. I also ... grasped the concept of “chutzpah,” a guiding force to this day. (*Laughing*, 133)

This jovial tribute to female humor and friendship across religio-ethnic difference is already significant for readers who know that the writer is a Muslim woman who was born in Iran and grew up in California. While poking gentle fun at Firoozeh, her youthful (experiencing or narrated) self, who knew less than she thought she did, Dumas (the older narrating self) likewise challenges her readers even as she entertains.³⁰ In case they assume that cross-cultural learning is a benefit unique to living in the United States, Dumas proceeds to something more unexpected:

When we lived in Iran, we had many Jewish friends. There were, and still are, more Jews living in Iran than in any other country in the Middle East outside of Israel. It was no surprise that everything Susan ever told me about Jewish culture felt familiar. (*Laughing*, 133)

As she educates readers who might not know this about Iran, and upends presumptions of inevitable animosity between Jews and Muslims, Dumas moves to yet another surprise:

One day Susan mentioned something about “a Jewish mother.” Even though I had heard the term before, I asked for the exact meaning. “It’s all about guilt,” she said. As she started to elaborate, complete with examples of Jewish mothers she had known, I was shocked. “That’s not a Jewish mother,” I told her. “That’s my mother.” (*Laughing*, 133-34)

Her punch line delivers. It is important that when Firoozeh asks for the “exact meaning,” for nuanced knowledge, she discovers similarity amid difference. By building up expectations and then pleasantly thwarting them, Dumas establishes again, that, like Susan, she too is “very, very funny,” and that the joke/surprise is precisely the discovery of commonality: both girls share a familial culture of children guilt-tripped by mothers and an ability to cope with it through humor.

Yet Dumas is still not done. In this prologue to a chapter about how her mother continues to guilt her in adulthood, she throws her readers another curve ball:

Growing up, I assumed all parents used guilt as one of the key pillars of parenting. My mother was so stealthy that you never knew what hit you. It was like Andre Agassi’s serve. You can know it’s coming toward you, but there’s still nothing you can do. Andre Agassi is, coincidentally, half Iranian. It is entirely possible that his serve is nothing more than guilt redirected. (*Laughing*, 134)

Through absurd analogy, she likens her mother’s emotional moves to Agassi’s serve, and reveals the little-known fact that this world-famous tennis champion is part-Iranian. Again implicitly challenging negative western stereotypes about Iranians, Dumas suggests that Agassi’s expertise may come from lifetime practice at combating similar parent-induced guilt. Finally, to forestall readers from concluding that this light-hearted preface--to her story about a bright red comforter that Firoozeh’s mother buys for her--is designed to ridicule her family, Dumas pulls us up short with an invitation to understand and empathize with an immigrant mother’s anxieties:

I realized years later that my mother’s use of guilt was her way to trying to corral me within the confines of her world. Like many immigrants, she was afraid that the unknown road I was taking would leave me with nothing but regrets. Even though her life had not always turned out as she would have wanted, she wanted me to follow the same familiar road. At least then my regrets would be similar to hers. (*Laughing*, 136)

I parse carefully, piece by piece, this deceptively simple sample of Dumas' humorous autobiographical storytelling to identify and analyze some of its characteristic traits. First, note the multiple destabilizing shifts. In terms of *content*, her opening is not concerned per se with Muslims and Jews in Iran or America, or with Agassi, though it makes those references to build an argument about diaspora, mothers, and similarities across differences. But in terms of *style* and *strategy*, it exemplifies Dumas' technique of continually shifting, after almost every sentence, the ground beneath her readers' feet, producing an incongruity, a surprise that humorously exposes an assumption and invites rethinking and connection, not ridicule. At each point, an implicit stereotype is exposed and overturned—that a Jewish and Muslim American girl cannot be friends, that Iran is hostile to Jews, that Iranians are irretrievably other and cannot be Western celebrities—without putting anyone down. Dumas, as narrator, includes her younger naïve (narrated) self (Firoozeh) as also involved in the process of learning. Statements like “[Susan taught] me everything I know about Jewish culture,” and “I was shocked,” highlight her early naiveté. She does not exempt herself from the humor, but makes herself an example, as learning and growing with and through humor.

Thus, second, Dumas' humor is benign and inclusive: it has no single target against which others are invited to unite via ridicule or putdown. Exclusionary forms of humor work by uniting the maker of jokes and those laughing in presumed superiority against a targeted and ridiculed other. However, Dumas' humor eschews this malign form. It keeps shifting its target, so that no one is excluded from the joke. Benign humor has the effect of including all, as all are invited to join in the laughter, to laugh at themselves (as Dumas laughs at herself) as they discover their own misconceptions, and are disallowed from simply laughing at another. In this example, Dumas' target shifts from herself, to her readers, to her mother, and back to herself, as she wryly concludes with a self-ironic belated recognition that her immigrant mother's “use of guilt” arose from anxiety and love, a poignant desire to minimize instability for her children in a world that she feared would only disappoint, and to “corral” them into shared experiences so that their “regrets” would at least be familiar. Dumas' conclusion is thus complex, for its humor is

directed at first at her mother but then at herself for not initially understanding her mother, and it invites its readers to share in that progressive shift towards understanding and (re)learning.

Third, I want to note Dumas' deliberate lightness of tone and use of absurd understatement and overstatement, comic and ironic mismatching rhetoric (all forms of incongruity), which can be misread. If read straight, for instance, the statement that she "realized that any religion where fried potatoes is part of the tradition is good," could be regarded as trivializing religious, political or ethnic difference, where the Muslim American girl overcomes her wariness of Jewishness merely because she loves the food. But Dumas' writing is tongue-in-cheek. It *is* an effort to counter religious prejudice, but from a place that highlights the absurdity of the assumption that an entire religion or religious group is suspect. It renders comic the notion that any religion is *not* "good" by offsetting it against the incongruous absurdity of a teenager's joy in "fried potatoes." Moreover, it overturns that assumption without mockery or derision.

As autobiographical writing, Dumas' work clearly contributes to the growing "Iranian [and Iranian American] women's memoir phenomenon."³¹ While first generation memoirs like *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita* were "still invested in the depiction of a national story and the possibility of a return to power in the home country," second generation memoirs like Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) and Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No* (2004) are "no longer intended exclusively to educate Americans about Iran; they are equally invested in teaching themselves and one another about *diaspora*".³² Dumas, as a one and half generation Iranian American, does both, with the additional distinctive use of humor: she elucidates experiences of middle-class Iranians in the U.S. as well as in pre-revolutionary Iran. Moreover, she attempts to mediate in *multiple* directions, not only addressing Iranian Americans like herself, but also seeking to educate American and Iranian readers about each other, to upend expectations and dispel negative preconceptions on both sides, while maintaining an awareness that both sides are not equal, that Americans carry greater responsibility because of their greater global dominance and cultural and political power, and because far more Iranians have become Americans than the converse. To all readers she emphasizes their common ground or "shared

humanity”.³³ Dumas thus presents herself explicitly as a cultural mediator, building bridges across chasms of negative representation.

As an Iranian American writer, Dumas inevitably faces a challenge, given “the context of the stereotyping and vilification to which Iranians have been subjected in moments of heightened confrontation between the United States and Iran,” after the 1953 CIA backed ousting of Iran’s democratically elected nationalist prime minister Mossadegh in support of the Shah to control Iran’s oil industry, the 1979 revolution and hostage crisis, and the post-9/11 “war on terror” and designation of Iran as the “axis of evil”.³⁴ So “what is the best manner in which to combat the demonization of Iranians by the West and the demonization of the West by Iran?” asks a critic, to argue that literature can help break down cultural and political dichotomies.³⁵ While Dumas’ autobiographical writing does not claim to represent or speak for all Iranians or Muslims in America (or Iran), it does push back against these negative representations that have only intensified in the aftermath of 9/11 and ensuing tensions in Iran-U.S. relations.

Scholars who have attended to Dumas’ work tend to be dismissive, perhaps because they misapprehend her use of humor. Negar Mottahedeh, for instance, criticizes Dumas for trivializing the complexities of world politics when Dumas writes, “I believe peace in the Middle East could be achieved if the various leaders held their discussions in front of a giant bowl of Persian ice cream, each leader with his own silver spoon. Political differences would melt with every mouthful.”³⁶ Amy Motlagh softens Mottahedeh’s critique but does not contest her premise that Dumas’ “clumsy attempt to translate Iranian culture into humorous terms comprehensible to Americans ... trivializes Iran’s plight in the modern world.”³⁷ I would argue, however, that such responses overlook the formal, rhetorical and discursive strategies of Dumas’ humor: irony, comic exaggeration, absurdism. Clearly, Dumas is not seriously proposing food as a solution to political conflict. Ironic humor uses indirection; it depends on the relation between the said and unsaid.³⁸ I read Dumas here as doing several things at once. In detailing her family’s hybrid celebration of American Thanksgiving with Iranian food, she fully celebrates Iranian culture and Iranians’ capacity to adapt and survive in adverse circumstances abroad; she reminds all readers,

not only Americans, that political differences notwithstanding, food can provide an occasion to bring people together, to recall their shared humanity and attempt to work out differences with good will; and she uses the rhetoric of exaggeration, while recognizing differences, to suggest that sharing what we can share (food, laughter), building trust, breaking bread together, at the same table, might be a way to mitigate them. Rhetorically, her comment attempts to draw readers together by its evocation of both Iranian food *and* humor.

