Iranian American Comedic Memoirs: Interrogating Race and Humor in Diasporic Life Writing

Leila Moayeri Pazargadi
Associate Professor, Nevada State College

As an innovative aesthetic in transnational life writing, humor can facilitate an affective transmission of eyewitness experiences, particularly of past historical traumas. In Iranian American[1] diasporic writing, comedic writing has become an innovative and increasingly popular tool for recounting experiences of immigration from Iran to America during the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and for confronting ensuing acculturative and racist struggles. One early example of this subgenre occurred in 2004 when Firoozeh Dumas debuted her popular memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, offering readers a comparison of life in America before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. As part of her

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[1]Because I do not want to neatly situate or categorize identity, I do not hyphenate Iranian American identity. Rather, I would like to draw attention and bring awareness to the tension and difficulty in reducing identities to distinct ethnic categories.

Leila Moayeri Pazargadi is an associate professor of English at Nevada State College, teaching composition, postcolonial literature, life writing, and Middle Eastern literature. She received her PhD in comparative literature with a certification in gender studies from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2012. Her research focuses on Middle Eastern women writers producing autobiographical material in fiction and nonfiction. In 2020, she was a visiting scholar at UCLA's Center for Near Eastern Studies, researching Middle Eastern women's memoirs for her upcoming monograph. She has been published in *Biography*, *a/b: Autobiography Studies*, *Gender Forum*, and the *Getty Research Journal*.

autobiographical self-disclosure, Dumas notes increased racial hostility against Iranians in America, using humor to explore themes of white passing, racism, and liminality in America. Yet, rather problematically, the author at times uncritically embarks on a racial transformation to socially ascend and pass for white as a French woman, perhaps as a way of coping with liminality. In contrast to Dumas's earlier work stand two comedians who similarly employ humor in their memoirs, but complicate their experiences of racialization as Iranians in the American diaspora.

Maz Jobrani employs humor akin to Firoozeh Dumas in his 2015 memoir, *I'm Not a Terrorist but I've Played One on TV: Memoirs of a Middle Eastern Funny Man*, in order to bridge gaps between his Iranian identity and surrounding American fears about Iranians. Like much of his stand-up work, Jobrani's memoir does not wade deep into controversial waters. However, it does manage to ruminate on changing perceptions of Iranian racial identity, particularly from his perspective as a brown Muslim man living in increasingly hostile America. Jobrani entertainingly uses humor to ease tensions between Iranians and his mostly non-Iranian audience, who might mistake Iranians for threatening terrorists.

To round out these comparisons, Negin Farsad's 2016 *How to Make White People Laugh* approaches Iranian liminality from a space of Black power and allyship, as opposed to a position of white passing. Farsad uses humor to teach her audience about the nuanced liminality of Iranians, while disrupting neatly packaged narratives and exposing gaps of belonging. Like Jobrani, she offers a few suggestions to build bridges between peoples, but more so, she ruminates on the liminality of Iranian Americans. In this way, her humor takes Jobrani's observations and criticisms one step further, speaking to the messiness of fitting into a neoliberal American social order that seeks to ostracize her. Farsad embraces her Otherness, while deftly employing critical race theory to outline a different positionality for Iranians living in the diaspora, one that rejects racial erasure.

Ultimately, through the stylistic aesthetics of humor, the structure of these comedic confessionals playfully offers alternatives to the more

traditional form of memoir, thereby allowing for a rich exploration of Iranian American racial identity. Thus, this essay explores the ways in which Jobrani and Farsad reflect on the process of their racialization from white to brown, depending on how threatening they are perceived as being, especially after 9/11. This racialization fluctuates from *rewarding* Iranian Americans with whiteness when they are received as model minorities, to *punishing* them with brownness when they are perceived as threats. Ultimately, both Jobrani and Farsad touch on themes uncovered in John Tehranian's and Neda Maghbouleh's works that explore the legal paradoxes of government categorization of Middle Easterners as white compared with Iranian American perceptions of themselves as "Other." Additionally, by applying Maghbouleh's concepts of "racial hinges" and "racial loopholes" to these memoirs, this essay considers how Jobrani and Farsad use humor as a mechanism to confront and acknowledge their liminality in America. At the same time, they employ comedy to diffuse tension around racial stereotyping and identity fragmentation in order to carve out a space for Iranian Americans.