Mottahedeh also criticizes Dumas for her celebration of American freedoms, including “the right to vote” and “the abundance of free samples available throughout this great land.”³⁹ But again, she neglects the irony of Dumas’ tone, as well as Dumas’ pointed reminder of gender inequality. Unlike her mother, who had to give up her dream of being a doctor to marry Firoozeh’s father in Iran, Firoozeh can pursue an education and financial independence in America. “I always share gratitude for being able to pursue my hopes and dreams, despite being female. My relatives and I are proud to be Iranian, but we also give tremendous thanks for our lives in America, a nation where freedom reigns” (*Funny*, 75). This tribute to America may sound naive, but it does recognize the reality of certain freedoms, especially for women, compared to Iran.⁴⁰ Moreover, if we note the context, it becomes apparent that these comments are only the set-up for a chapter that is much more critical of America: Dumas quickly qualifies that praise of American “freedom” as she critiques the phrase “the land of the free” when she applies it ironically to putative American largesse (75). Far from celebrating, in this chapter Dumas satirizes the American capitalist economy that hands out seemingly “free” samples to entice consumers to buy more, and gently critiques her parents for falling for that seduction.

Perhaps one difficulty that Dumas faces is that (especially among academic critics), humor, or the laughter it may evoke, is often regarded as frivolous, frothy, unworthy of serious attention, a sign that the author cannot be serious.⁴¹ In traditional western aesthetics, the comic itself, as a form, was considered lesser than the tragic or the sublime.⁴² Likewise, in Persian, Arabic and Turkish literary traditions, *hazl*, humorous or comical satire, was considered inferior to *hajv*, sheer invective.⁴³ However, as humor theorists from Plato to Bakhtin to contemporary

psychologists and anthropologists argue, we need to take humor seriously, to understand its social, psychic, cultural and political dimensions, to see how it can do valuable cultural work. Indeed, the classical Persian tradition recognized that “behind the lightness of its form” *hazl* can conceal *jedd*, serious intent.⁴⁴ A literary scholar puts it forcefully: “one of the most insidious fallacies is the belief that laughter is trivial. The function of laughter is to *make* things trivial—and thus gain mastery over whatever threatens to overwhelm us. Laughter is a serious matter. ... [it] is a strategy of self-defence that enables us to face sources of fear or pain.”⁴⁵ “Humor is inextricably linked with power,” and can be used both to reinforce and to challenge dominance and power; the “marginal humor [of those in socially disadvantaged positions] may empower the powerless, may invert and subvert the status quo.”⁴⁶ And humor can make critique more effective by making it more palatable. Before turning to a closer examination of Dumas’ work, then, I want to explain the foundational framework for my analysis by offering a brief overview of theories of humor that I find most useful for her work.

Reading Dumas via Theories of Humor

The capacity to laugh has long been considered a defining feature of the human species. Aristotle named us *animal ridens* (the creature who laughs).⁴⁷ Contemporary psychologists and anthropologists agree that “humor and laughter are a universal aspect of human experience, occurring in all cultures ... throughout the world,” though “different cultures have their own norms concerning the suitable subject matter of humor and the types of situations in which laughter is considered appropriate.”⁴⁸ While particular forms of humor are culturally and historically specific--hence the untranslatability of specific instances of humor—the human psychology and physiology of humor and laughter seem universal. Since I draw mostly on theories of humor developed by western scholars—though ranging in place and time—that pertain to human psychology in general, some may wonder to what extent they are applicable to Dumas’ humor. First, these theories claim applicability to all humans across cultural and historical differences and are not limited to western forms of humor; second, since Dumas writes in English, hence assuming a global Anglophone readership, this theoretical framework seems

relevant. This does not preclude, of course, affiliations between her culturally hybrid humor and Iranian traditions of humor, though exploring those lies beyond the scope of this essay.⁴⁹

Three influential philosophical theories have dominated discussions of humor. (To be clear about terminology: *humor* is understood as “action, speech or writing” that elicits laughter or amusement, or, “the quality of being amusing, comical” (OED); *laughter*, as a bodily response to humor that usually expresses and evokes pleasure; *amusement* as a mental or psychological state.⁵⁰) First, the *Superiority Theory* originated with the ancient Greeks, who saw all humor as ridicule or mockery, a way to establish superiority over those laughed at, or to subvert righteous authority and hierarchy; Plato banned humor from the Republic for being disrespectful and anarchic.⁵¹ This view of humor as exerting superiority or challenging authority extends to Hebrew, Middle Eastern, Russian and Asian traditions. In the Old Testament, Abraham’s wife Sarah got in trouble with God for laughing when told that she would have a child in her old age, because her laughter was read as skepticism of divine power; Christ reportedly never laughed, nor in Christian medieval belief, did angels; Sun-tzu tells the story of a Chinese king who responded to the laughter of his wives by beheading them.⁵² Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque humor, though valorized positively, likewise sees laughter as a tool by the disempowered to diminish the power of the dominant, to bring low the pretensions of the high.⁵³

Second, the *Relief Theory* suggests that humor enables a release of psychic energies otherwise deployed in restraining the primal impulses and emotions like hostility, anger, or sexual desire; laughter saves energy otherwise spent on self-control. For Freud, “humor is a means to circumvent social taboos against both aggression and sexuality. ... Laughter serves as a hydraulic safety valve for the unconscious.”⁵⁴ Hence laughter is also a “key to the unconscious,” because it allows us to “tap buried sources of pleasure.”⁵⁵ The third, *Incongruity Theory*, proposes that humor is a cognitive phenomenon: we find something funny when we experience the incongruous, a mismatch between expectation and reality. Kant argued that “laughter is a reaction to the absurd, that which defies rational understanding”; Schopenhauer that laughter is evoked by paradox, the “pleasure of surprise.”⁵⁶ Philosopher John Morreall defines humor as occasioned by a “conceptual

shift;” indeed the “essence of humor,” writes Martin, is “the simultaneous activation of two contradictory perceptions” or “bisociation,” when “two self-consistent but normally incompatible or disparate frames of reference,” “both X and not-X,” are seen or brought together.⁵⁷

These theories, however, do not explicitly distinguish between malign and benign uses of humor, though they can explain both. Citing Henri Bergson, behavioral neuroscientist Provine also makes explicit the inherently social dimension of laughter, which can only occur in “the context of a group.”⁵⁸ Hence all three theories can explain how humor is linked with power, or involves an assertion of power by both the socially empowered and disempowered. The Superiority Theory explains the negative humor of racist or sexist jokes as a way to assert power, to put down (or keep down) those with less power, where those inciting laughter and those laughing together assert superiority over those laughed at, to reaffirm social hierarchies. But all humor does not involve aggression or scorn.⁵⁹ The superiority theory can also explain the pushback humor of the socially marginalized. Positive humor like Dumas’ seeks not to exert superiority over others, but rather, to assert a refusal to be cowed or vanquished (by racism, Islamophobia, anti-Iranian sentiment, or relative disempowerment). It works like “deathbed” humor: by making a joke of what threatens us, we refuse to succumb to the threat. Psychologically, it becomes a way to reassert power, to maintain a sense of control in the face of prejudice or persecution. “The superiority view can provide a theoretical basis for conceptualizing humor as a way of coping with stress and adversity. If humor is a way of playfully asserting a sense of victory over the people and situations that threaten us, mastery over our oppressors, and liberation from life’s constraints, then ... it can be an important way of maintaining our self-esteem and mental sanity in the face of adversity.”⁶⁰

Likewise, if Relief Theory explains negative humor as a way for the powerful to evade social restraints (or repression) and say the otherwise unsayable, it also explains how humor like Dumas’ can work positively for those disempowered (both for herself as a writer and producer of humor and for her Iranian American readers). It can bring relief as an emotionally cathartic or coping mechanism to laugh away the pain, to restore a sense of self-esteem and control. Laughter brings relief from a sense of oppressiveness, even if it cannot solve the problem. In fact, argues,

Morreall, comedy enables emotional disengagement and flexible thinking and thereby promotes alternative forms of problem-solving.⁶¹ Finally, Incongruity Theory, understood as a cognitive, conceptual shift, explains how humor like Dumas' can also be educational: by making explicit the absurdity of powerful assumptions, preconceptions, or biases, it can provoke laughter at oneself for holding them, and can promote the rethinking of those assumptions (say among white American readers). Humor depends on and enables a shift in ways of seeing: "applying humor to a situation is like applying lateral thinking—it allows you to see things from a new angle."⁶²

Contemporary science research (from psychology to behavioral neuroscience) confirms and extends these philosophical approaches to humor. Psychologist Rod Martin argues for an *integrated* approach to humor studies, to emphasize the multifacetedness and multifunctionality of humor and to reassert its combined cognitive, emotional and social dimensions:

Humor can be a method of enhancing social cohesion within an in-group, but it can also be a way of excluding individuals from an out-group. It can be a means of reducing but also reinforcing status differences among people, expressing agreement and sociability but also disagreement and aggression, facilitating cooperation as well as resistance, and strengthening solidarity or undermining power and status. Thus, while originating in social play, humor has evolved in humans as a universal mode of communication and social influence with a variety of functions.⁶³

Rather than see humor as *only* aggressive, or *only* cognitive, or *only* relief-giving, Martin emphasizes how different forms of humor can incorporate varying degrees of all these as well as the social (positive and negative) functions of communication and exertion of power. These theories explain what is operative in all the examples I analyze below, though to avoid repetition, I will not name them each time. In every case, Dumas' humorous anecdotes and remarks demonstrate: (i) the exertion or reassertion of control (superiority over that which threatens); the production of relief from tension; and most importantly, through the surprise of incongruity, the production of an opportunity to learn or relearn, to rethink prejudice or misconception. Moreover, as the examples below show, Dumas' humor also enacts a form of feminist empowerment and community building.

Based on empirical studies, Martin identifies three broad categories of humor: "jokes, or prepackaged humorous anecdotes that people memorize and pass on to each other," involving a

setup and punch-line; “spontaneous conversational humor, created intentionally by individuals... in social interaction;” and “accidental or unintentional humor” (11). Whereas most empirical studies of humor in labs focused on jokes, he found in a study of subjects’ daily logs that only “11% of daily laughter occurred in response to jokes,” 17% to the media, and 72% in *spontaneous social interactions that occur within specific social contexts* (12). Moreover, he found significant *gender* differences in the use of these categories: “joke-telling tends to be relatively more characteristic of male humor, whereas women are more likely to relate humorous personal anecdotes” (147).⁶⁴

Martin’s findings illuminate key aspects of Dumas’ storytelling: its *sociality* and *gendered form* (the autobiographical story). Instead of prepackaged jokes or one-liners, Dumas uses the form of the humorous personal anecdote to describe her own context-specific interactions and conversations with others, as if enacting a second level of humorous social conversation with her readers. This has the powerful effect of creating the sociality or social interaction that Martin describes--between author and readers—as readers share in her stories and are invited into the world she (re)creates. Her writing clearly belongs in the category of intentional spontaneous conversational and gendered humor. (This is not to say that men cannot use humorous storytelling for similar purposes, but that women predominantly do.) By using the form of the personal anecdote, Dumas deploys an inclusive, non-aggressive, social bonding mode of humor.

Rod Martin identifies three psychological functions and outcomes of humor: (i) “cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth” (which induce better learning and memory, more creative problem-solving, more social responsibility and prosocial behaviors such as helpfulness and generosity); (ii) “social communication and influence” (which enable forms of indirect communication that can either “strengthen relationships, smooth over conflicts, and build cohesiveness” or “ostracize, humiliate, or manipulate”); (iii) “tension relief and coping” (which “provides a way for an individual to shift perspective on a stressful situation” and “may have a physiological benefit of speeding recovery from cardiovascular effects of negative stress-related emotions” that “can contribute to mental health” (Martin, 15-20). Dumas’ writing, as we see below, demonstrates all these benign functions of humor. First, cognitively, it attempts to enable positive

re-cognition of otherness (we learn better with laughter); second, as social communication and influence, it seeks to build cohesiveness across cultural and national differences through shared humor, recognition of commonality, and good feeling (we connect over laughter); third, as tension relief, it enables both a form of therapeutic coping for herself as well as for diverse readers, restoring self-esteem and control (we feel better after laughter).

The Artful Arc of *Funny in Farsi*

Close reading has been identified as a distinctive analytical method of literary criticism because it allows for the careful, nuanced analysis of layers of meaning and the unpacking or opening up of multiple coexistent meanings. Though once associated with the exclusion of historical and social contexts, informed close reading can actually enhance culturally and politically oriented textual approaches with greater attention to the unexpected and unique, to textual detail and twists of language and rhetoric, to discover greater subtlety and complexity in a text than via a pre-set grid.⁶⁵ In what follows, I do not just *explain* what is funny, but, to use the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of language, I emphasize what is enacted, or performed by Dumas' acts of humor.⁶⁶ Hence, by reading closely particular instances, and attending to the trajectory of each book, I examine how Dumas establishes trust and inclusivity with her readers through laughter in order to carve herself a space for critique, and how she addresses multiple audiences to do cultural and *cross-cultural* work.

The vignettes in *Funny in Farsi* are arranged in rough chronological order, from Firoozeh's arrival in Whittier, California in 1972, her early school experiences, adolescence, to marriage and adulthood, with occasional flashbacks to her childhood or family history in Iran. But they also have another underlying design. Dumas starts with seemingly self-deprecating, innocuous accounts of herself and her family adjusting to their new lives as immigrants, making comical mistakes, finding kindness among strangers. She does not play the fool (as some minority comedians have done) to appease or ingratiate herself or her community with a dominant cultural readership, but uses these opening vignettes to establish her credibility, her verbal dexterity, her warmly affectionate if irreverent ribbing of her parents, to build her readers'

trust before she makes more pointed criticisms. She begins with an account of her first day at elementary school, the kindness of her American second grade teacher who welcomed her and her mother by “incorporating [them both] into the day’s lesson” (6), but didn’t realize that Firoozeh’s mother’s inability to find Iran on the world map was due to her lack not only of English, but also “of world geography” (6).⁶⁷ Young Firoozeh’s mortification and fear of being thought stupid by her new classmates is both described and counteracted by (older) Dumas who demonstrates her retrospective distance from and control over those feelings through her use of humor (exerting both superiority over them and relief). In so doing, Dumas also makes visible the systemic gendered disadvantages that underlay her mother’s limited education in Iran despite her class status. Dumas combines sympathy for her mother with a critical delineation of her father’s male privilege as she describes how he became an engineer and a Fulbright scholar who spent a year at Princeton, and could then return to pick her “fair-skinned” seventeen-year-old mother, who had to give up her dreams of a career for an arranged marriage (5).

Yet throughout, Dumas’ tone remains light and jovial, as she reaches out to readers in dominant American culture. Her father’s English, too, in those early years, was not much help to the immigrant family. “He was to be our own private Rosetta stone” upon arrival, she quips, but “thanks to [his] translations, we stayed away from hot dogs, catfish, and hush puppies, and no amount of caviar in the sea would have convinced us to try mud pie” (8-9). Having spent his time in America in the library or with engineering professors, her father, she notes, “As long as the conversation was limited to vectors, surface tension, and fluid mechanics, ... was Fred Astaire with words. But one step outside the scintillating world of petroleum engineering and he had two left tongues” (9). She thus demonstrates her own adept command of English, popular culture, intellectual history, and the twin arts of humorous understatement and hyperbole. Dumas’ parents are not set up as targets of humor; even as it humanizes them, each anecdote emphasizes their courage and resilience in coping with migration and resettlement. Moreover, she quickly shifts targets to include her younger self and her readers in the humor, and demonstrates how laughter

becomes a resource for her immigrant family to help cope with and rise above embarrassments and humiliations.

“Save Me, Mickey,” describes how seven-year-old Firoozeh gets lost in Disneyland. Dumas presents her younger self as both comical (fascinated by the possibility of talking to Mickey Mouse, Firoozeh loses track of her family) and precociously witty. She begins with a wry account of Dumas’ father’s idolization of Walt Disney (“For him, ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ represents the pinnacle of man’s creative achievement” not “computers, the Concorde or knee replacement surgery,” (18)). Then she describes his fear of American gun violence: “One of my father’s biggest fears in moving to America was child kidnappings. Our hometown, Abadan, was about as safe a place as one could hope for. We knew all the neighbors, everyone looked out for everyone’s kids, and there was basically no crime other than petty theft. Whenever my relatives came to visit us in America, they would watch the evening news a few times, and then refuse to leave the house. ... In Iran, citizens do not have access to guns, so we do not have the types of crimes that so often lead to murders in America” (18-19). Having allayed American readers’ potential suspicions of an Iranian man by establishing her father’s eagerness to assimilate, his (uncritical) adoration of Disney, and his repeat excursions with family and friends to Disneyland, Dumas describes the relative safety of daily life in Iran compared to the U.S., and, with an implicit critique of the Second Amendment, emphasizes her immigrant father’s anxiety about his children’s safety in America, and his insistence that they seek police help if needed. Careful as yet to appeal to a range of readers, she suggests that Iranian visitors’ fears may be similarly exaggerated by showing how dominant media representations distort both nations.