The Legacy of Racial Formation Theory: Racializing "White Ethnics" in America

In terms of life writing aesthetics, both Jobrani's *I'm Not a Terrorist but I've Played One on TV* and Farsad's *How to Make White People Laugh* use humor to expose racial paradoxes; at the same time, they propose views that challenge American stereotypes about Iranians and Muslims alike (since these identities often converge in stereotypes). Through their narratives, the authors employ a unique intersection of comedy and racial politics to interrogate identity in the United States and appeal to readers' affective state. As Iranians in the American diaspora, the authors use humor to undercut the audience's expectations that Iranian Muslims are threatening or terrorists, thereby diffusing tensions. Jobrani often claims that he is "brown and friendly," as expressed in his 2009 comedy tour of the same name, while Farsad ups the ante by heralding the "Muslims Are Coming" in her 2013 comedy tour and corresponding comedic documentary. Both comedians mock American stereotypes about Iranians and Muslims, but in varying

degrees: Jobrani mildly mocks the stereotype, trying to prove himself in an acculturative way, while Farsad identifies as a woman of color, borrowing from African American studies to align with Black Power movements to disrupt narratives of perceived whiteness. Compared with Dumas's earlier examples, the narrative critiques of both authors go one step farther than Dumas's polite acquiescence and assimilative approach to being Iranian in America.

Central to both Jobrani's and Farsad's texts is an interrogation of racial politics that explores the boundaries of white designation for Middle Easterners, specifically Iranian Americans. To determine this process of racial self-selection, Jobrani and Farsad touch on debates about the racialization of perceived whiteness, which are stirring inside and outside the Iranian community. For instance, according to law professor John Tehranian, in his study of the racial status of Middle Eastern Americans in *Whitewashed*, Iranian Americans often work through the state's designation of them as Caucasian and "white," as opposed to their social Othering as "brown," particularly after 9/11. In the American diaspora, this question has come to a boiling point given the ongoing war against terrorism, which simultaneously disrupts the settlement of racial categorization for Iranians. Under the umbrella of Middle Eastern American, Iranian Americans are categorized as white according to the US census; however, in practice they are socially excluded and politically marginalized as people of color. According to Tehranian's assessment in *Whitewashed*, Middle Eastern Americans are discriminated against in their daily lives, but have little legal recourse to challenge this discrimination since the American government classifies them as white.[2] Relegated to the status of Other, Americans of Middle Eastern descent are not afforded the benefits of white privilege.[3] He echoes Anita Famili's assessment that Middle Eastern Americans are "both interpolated into the category of Caucasian while simultaneously racialized as an 'other'…Middle Eastern Americans do not appropriately

[2]John Tehranian, *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3; Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 3.
[3]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 3.

fit into the prevailing categories of race. Rather, their ethnic/racial identity is constantly contested."[4] This makes any type of integration that speaks to the American project of equality difficult to achieve.

This is not unlike the established racial dissonance between other minorities who were classified as white and treated as marginalized. Tehranian draws on long contemplations of the racialization of "white ethnics," such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews who immigrated to the United States. Building on notions of liminality, he expounds on increased Islamophobia since the 9/11 attacks, which compounds racism for Iranians and Middle Easterners (regardless of religious identity or belief). Very briefly, many critical race theory scholars have found that white ethnics, for lack of a better phrase, have experienced the paradox of white legal classification along with racialized mistreatment. Drawing on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's seminal theory of racial formation, scholars note the social constructions of race that shift along with social mores. As legal scholar Kevin Johnson observes, "The slow social assimilation, or 'whitening,' of various immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Jews, evidences how concepts of races are figments of our collective imagination, albeit with real-life consequences."[5] Indeed, Steven Belluscio notes in his study of Jewish American and Italian American writers in *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* that Italian and Jewish American writers historically were posed as part of the white majority, but were simultaneously considered as ethnic Others, and denied privileges associated with whiteness.[6] Similarly, in Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*, the author focuses on the concept of race as a social construct in evaluating how society has historically regulated white privileging in America. In his discussions

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[4]Anita Famili, "What About Middle Eastern American Ethnic Studies?" (paper presented at Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programs Symposium, University of California, Irvine, 17 May 1997); Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 3.

[5]Kevin R. Johnson, "The End of 'Civil Rights' as We Know It? Immigration and Civil Rights in the New Millennium," *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002): 1481–1511. Quote on pp. 1488–89. Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 22.