But this vignette is designed to do more (cross) cultural work. As Dumas describes how she was escorted to the Lost and Found by a Disney employee and safely returned to her parents, she includes a biting account of well-meaning white American ignorance and condescension to racial(ized) others. The comforting ladies at the Lost and Found Center have no idea where Iran is, and compliment the teary Firoozeh on her English. When another lost child arrives screaming and appears to speak no English, they assume she must know him. “I knew what was coming. ‘Is

that boy from your country?’ she asked me. ‘Why yes, I wanted to tell her. ‘In my country, which I own, this is National Lose Your Child at Disneyland Day’” (20). Firoozeh’s smart, sassy, imagined response makes visible, and contrasts with, the adult’s foolishness, implicitly implicating, amusing, and educating her American readers about their own assumptions.

This mode of instruction with amusement continues in the chapter “With a Little Help from My Friends.” Alluding with her ironic, playful title to the Beatles song, establishing her own conversance with Western popular culture, Dumas begins with the kindness and ignorance of Americans (about Iran) in 1972: “I was lucky to have come to America years before the political upheaval in Iran. The Americans we encountered were kind and curious, unafraid to ask questions and willing to listen. As soon as I spoke enough English to communicate, I found myself interviewed nonstop by children and adults alike. My life became one long-running Oprah show, minus the free luxury accommodations in Chicago, and Oprah” (31). She uses humorous analogy (and incongruity) to describe the Americans who had never heard of Iran and could not even locate it in Asia, and make visible differences in global power between Iran and America: “We had always known that ours is a small country and that America is very big. But even as a seven-year-old, I was surprised that so many Americans had never noticed us on the map. Perhaps it’s like driving a Yugo and realizing that the eighteen-wheeler can’t see you” (32). Dumas attributes this differential in geographic knowledge to differences in educational systems. “In [pre-Revolutionary] Iran, geography [was] a requirement in every grade ... In first grade geography, I had to learn the shape of Iran and the location of its capital, Tehran. I had to memorize that we shared borders with Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and the USSR. I also knew that I lived on the continent of Asia” (32). Under the guise of humor, she slips in that requisite geography lesson for American readers, and suggests how power differentials are linked to differences in knowledge, how Americans, unlike Third World peoples, can afford to be insular.

Even in 1972, American children, she reports, were prone to ask questions that revealed Orientalist preconceptions. Uncurious about geography or history, they asked her about camels.

“How many did we own back home? What did we feed them? Was it a bumpy ride? I always disappointed them by admitting that I had never seen a camel in my entire life. And as far as a ride goes, our Chevrolet was rather smooth. They reacted as if I had told them that there really was a person in the Mickey Mouse costume” (32). Dumas’ punch line is funny because it uses a surprise/incongruous analogy to make the point that her audience has been harboring puerile illusions (adults know that there really *is* a person inside the Disney costume; only children need to maintain that illusion). Likewise, the belief that Iranians ride on camels, do not have cars, and live in a timeless premodernity, tells us more about the primitivist, Orientalist *desire* to believe, to consider oneself superior, and about those who hold such beliefs (and their geopolitical location and power) than about those about whom such beliefs are held.

While critiquing this American mixture of ignorance and arrogance, Dumas’ artful humor is not done. Again, it shifts ground. American readers who are invited to laugh at children’s questions are implicated when Dumas reveals that adults were no exception, asking about “electricity, tents, and the Sahara” and were similarly disappointed to learn that “we had electricity, that we did not own a tent, and that the Sahara was on another continent” (32). But again, Dumas alleviates these revelations by expanding the scope of her humor to include her father, whose response she casts as both understandable (countering Orientalism) and excessive: “Intent to remedy the image of our homeland as backward, my father took it upon himself to enlighten Americans whenever possible. Any unsuspecting American who asked my father received, as a bonus, a lecture on the successful history of the petroleum industry in Iran. As my father droned on, I watched the faces of these kind Americans, who were undoubtedly making mental notes never to talk to a foreigner again” (32-33). While Dumas’ humorous retelling gently ribs her father’s earnestness, she also makes clear that her father’s concern was legitimate. A neighbor who had seen *Lawrence of Arabia* revealed that these inquiries were based on the assumption that Iranians are Arabs. “My father explained that Iranians are an Indo-European people; we are not Arabs. We do however, have two things in common with Saudi Arabia, he continued: ‘Islam and petroleum.’ ‘Now I won’t bore you with religion,’ he said, ‘but let me tell

you about the petroleum industry” (33). Again, her humor leavens without mitigating her points; indeed, it enables their reception. It excludes none, inviting all to laugh at themselves, singling out neither Americans nor Iranians nor her father as targets of humor, inducing laughter to dispel tension, building good will to explain and contextualize the larger inequalities and socio-political or structural reasons for these misconceptions.

As a child, she notes, though she got tired of the questions, “I never punched anybody with my fists; I used words” (33). Young Firoozeh learned to deploy pointed wit and her intermediary’s knowledge of both cultural contexts to fight back, to resist the aggressive bullying humor that exerted superiority on the playground: “Often kids tried to be funny by chanting, ‘I ran to I-ran, I ran to I-ran.’ The correct pronunciation, I always informed them, is ‘Ee-rah-n.’ ‘I ran’ is a sentence, I told them, as in ‘I ran away from my geography lesson’” (34). As an adult, she builds on these skills to invite reflection and understanding via the literary art once defined by the poet Philip Sidney as the combination of instruction with delight.

In this illustrative chapter, with its twists and turns, Dumas does not merely portray American ignorance and her family’s efforts to counter it, but makes a more complicated point. “Almost every person who asked us a question asked with kindness,” she notes. “Questions were often followed by suggestions of places to visit in California. At school, the same children who inquired about camels also shared their food with me” (34). Dumas describes how Firoozeh was looked after, especially around American rituals: friends’ mothers made cupcakes for her classroom snacks, brought her Halloween costumes so that she would not feel left out, taught her to ride a bike, and when her family were returning to Iran in 1974, showered her with “an avalanche of kindness” and slumber parties (36). Even without English, Firoozeh’s mother understood that the crossing guard’s smiles meant she was looking out for her daughter. “Even though I had been the beneficiary of all the attention, my mother, watching silently from a distance, had also felt the warmth of generosity and kindness. It was hard to leave” (36). I read Dumas here not as appeasing her American readers, but as making a complicated maneuver. Without diminishing her earlier critique, Dumas reassures her American readers that goodwill

and humane interaction were possible then, and now. Her long list of examples also dispels misconceptions about Americans on the part of her Iranian readers. And finally, Dumas ends with another twist. She historicizes this moment as pre-1979, educating Americans, Iranians, and Iranian Americans about the changes that followed that critical date:

When my parents and I get together today, ... we remember the kindness more than ever, knowing that our relatives who immigrated to this country after the Iranian Revolution did not encounter the same America. They saw Americans who had bumper stickers on their cars that read ‘Iranians: Go Home’ or ‘We Play Cowboys and Iranians.’ The Americans they met rarely invited them to their houses. These Americans felt that they knew all about Iran and its people, and they had no questions, just opinions. My relatives did not think Americans were very kind. (36)

Upending expectation upon expectation, Dumas disallows any one set of readers to settle into complacency or to feel superiority over others. She assures her Iranian readers that Americans *were* kind, kinder in 1972 than after 1979—and hints to her American readers that that former kindness is recoverable.

Concerned about one-sided Western media representations of the Middle East, especially post-9/11, Dumas strives to serve as cross-cultural ambassador, to foster mutual acceptance.⁶⁸ Her humor is thus carefully nuanced and controlled, designed to build connection, not to alienate, so that her points can be heard. In a later chapter, “I-raynians Need Not Apply,” she describes the prejudice and hostility that her family experienced after 1979 (they returned and settled in the U.S. in 1976), how her father was laid off and could not find another job, how the media vilified Iranians, how all Iranians were blamed for the hostage takers, how “crimes against Iranians increased” (117).⁶⁹ Iranians are asked to understand angry American responses to the hostage crisis, and Americans to understand the consequences (for families like hers) of those responses. But Dumas does not simply seek to “balance” perspectives in an unbalanced situation. Americans, given their relatively greater global power, are asked to take more responsibility; it is their continuing preconceptions that her work--written in English--primarily addresses.

On several occasions in *Funny in Farsi* Dumas also makes herself the target of laughter to preempt being perceived as placing herself in a position of superiority over others, or

encouraging readers to laugh at those she describes. However, she invites her readers to laugh *with* (not *at*) her (or her younger self) and demonstrates her own capacity to laugh both at herself and at the situation to rise above the difficulties she describes. Humor thus allows Dumas to show how she copes (through relief) with racially charged problems or microaggressions. Dumas does not engage in the kind of self-putdowns that some comedians from non-dominant groups have used to win a mainstream audience, and that reconfirm stereotypes about that group. Instead, she describes a range of situations that any newcomer might experience in a new environment, inviting diverse readers to relate or understand, to challenge stereotypes, and via humor, to switch perspectives out of habituated modes of perception. Often she presents her childhood or teenage self in ludicrous moments: her first time at a summer camp, where she spent two weeks refusing to bathe or participate in outdoor activities because of the lack of private shower facilities (42-49); her hopeless ineptitude learning to swim despite her family's drastic efforts to teach her (68-73). Each episode offers an example of her quick shifting moves, so that no one remains the target of humor for long, and each absurd event or action is contextualized to enlist imaginative sympathy, especially through the use of the first pronoun "I," where the teller manifests her willingness to expose herself and her family with the expectation (and exemplary demonstration) of generosity.

In "The 'F Word,'" for instance, she describes the trouble Iranian parents unwittingly caused their children by giving them names unpronounceable in America. "My cousin's name, Farbod, means 'Greatness.' When he moved to America, all the kids called him 'Farhead.' My brother Farshid ('He Who Enlightens') became 'Fartshit.' The name of my friend Neggar means 'Beloved' although it can be more accurately translated as 'She Whose Name Almost Incites Riots'" (62). Careful to provide cultural/linguistic context, she explains what each name means in Persian, and how it is subjected to transmutation in American English. That these epithets are enabled by a dominant racist environment where American children can torment Iranian ones is part of her point. But the humor for Dumas' readers is created from the incongruity of the two systems, not by making either one a butt of ridicule. She describes her own vulnerability as a

twelve-year-old: “My name, Firoozeh, chosen by my mother, means ‘Turquoise’ in Persian. In America it means ‘Unpronounceable’ or ‘I’m Not Going to Talk to you Because I Cannot Possibly Learn Your Name and I Just Don’t Want to Have to Ask you Again...’” (63). Despite dissuasion from her older brothers, Firoozeh changed her name to Julie, only to discover that her new neighbor was also called Julie. Yet while Dumas makes fun of her younger self for desiring assimilation to the dominant culture, she elicits understanding of the pressures that an immigrant teenager undergoes, showing also how malign, racist humor can hurt. She seeks relief from the mortifying memory via laughter, and shows she has risen above it by retelling it as a funny story.

Dumas’ humor also enables her to present, for her American readers, a hearable critique of broader American culture and prejudices. She reports how, after the Iranian Revolution, her newly adopted name (Julie) and accent-less English suddenly allowed her to hear racist remarks about Iranians because she was assumed to be American, or how, after college, when she re-adopted her real name, she could not get interviews until she returned to ‘Julie’ on her resume (65). (Nadine Naber confirms how, after 9/11, Muslim sounding names like Mohammed have functioned in association with “particular nations of origin” as “signifiers of an imagined Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim enemy,” and provoked acts of racism (278).) It would be tempting, perhaps, to use sarcasm or more bite to excoriate this racism. But doing so would lose her American readers. Dumas’ tactic throughout instead is to win empathy by evoking laughter.

Dumas’ conclusion reveals another destabilizing shift, as she describes a scene in a doctor’s waiting room:

As I waited patiently, the receptionist called out, ‘Fritzy, Fritzy!’ Everyone looked around, but no one stood up. Usually, if I’m waiting to be called by someone who doesn’t know me, I will respond to just about any name starting with an *F*. Having been called Froozy, Frizzy, Fiorucci, and Frooz and just plain ‘Uhhhh...,’ I am highly accommodating. I did not, however, respond to ‘Fritzy’ because there is, as far as I know, no *t* in my name. The receptionist tried again, ‘Fritzy, Fritzy DumbAss.’ As I stood up to this most linguistically original version of my name, I could feel all eyes upon me. The room was momentarily silent as all of these sick people sat united in a moment of gratitude for their own names. (66-67)

Instead of angrily presenting the receptionist as ignorant or ethnocentric, Dumas' humorous storytelling does something far more complex: it highlights both her own sense of mortification at being made (unwittingly) the object of laughter, and her ability to defeat that mortification by sharing it via hilarity and showing that she can laugh it down (demonstrating relief, superiority and incongruity). The accumulated humor is not at the expense of any individual, but is occasioned by the situation, and the way Dumas describes it.⁷⁰ In fact, just as Dumas imagines the other patients "united" in this moment, her storytelling effectively works to unite her readers and herself in a moment of sympathetic and shared laughter. Her ability to tell this story (at her own expense) with humor and to laugh it off (she gets the last word and the last laugh) converts it from an occasion of intense embarrassment to one of shared pleasure in the sudden surprise of absurdity and the conquest of difficulty. It hence also builds community.

Dumas works strategically to win trust from her readers, so that she can credibly convey more serious critiques and alternative perspectives. In a later chapter of *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas then takes on more thorny topics: religion, politics, western imperialism, and the "greed" for Iranian oil that has been at the heart of modern Iran's troubles with the west. "The Ham Amendment" begins with her father's loves of ham, even though he is Muslim. To explain how he obtained tinned ham (which even his wife would not touch) in Abadan, she describes how the city was set up as a planned development by the British to drill oil, how that resulted in decades of western exploitation of Iran, the consequent nationalization of Iran's oil industry, the ousting of Mossadegh "the national hero" in the 1950's by "foreign powers behind the scene," and how the reinstatement of foreign oil companies under the Shah enabled a large population of Britons and the availability of British products in Abadan (82-85). This crucial history explains the growing resentment against the Shah (who was seen by many Iranians as a western stooge and sell-out), which led to the Iranian Revolution in 1979; it connects the U.S. and British imperialist interventions in Iran (unknown to most Americans) that led to the hostage crisis of 1979. She makes her position clear, with characteristic humor: "In a perfect world, the kindergarten teacher would have stood up before any documents were signed [with Iran] and said, 'Time out for

Britain. We'll renegotiate after a nap.' But, alas, with no teacher present to remind the participants of the universal concept of fairness, the British applied a different universal concept, greed" (84). The lightness of tone does not diminish the seriousness of the point, while the incongruity—comparing international governmental deals with kindergarten bullying—induces a shift of perspective to make clear the self-aggrandizing moves of power.

In so doing, Dumas also pays tribute to her father's wisdom and blend of secularism with respect for religion. Young Firoozeh is horrified when she learns in religion class that her father's penchant for ham destined him to "*a very bad place for a very long time*" (86). When he realizes how distressed she is, her father switches from amusement to gentle counter-instruction:

"Firoozeh, when the Prophet Muhammad forbade ham, it was because people did not know how to cook it properly and many people became sick ... The Prophet, who was a kind and gentle man, wanted to protect people from harm, so he did what made sense at the time. But now, people know how to prepare ham safely, so if the Prophet were alive today, he would change that rule.'" Such exemplary application of reason is perhaps why this entire chapter, which Dumas describes as the "soul of [her] book," was the only one to be cut from the Persian translation by the Iranian censor.⁷¹ She quotes her father's different religious (and life) instructions: "'it's not what we eat or don't eat that makes good people; it's how we treat one another. As you grow older, you'll find that people of every religion think they're the best, but that's not true. There are good and bad people in every religion. Just because someone is Muslim, Jewish, or Christian doesn't mean a thing. You have to look and see what's in their hearts. That's the only thing that matters, and that's the only detail God cares about" (87). As the center of many of her funniest stories, her father is treated with irreverent affection and deep respect. In her Afterword to *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas notes that he became "the main character," though when she began writing she "had no idea he would figure so prominently" (191). In a 2008 interview with NPR, Dumas says, "My father is a storyteller. And he is actually the funniest person that I know. I never ever grew up thinking that I was even remotely funny. ... I wanted my children to know my stories just like I knew my father's stories." *Funny in Farsi* concludes with a final tribute to Dumas' parents for

their support and good-humored reception of her work, crediting her father as a source and audience of her stories (189-98). By centering self-reflexively on the familial, Dumas' work also extends the notion of family to her readers, as a community literally *made*, cemented by the sharing of stories and inclusive laughter.