[6]Steven Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

of Jewish Americans, he notes that a non-Christian prototype for Iranians exists, suggesting that Iranians are also simultaneously white and Other.[7] Jacobson focuses on visual cues of race, describing the way in which anti-Semitism is centered on appearance since "race is social value become perception; Jewishness seen is social value naturalized and so enforced."[8] Most notably, Karen Brodkin adds to these conversations, showing *How Jews Became White Folks* since many Jewish Americans were perceived as outsiders, but opted for model minority status and assimilated to the American way of life.[9] Of course, all of these theories and discussions are much more nuanced and complex than presented here, but for the purposes of this study, their overview is helpful for identifying the trajectory of critical race theory and its relevance to the discussion of Iranians and race.

Returning to the discussion of Iranian Americans, what ensues from this discourse is a paradox that supports Tehranian's observations about Iranian Americans' navigation of whiteness. In the racial spectrum of America, Iranians forge a separate identity in a liminal, tertiary space. His case studies and legal references, in addition to previous conversations about the racialization of white ethnics, are helpful in determining the way in which Iranian Americans are paradoxically classified as white but socially denied the status.[10] Consequently, he makes the case for new racial classifications and official designations for Iranian Americans, especially on the census.

Building on Tehranian's work, Neda Maghbouleh similarly observes in *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* that everyday experiences of racism and racialization simultaneously occur alongside legal designations of whiteness and internalized "racial covering."[11] Iranian Americans often Anglicize

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[7]Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 174.

[8]Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 137.

[9]Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[10]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 3–4.

[11]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 4; Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 65.

their names (at least their first name) so as not to easily draw attention to their difference.[12] Moreover, they may obscure their national identities and ties to Iran, instead fabricating points of origin or focusing on former residences in countries lived in prior to immigration to America. This process of racial covering (as Tehranian puts it and on which Maghbouleh expands) attempts to reconcile the legal paradoxes of government categorization of Middle Easterners as white compared with their mistreatment by the Transportation Security Administration, law enforcement, and border patrol officers, who perceive Iranian Americans as Other.[13] They must adapt to access whiteness, since they are left with little legal recourse to challenge discrimination in light of their legal classification as white.[14] Maghbouleh also evaluates the scholarship extending from Omi and Winant's racial formation theory to show how "racial categories involving liminal groups expand, contract, and transform through social, economic, and political force."[15]

While Tehranian points out the legal issues for Iranians, Maghbouleh takes the material a step further by offering an innovative theory for articulating the process of racializing Iranians. Her concepts of "racial hinges" and "racial loopholes" are pertinent to the racial explorations of Jobrani's and Farsad's identities in America. According to Maghbouleh, the concept of "racial hinges" touches on how "the geographic, political, and pseudoscientific specter of a racially liminal group, like Iranians, can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to whiteness as necessary."[16] Furthermore, "racial loopholes" diagnose the daily "contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a group's legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization."[17] *Racial loopholes* is another way

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[12]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 6.
[13]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 38. As a member of the Iranian American community, I have also personally observed cases of racial covering and appellative passing amongst many Iranians in the diaspora.
[14]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 6.
[15]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 170.
[16]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 5.
[17]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 5.

of referring to the racialized paradoxes that Tehranian notes about the dissonance between the white status of Iranian Americans and their everyday marginalization.

Taken together, these concepts are useful to show the paradoxes noted in Jobrani's and Farsad's memoirs. Combining these paradoxes with notions of humor and affect inherent in the aesthetics of comedic memoirs, these two Iranian American comedians provide plenty of thoughtful fodder for those left wondering about the complexity of racial categorization concerning Iranian Americans. They both use humor and draw upon their stand-up comedy routines to evoke laughter from the audience, so that readers can take in the irony, the mockery, and the light-hearted approach to heavier topics like racism, dispossession, and un-belonging. Furthermore, a comedic approach allows for the bridging of gaps and the diffusing of racial tensions in creating an affective response in readers, who might reexamine their biases and prejudices. In so doing, through the power of their autobiographical disclosure, these comedian-cum-authors attempt not only to entertain but also to instruct audiences about how to coexist.

I'm Not a Terrorist but I've Played One on TV

In my discussion about the racialization of Iranian Americans, it is first useful to discuss Maz Jobrani's memoir, *I'm Not a Terrorist but I've Played One on TV: Memoirs of a Middle Eastern Funny Man*, since he takes a less critical and more exploratory approach to racial dynamics than does Negin Farsad in her memoir. In his debut memoir, Jobrani addresses the elephant in the room by announcing through his title that he is not in fact a terrorist, contrary to American stereotypes about Iranians and Muslims. This notion is even more pronounced by the cover of Jobrani's memoir, which shows him wearing a suit with a keffiyeh and a lit bomb, accompanied by a puzzled look that casts doubt on the whole scene. From the very beginning, Jobrani regales his audience with tales of how television producers and film directors attempted to dress him in a random assortment of stereotyped clothing meant to look like Islamic terrorist chic. Throughout this discussion

about Middle Eastern and Muslim stereotypes, Jobrani notes that he refuses to take these roles, considering the damage that they do for Iranians and the broader Middle Eastern community. It is with this frame of mind that Jobrani opens his memoir in discussing stereotyping and racialization of Iranians.

In his memoir, Jobrani discusses his early childhood in Iran, his move to Northern California at six years old, his acclimation to America, and his rise to becoming a world-traveling comedian. As a 1.5-generation immigrant,[18] he uses humor to cope with the liminality of leaving Iran and moving to America, particularly during the aftermath of the 1979 American hostage crisis in Iran. Just like many other Iranian Americans, the Jobrani family's journey was a bit unexpected: they "packed for two weeks" but "stayed for thirty years."[19] Immediately, Jobrani recalls classmates making fun of him in the predominately white city of Tiburon in Northern California. But what ensues is a comedic approach to discussing issues like racism, racial profiling, and double consciousness as a way of addressing Iranian Americans like him. In so doing, he means to reeducate American and Iranian readers about one another as he attempts to dispel negative stereotypes about Iranians as threatening, particularly the misperception that they are terrorists. For Jobrani, memories of being teased at school are undercut by his public reprimands of a school bully in his memoir.

While microaggressions against him started during his childhood, Jobrani recounts how they continue throughout his life and career. Even so, he finds the capacity to laugh, using humor to inject his own critiques while undermining racially motivated slights and teasing. Through his comedic approach, Jobrani attempts to tackle the past trauma of his childhood with scathing sarcasm:

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[18]Sociologist Ruben Rumbaut coined the term *1.5 generation* to "describe the situation of immigrant children who are socialized and begin their primary schooling abroad but immigrate before puberty." Ruben Rumbaut, "Assimilation and Its Discontents: Between Rhetoric and Reality," *International Migration Review* 34 (1997): 923–60. Quote on p. 950.

[19]Maz Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist but I've Played One on TV: Memoirs of a Middle Eastern Funny Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 31.

> My attempt at blending in failed miserably when I was in the fourth grade. I was met with a verbal confrontation by a sixth grader named Jim who somehow figured out that I was the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Marin County. After all, I had a funny name, beautiful furry eyebrows, strange-sounding parents, and a dad who drove a better car than his dad. I had to be involved with the hostage crisis somehow – I looked the part. This sixth grader came up with a clever nickname, calling me a Fucking Eye-ranian. That's what people called Iranians back then: Fucking Eye-ranians. "First of all," I explained, "it's pronounced Ee-ron-ian, not Eye-ranian. Second, you're bigger than me so it's whatever you want it to be. Third, I'm not sure where you heard a rumor that I'm Iranian. I'm not. I'm totally Italian – *ciao*!"[20]

Jobrani's Iranian and Muslim identities are read as Other, particularly through his perceived foreignness as evidenced through his "funny name," "furry eyebrows," and "strange-sounding parents." At the time of the hostage crisis, when tensions were high, Iranians in the United States were treated as enemy combatants—even when they had nothing to do with the crisis. The epithet "Fucking Eye-ranian" is doubly damning since it not only includes a forceful expletive, but it also willfully mispronounces *Iranian* to provide further ridicule. Countless others can attest to having experienced the particular barb embodied by the word *Eye-ranian*, which unleashes its sting as it is transformed from a noun to a verb in its mispronunciation. Through learning about Jobrani's experience, at the beginning of his acclimation to America, the reader is able to glean a few points: first, Jobrani is considered an outsider; second, through his use of comedy, he makes a joke to diffuse the tension; and third, he hints at Iranians obscuring their origins and passing for Italian, which is a practice that resurfaces throughout his memoir.

Just as in the rest of the book, here Jobrani relies on humor to create a cathartic release regarding this specific racial tension. Reflecting on this specific instance, he employs what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson refer

[20] Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist*, 52.

to as the "narrating I," which is the autobiographical voice aware of crafting a memoir during the process of narration.[21] This usually occurs during chronological jumps forward and backward in time when Jobrani (and other autobiographical writers) revisits a memory from the past with a new perspective. Employing the "narrating I," he notes, "Years later, while doing stand-up comedy, I began talking about these incidents. It felt like I was opening up an old wound, but it was good to talk about the childhood troubles I had with Jim."[22] In the practice of comedy, autobiographical confession is often mixed with a sense of irony or satire, which can help to heal "old wounds," as Jobrani says. Specifically, the relief theory of comedy 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."[23] Indeed, humor is a coping mechanism and tool that allows Jobrani to reevaluate his childhood traumas. This is not surprising, since life writing often allows for catharsis, particularly for those who have been marginalized. Even more so, the use of humor allows a comedic writer to work through past trauma to show racism and bigotry to be just as reprehensible as other atrocities.