The Greater Edginess of *Laughing Without an Accent*

Laughing Without an Accent is a sequel to *Funny in Farsi*, with similar "humorous vignettes, verbal snapshots of [her] immigrant family," but expanded to include more stories of Dumas' childhood in Iran and adulthood in the U.S. after marriage and three children (4). Despite the lacing of humor, some of these pieces, written under the threat of imminent war between the U.S. and Iran, seem more edgy, more critical of American policies and culture, as if, having established her credibility in her first memoir, Dumas feels confident to speak more openly. It includes several uproarious chapters, such as "The Jester and I," describing how she and her French husband met as college students at Berkeley's International House, or "'Twas the Fight Before Christmas," describing how her parents love her French husband but not his cooking, and bicker with each other. Other chapters carry more incisive critiques.

In "Eight Days a Week," for instance, Dumas compares the educational systems of prerevolutionary Iran and the contemporary U.S. In the former, unlike the latter, she notes, children learned work, discipline, respect, organization, time-management, appreciation for academic excellence, and read an eclectic range of world literature and philosophy. Lauding her American second grade teacher as exceptional, Dumas questions the American expectation that learning be always "fun," and homework minimal. Why, she asks, are kids who do well in school "called nerds and geeks and dorks? This may be the only country where people make fun of the smart kids. Now *that's* stupid. I only hope that the engineer who built the bridge I drive across or the nurse who administers our vaccines or the teacher who teaches my kids was a total nerd" (52). Dumas continues her trademark humor and vivid concreteness to make her points, but her goal seems more ambitious, to make an active intervention--as in this case, to ask her readers to

think about education with a global perspective. For contemporary American readers, this is itself an education; for young Iranian ones, a reminder that pre-revolutionary Iran was different.

In “Victoria’s Hijab,” Dumas takes on the controversial issue of veiling to make nuanced but strong educational points through humor. Noting how glad she is that her twelve-year old does not have to wear a *hijab*, “the headscarf mandatory for all women in present-day Iran” and can choose her own future (200), she punctures her imagined American readers’ complacency about putative American freedoms as she shifts to a feminist mother’s critique of American consumer and media culture: “raising a daughter in this culture is a challenge for which no human is fully prepared” (202). She explores the significance of the difficulty of buying teenage clothes in the U.S.: “I sunbathe topless in France and celebrate the human body in all its shapes and sizes, but why are the offerings at malls preparing our daughter for careers at Hooters? ... I’m all for consumer freedom, but I don’t see the freedom when there are no alternatives. What happened to play clothes and girls dreaming of becoming astronauts?” (201). Commenting on hip hop music videos and teenage icons like Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears, she points out the contradiction of American rhetoric and practice: “In a country where women are told they can be anything they want to be, popular culture tells them that the lower the bar is set, the cooler you are” (203). She describes her sister-in-law, who grew up in Iran having to wear a *hijab*:

“She is one of the most independent, outspoken women I know. She’s typical of Iranian women. Wearing the hijab does not mean that women are submissive and weak. *Au contraire*. The majority of Iranian women are strong and smart, defying the rules set by the totalitarian government every chance they get. I wish to see the day when no woman is forced to wear a *hijab*, *chador*, or *burqa*, but let us not discount the women underneath those mandatory coverings. If empowerment were as simple as being able to show skin, Paris Hilton would be the most enlightened woman in the United States. Having freedom does not automatically mean we make good choices. Freedom is a rope: some make a ladder out of it and climb out of the box they’re put in; some make a noose; others make a stripper’s pole” (204).

Dumas forcefully deconstructs, with levity, serious western misconceptions concerning the veil, Muslim women’s oppression, and putative western women’s liberation, noting how the hegemony of the fashion industry and sexualization of children can produce its own choicelessness.⁷² She makes clear her critical stance towards both the Iranian regime that denies

women choice and the self-righteous western assumptions that cast others as inferior while remaining blind to their own forms of gender oppression. Demonstrating incongruity, relief and pushback against oppressive dominant western arrogance, Dumas' humor again works with, not against, her goals, sweetening the pill, enabling her American readers to hear what she says.

Throughout *Laughing*, laughter remains a constant, and becomes a subject in itself, as a tool of survival, a builder of community, a signifier of adaptation and change. In a moving chapter, "Seyyed Abdullah Jazayeri," Dumas pays tribute to her uncle upon his death at ninety, describing his achievements as an immigrant from Iran, his love of books, gardening and family, warm sense of humor, and terrible sense of direction. Then, she adds humorously: "If there's one thing that separates Middle Easterners from Westerners, it's the way we mourn. We can out-mourn anyone. For many in the Middle East, a highly emotional funeral is proof that the deceased is missed. Jackie Kennedy's stoicism after the death of her husband would not have translated well in the Middle East" (154). Contrary to this tradition of spectacular grieving, however, the extended family of six hundred, spread over the U.S. and Europe, gathers to celebrate his life, and to her surprise, in addition to the speeches and slide show, join in laughter as her cousin remembers how his father learnt to play the flute (very badly) at age seventy, and missed the birth of his son because he got lost driving to the hospital: "And that is when I heard something I never thought I would hear at an Iranian memorial service: laughter... [eventually] the audience roared. I couldn't believe my ears" (157-58). This becomes a measure of how far the family has come. For a six-hundred member multi-generational cross-continental extended family, the laughter becomes a warm celebration of a beloved family elder, an occasion of unity and community as they all remember him with love, a mode of sharing and overcoming grief, and finally, a marker of immigrant achievement:

My uncle, along with the rest of my family, came to America seeking a better a life. Like so many immigrants before us, we found not only what we wanted but a few things we didn't even know we were looking for: Girl Scouts, freedom of speech, affordable community colleges, guacamole, public libraries, clean bathrooms, the pursuit of happiness, and Loehmann's. Of course we also found a few things we didn't like: marshmallows, the Hilton sisters and all their friends, the lack of interest in geography, ...

tomatoes that taste like cardboard. Regardless of the influences, we swore we would live in this country but never change. We were wrong. America changed us, in ways we didn't realize. Oddly enough, we also changed America. We expanded the palates of many friends to include *tadig*, *joojeh kabob*, and desserts made with rose water. ... And if there's one thing that I hope we Iranians have imparted, it is the closeness of extended family, not because we all get along perfectly, but because we know that we all benefit emotionally from maintaining those ties." (159-60)

Dumas' incongruous, tongue-in-cheek list is at once designed to evoke laughter and make a self-reflexive point. Their laughter highlights both how immigrants change and are changed.

Conclusion: Humor as Bridge-Building

Dumas' writing does not undertake radical critique. Her stories concern mostly secular, educated, westernized, urban professionals who left behind privileges (like having servants) in Iran to resettle in the U.S. Critics may object that her memoirs display an assimilationist strategy, asking for belonging on the basis of sameness, not difference. Much of her argument that Iranians are not as other as the western media makes them out to be is based on the attempt to demonstrate similarity with a middle class American readership. That leaves little room for those Iranians or Muslims who may remain other, or become more othered if they do not fit this demographic because of their less privileged class status or more visible religious practices.

While recognizing these problems, I suggest a few ways to address them. First, while Dumas emphasizes the underlying sameness of all humans, she does not do so by eliminating religious-cultural differences. As shown above, her work revels in continuous references to Iranian food, religion, history, cultural practices, and family rituals that emphasize the cultural distinctiveness and specificities of Iranians and Iranian Americans as an ethnic group in the U.S., and hence the recognition of difference-in-sameness. So it does not propose a generalized sameness, but rather, difference *in* sameness, or both sameness *and* difference, in order to counter the pernicious dominant rhetoric of irreconcilable or unbridgeable differences. In an Op-ed, Dumas comments:

My people need a TV show. ... My family, and most Middle Eastern immigrants I know, spend their time working, studying, and yes, trying to lose weight. We're not terrorists. We're not *very* Muslim. (I have some Christian friends who attend church every day, and others who just eat chocolate bunnies on Easter. My family is the Muslim equivalent of

the bunny eaters. A TV [sitcom] would make this obvious point obvious: Middle Easterners come in all shapes, sizes and belief levels, just like every other kind of American.)⁷³

It is itself telling that Dumas feels she has to say this, to establish her legitimacy in the U.S. by citing her non-religiosity, harmlessness, Christian friends, and Muslim equivalence through those friends. While it certainly presents her family as the secular “Muslim equivalent,” her humorous analogy opens up space for other kinds of Muslim immigrants, with different “belief levels,” implying that they too are “normal,” like the range of Christians in America. She does not claim to represent all Muslims (no memoirist can), but asks readers to understand heterogeneity.

Second, rather than simply promote assimilation, her stories enact, I would argue, a strategy of *triple-voicedness*. To American readers her humor says, “we are both like you and not like you, and as you get used us and recognize our sameness, you’ll find our differences not that threatening;” to her Iranian American readers, with whom she shares an understanding of the relatively greater power of mainstream Americans, “we can share much, without having to give up what we cherish, and acknowledge the inevitability of cultural adaptation, flexibility and change;” and to her Iranian readers she says “Americans are as complex, varied and human as we are.” In each case, for each kind of reader, in different ways, her work strives to break down binarisms of us-them, enemy-friend.

Laughing Without an Accent has been criticized for its title: “It is through humor, ultimately, that Dumas feels that people can connect on deeper, universal levels. Hence the title suggests that when we laugh, we transcend ethnicity and nationality. While this may be true, Dumas doesn’t seem to want to recognize that there is little to no way to hide ethnicity and nationality (let alone accents) when we converse with one another.”⁷⁴ By contrast, this essay argues that we need to read Dumas’ humor as more subtle and constructive. Dumas does not attempt to hide or transcend ethnic or other differences; she *both* highlights them *and* emphasizes what humans share. The title of her second memoir continues the emphasis on shared humanity displayed in her first: “our commonalities far outweigh our differences” (*Laughing*, 47). It emphasizes that laughter, unlike speech, has no accent, that it is common to all humans and is the

closest we have to a lingua franca, or universal language. Her title both makes visible existing commonality and suggests that the act of laughing together can itself *create* commonality and community. It would be a category mistake to treat her work as a treatise on Iran, or Islamophobia post-9/11, and to lambast its failure to show what a historian or political scientist might. A memoirist tells her own story, from her necessarily partial perspective, but she can appeal to a broader audience via the engaging, affective call of humor, self-conscious reflection, and the pull of the particular instance, retold as personal, individual experience. Dumas' strategies of humor--exaggeration and understatement, highlighting incongruity, shifting ground and shifting targets--have multiple cultural, psychological, emotional and cognitive effects. They enable, as Martin reminds us, better conditions of learning (with laughter) about otherness and about one's own fallacious assumptions; the reduction of threat and relief from pain; a therapeutic sense of control; and the building of community and connection through laughter that may in turn create a greater openness to learning. Her humor seeks to build bridges, to enable recognition of sameness and good feeling that can then lead to a greater understanding of difference. For cultural work, that may not be a place to end, but it is a place to start.

Notes

¹ Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon, 2000) and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003) are the most well-known. Others include Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (New York: Perseus Books, 2005) and Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No* (New York: Random House, 2004).

² Important exceptions that use humor include Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon, 2000) and Porochista Khakpour's autobiographical essays. Scholars have taken diverse approaches to Iranian women's life writing. *Persepolis*, for example, has been studied for its formal and thematic interventions (its innovations as graphic memoir, its use of tensions between image and written text, its critique of the post-Revolutionary regime in Iran, its anti-Orientalism). *Reading Lolita* has had a more controversial reception for arguably enabling the consolidation of rightwing American ideologies that cast Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescue to justify war. See for example Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" *Signs* 33.3 (Spring 2008): 623-646. For key introductions to Iranian women's life writing, see Amy Motlagh, "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing" *MELUS* 33.2 (Summer 2008): 17-36, and "Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31.2 (2011): 411-424. On the recent rise in Iranian and diasporic women writers, see

Persis Karim, ed. *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), xx).

³ To clarify, it is important to distinguish between the often confused, sometimes overlapping but not synonymous categories Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim. Just as “Muslim” and “Arab” are not the same (Arabs can be Christian or Jewish, and more Muslims in the world today are non-Arab than are Arab--from Iran, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, etc), Iranians are understood as Middle Eastern but not Arab. And not all Iranians are Muslim, though most are.

⁴ Rod A. Martin clarifies this distinction: “Laughter can be a method of positively reinforcing others for desirable behavior (‘laughing with’), as well as a potent form of punishment directed at undesirable behaviors (laughing ‘at’),” in *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 10.

⁵ The scholarship on post-9/11 Islamophobia is vast and growing. For my purposes here, I understand Islamophobia as not just a fear of Islam or Muslims, but as: “a new form of racism, based on assumptions about (and attributions of) inherent characteristics linked with national origin, or other markers such as names, forms of dress” (Nadine Naber, “‘Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!’: Cultural Racism, Nation-based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11” in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*. Eds. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 303); and as a new mutation of Orientalism, “an ideological formation” emergent from post-Cold War politics, that has accompanied and enabled the rise of U.S. imperialism and globalization (Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims* (Atlanta: Clarity, 2011), 31). Islamophobia, also fails (among other things) to discern the heterogeneity of Muslims and their ethnic, religious, national and class diversity.

⁶ Mucahit Bilici, “Muslim Ethnic Comedy: Inversions of Islamophobia” in *Islamophobia/ Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, ed. Andrew Shryock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 195-208), 195-96. These notions were manifest in the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005, and again in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in January 2015.

⁷ A. O. Scott, “A World That Won’t Laugh With You,” *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure, 1, Sunday, June 7, 2015, 18.

⁸ Bilici, 197. An achievement of British South Asian television comedy shows like *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No. 42*: was to establish that South Asians (long seen in Britain as humorless and therefore less than human) were capable of producing laughter and laughing, and that their humor was sophisticated and intellectually complex, and to re-code South Asianness as desirably hip and cool. My thanks to Kevin Rozario for this point.

⁹ Bilici, 205.

¹⁰ Bilici, 196.

¹¹ Martin, 87.

¹² Bilici, 207.

¹³ I understand “secular Muslim” as someone who was raised in a Muslim family or culture, but who may not follow or observe various orthodox Islamic practices, and may be agnostic on or critical of various aspects of Islam. Some secular Muslims may not self-identify as Muslim but may have the identity of Muslim imposed on them by others. “Intersectionality” is a keystone of contemporary feminist theory and teaching, founded on Kimberly Crenshaw’s early work, which recognizes the mutual constitution of gender with other dimensions of social identity and

experience, such as race, class, ethnicity, etc., and cannot be understood in isolation from them. See Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (New York: Polity, 2016).

¹⁴ On prohibitions on women's laughter, see Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 101-103; Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 2-5, 105-107.

¹⁵ Barreca, 104.

¹⁶ Ghose, 1; see also Parvulescu, , 110-11.

¹⁷ Parvulescu, 19, Barreca, 7. Joanne R. Gilbert describes the disingenuousness of 'Can't you take a joke' disclaimers as a "thin veneer" for sexist attacks under the mask of humor, "a rhetoric that simultaneously promotes and disavows itself." (*Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 12.) On women's putative inability to take a joke, Regina Barreca writes, "one of the reasons women have for so long been told they themselves can't laugh" is that "we've been hearing the underlying hostility of those [men's] jokes and have often been unable or unwilling to overcome our distress" (71-72). Given structural gender inequality, she notes, "studies have shown that men's humor [against women] is much more hostile than women's [against men]" (72), so that women's humor tends (for historical and social not essentialist reasons) to attack "the powerful rather than the pitiful," institutions rather than persons, choices rather than traits (13). As an important corrective to claims of women's humorlessness, Audrey Bilger historicizes how in 18th c England the cultural suspicion of women's laughter, its threat to patriarchal authority, and its association with sexual knowledge was so strong that women's laughter was attacked and successfully eliminated by conduct books and dominant representations, so that a social construction subsequently became naturalized as the truism that women *by nature* had no sense of humor (*Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 23-24).

¹⁸ Barreca, 3; Gilbert, 27.

¹⁹ On 18th century women novelists' use of humor, see Bilger; on 20th c feminist writers' see Gillian Whitlock, "Have you read the one about angry women who laughed?" in *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*, eds. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1986), 123-31.

²⁰ Martin, 120-21.

²¹ Barreca, 182. She excepts from this early female comedians' self-abasing 'I'm so ugly' jokes.

²² Barreca, 110.

²³ Firoozeh Dumas, *Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen* (New York: Random House, 2008), 9-10. Hereafter cited in the text as *Laughing*.

²⁴ *Funny in Farsi* was to be adapted as a sitcom on ABC with Maz Jobrani playing the role of Firoozeh's father, but though a pilot was filmed, the show was rejected. Dumas speculates this was because it coincided with the Ground Zero mosque controversy. Matt Coker, interview with Dumas, http://blogs.ocweekly.com/navelgazing/2011/05/firoozeh_dumas_funny_in_farsi.php

²⁵ The tradition of Euro-American male autobiographical writing has constructed the fiction of the autonomous individual self. However, life-writing theorists have contested this notion and emphasized the relationality of identity and of human lives. See Paul Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), Chapter 2, and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Introduction, 7-21.

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- ²⁶ On the critically productive inbetweenness or liminality of Iranian American cultural production, see Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8-10, and Persis Karim and Mohammed Khorrami, eds. *A World Between* (New York: Braziller, 1999), 21.
- ²⁷ Though *Funny in Farsi* was later translated into Farsi, it was written, Dumas reports, in anticipation of a translation for Iranian readers. In response to criticism that the English name for the language is Persian, not Farsi, Dumas explains that her title uses “humorous alliteration” (*Laughing*, 7).
- ²⁸ Dumas’ is thus also a transnational position, if we understand transnational as flexible citizenship or living with multiple national allegiances.
- ²⁹ Graeme Dunphy & Rainer Emig, eds. *Hybrid Humor: Comedy in Transnational Perspectives*. (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2010), 25; Gilbert, 10.
- ³⁰ In this essay, I use the autobiography studies convention of referring to the author of the memoir (the older narrating self who makes narrative choices) as Dumas, and to the subject of the memoir (the younger narrated experiencing self or the actor within the narrative) as Firoozeh.
- ³¹ Amy Malek, “Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* Series.” *Iranian Studies* 39.3 (September 2006) 353-80.
- ³² Motlagh, “Towards”, 29.
- ³³ *Laughing*, 9. Dumas’ web page states: “Firoozeh has traveled internationally reminding us that our commonalities far outweigh our differences ... and doing so with humor” <http://firoozehdumas.com/about-firoozeh-dumas/>.
- ³⁴ Persis Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh, “Introduction: Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon,” *MELUS* 33.2 (Summer 2008): 7-15.
- ³⁵ Daniel Grassian, *Iranian and Diasporic Literature in the 21st Century: A Critical Study*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), 3.
- ³⁶ Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 75. Hereafter cited in the text as *Funny*. Negar Mottahedeh, “Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War,” *Middle East Report Online* (Sept. 21, 2004) http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/mottahedeh_interv.html.
- ³⁷ Motlagh, “Towards”, 17.
- ³⁸ In *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), Linda Hutcheon defines irony as “inclusive and relational,” existing in the “space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid, 12.
- ³⁹ Mottahedeh, 75.
- ⁴⁰ As a woman from Pakistan who chose to study and live in the U.S, I find it disingenuous when scholars from Iran or Pakistan attempt to silence any acknowledgement of the real problems (social, political, economic) in our countries of origin that prompted our migrations to America. While I understand that these attempts are inspired by the concern that exposing the problems of home countries will play into reactionary western agendas, and I agree that we must contest those western prejudices and misrepresentations, we also should not pretend that there is no difference in the freedoms available to us in the U.S. and in our home countries.
- ⁴¹ In medieval Europe, laughter was associated with folly, humanity’s fallen state, and the deadly sins “lust, sloth and pride,” (Indira Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 1). For a brief history of Anglo-American humor, see also Martin, 20-26.

⁴² By contrast, Vladimir Propp argued that “the comic should be studied primarily *in itself*” for its specificity cannot be understood as merely a contrast to these categories. *On the Comic and Laughter*. Ed. and trans. Jean-Patrick Debbèche and Paul Perron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5-6.

⁴³ Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), 13. *Tanz* is a relatively recent form of humorous satire in the Persian tradition, as Javadi also notes (13).

⁴⁴ Javadi, 13.

⁴⁵ Ghose, 7.

⁴⁶ Gilbert, xv.

⁴⁷ Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2007), 11. Since Aristotle, scientists have discovered that primates also laugh, but human laughter is distinguishably different, and connected to the evolution of speech. See Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 75-97.

⁴⁸ Martin, 2-3.

⁴⁹ Brookshaw notes that Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literary traditions of humor and satire have seen much cross-cultural migration, including among Greek and Mediterranean cultures. Introduction to *Ruse and Wit: The Humorous in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Narrative*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brooksaw, (Boston: Ilec, 2012), 1. Dumas does not explicitly reference specific Persian humorous traditions, though her humor is no doubt infused by them. She does cite classical Persian poets Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Saadi as the “heroes” she studied in Iranian school (*Laughing*, 46).

⁵⁰ John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 4-5; Martin, 7-8. Provine describes “laughter [as] an ancient vocal relic that coexists with modern speech—a psychological and biological act that predates both humor and speech and is shared with our primate cousins” (2).

⁵¹ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 4-14; Martin (31-82); Provine (11-22).

⁵² Bussie, 21, 23; Parvalescu, 17, 26, 101; Ghose, 1.

⁵³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 92. These cultural understandings have changed over time, though elements remain. The European Renaissance revised medieval notions of laughter into a form of “pleasure, not derision” (Ghose, 4). By the mid-18th century, with the rise of sentimentality and ideas of human nature as benign, laughter came to be seen as having “roots in sympathy not malice” (Ghose, 10). 18th century English differentiated “wit” from “humor”: “wit” was linked with the elite, the intellectual, ridicule, (laughing at), whereas “humor” was linked with emotion, the bourgeois, democracy, fellow-feeling, congeniality, universality (laughing with); in the 20th c this distinction disappeared and “humor” became the umbrella term for both (corrosive) wit and (benign) humor (Martin, 23). By the late twentieth century, humor (the ability to laugh and to make others laugh) came to be regarded as therapeutic and a desirable personality trait, a sign of intelligence, confidence, emotional stability, tolerance, with the aggression aspect forgotten (Martin, 24-26).

⁵⁴ Ghose, 9.

⁵⁵ Provine, 16.

⁵⁶ Bussie, 13-14; Morreall, 1987, 20.

⁵⁷ Morreall, 1987, 4; Martin, 63.

⁵⁸ Provine, 16. Even when we laugh by ourselves while reading or watching television, we do so in response to another human stimulus, notes Martin (113).

⁵⁹ Martin, 53-54.

⁶⁰ Martin, 55.

⁶¹ Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 79, 143.

⁶² Barreca, 126.

⁶³ Martin, 5. Martin clarifies: "Humor, then, is inherently neither friendly nor aggressive: it is a means of deriving emotional pleasure that can be used for both amiable and antagonistic purposes. This is the paradox of humor" (18).

⁶⁴ Feminist scholars corroborate this finding: women tend to tell funny stories among women, but their humor changes when men join the group; women become responders not initiators of humor when they are among men (Barreca, 104).

⁶⁵ Hannah Freed-Thall argues for context specific close reading "as a particular mode of attention, one that is at once unusually detail-oriented and open-ended. Sensitive to variations and valances of difference, elisions and silences, the close reader cultivates patience as she learns to listen for the intermittent and the unexpected. And she practices a skill that is ever more important in our era of Manichean, polarized thinking: she holds multiple interpretive possibilities in her mind at once, setting them side by side, moving between and among them." Unpublished paper, delivered at the Smith College Comparative Literature Colloquium, October 21, 2017.

⁶⁶ For an explanation of Austin's distinctions and their application to humor, see Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 35-36.

⁶⁷ This teacher, thanked in the Afterword as Dumas' "favorite American," soon notices Firoozeh's love of reading and introduces her to the public library (190).

⁶⁸ In a conversation with Khaled Hosseini, Dumas says, "Politics [in the U.S.] has grossly overshadowed humanity in the Middle East and I wanted to write a book that would shine the light on humanity. When I speak at schools, I often ask the students what they think when they hear the word 'Middle East,' and they all say 'war' or 'terrorism.' That's like someone saying that when they hear 'America,' they think of the Ku Klux Klan. So I always make sure that when I'm visiting schools I sing 'Happy Birthday' in Persian and I remind them that our commonalities far outweigh our differences. They get it" (*Funny*, 207).

⁶⁹ In "444 Days," the last chapter of *Laughing*, she describes how her father was, "thanks to the Iranian Revolution, unemployed, and thanks to the hostage situation, unemployable" and how she later met Kathryn Koob, who had been one of the two female hostages (214). "Encore, Unfortunately" narrates the resurgence of the popular 1980 song "Bomb Iran" after John McCain sang it (*Laughing*, 161-63).

⁷⁰ It is important that this instance of mispronunciation is not deliberate or malicious. But it is promoted by a system of dominance and negligence. To fix the problem, receptionists can ask patients to indicate phonetically correct pronunciations of their names on the forms they routinely fill out. Anglo-American names carry the privilege of being easily recognizable and pronounceable in U.S. dominant culture.

⁷¹ Dumas reports her father, upon learning this, joking that her "next book should be entitled 'Accomplishments of Jews I have Known,' interspersed with recipes using ham" (*Laughing*, 9).

⁷² For an excellent recent account of veiling in Muslim cultures, see Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁷³ Dumas, “‘Brady Bunch’ Diplomacy.” *LA Times Op-Ed*, 2011,
<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jan/30/opinion/la-oe-dumas-sitcom-20110130>.

⁷⁴ Grassian, 133.