Additionally, and perhaps significantly, Jobrani's early experiences with racialization in America touch on Tehranian's research on racial covering. Not unlike the earlier example of Dumas's passing for French, Jobrani also jokingly attempts to pass for another white ethnic: Italian. He mentions this numerous times, making jokes via name changes and Italian words and phrases like *ciao*, eventually pointing out the absurdity of this habit carried out by many Iranian Americans. In the earlier example when he notes he had a "funny name," what is indeed funny about his name is that *Maziyar* is an

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[21]Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 73.

[22]Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist*, 53.

[23]Ambreen Hai, "Laughing with an Iranian American Woman: Firoozeh Dumas' Memoirs and the (Cross-) Cultural Work of Humor," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, no. 2 (2018): 263–300. Quote on p. 275.

ethnically Persian name that is neither Arabic nor Muslim in origin (as it is mistakenly perceived), and *Jobrani*, which is also Persian, sounds Italian in its foreignness. It is not surprising that Jobrani is able to pass for Italian, even if it is a practice that increasingly frustrates him. In fact, these modes of white passing become vexing for Jobrani, who attempts to encourage Iranian Americans to embrace their authentic identity. For example, he admits that many of his friends changed their names to "Tony" after *Not without My Daughter* debuted in the United States and depicted Iranian men as particularly threatening and abusive toward women. Jobrani recalls:

> They went from being named Shahrokh, Mahmoud, and Farsheed to all being named Tony. I'm not sure why they all chose Tony, but it seemed odd to me that women wouldn't question you when you would introduce your friends this way: "I'm Maz. This is my friend Tony. Over there, next to Tony, is Tony. Over there next to Tony and Tony is Tony. Yes, they're all Italian. Very Italian. Me? I'm Iranian. Wait, where are you going? Did I say Iranian? I meant Persian, like the cat. Meow!"[24]

This passage includes a punch line that Jobrani often repeats—"Persian, like the cat. Meow!"—which often elicits laughter from Iranians and non-Iranians alike. Here, he attempts to turn the tables on an ignorant audience who associates Persians only with cats. In this way, laughter is used to build a coalition amongst other Iranians, while they are laughing at American stereotypes about Iranians. Jobrani's humor also creates space for non-Iranians to laugh at themselves and their own ignorance, eventually moving on from that unawareness. Lastly, there is another layer of humor since the word *Persian* is used by some Iranians as a form of racial covering designed to obscure their supposedly undesirable origins. Whether through his stand-up or his memoir, Jobrani often makes fun of the way in which some Iranians attempt to become associated with a more romantic origin.

Throughout the passage, Jobrani affirms his identity as Iranian and notes the way in which other Iranians around him attempt to pass for

[24]Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist*, 58–59.

Italian, especially via an appellative transformation to "Tony." Regarding this type of appellative passing, Tehranian observes that Iranian men in particular would change their name to "'Mike' for Mansour, 'Morty' for Morteza, 'Al' for Ali, and 'Moe' for Mohammed" as a way of passing for white.[25] About racial covering, Tehranian observes that the more someone associates with the white community, the more accepted and assimilated they will be. Their whiteness will become more legitimized through association with "credible" whites. Furthermore, associational covering can use financial success as a signpost for whiteness, which explains the Iranian American community's preoccupation with wealth and status, and more specifically, the Jobrani family's emphasis on driving a nice car. Group affiliation is another form of covering, wherein Iranian Americans purposely mislead or fail to correct their ethnicity when mistaken for Italian, French, or another more preferable identity. All of this is done to avoid the stigma of being associated with terrorism, hostage takers, and general foreignness.[26] But these measures are also taken because they point to the precarious situation in which Iranians find themselves: their legal classification is white, which is incongruous with their marginalization.

There is little legal recourse for these chasms between legal and perceived racial identities for Iranian Americans, yet steps like legal identification on the census would help ameliorate racial ambiguity. When discussing the US census, Jobrani, like Tehranian, Maghbouleh, and Farsad, finds the lack of ethnic and racial choices frustrating. Jobrani notes that because many Iranian Americans want to fit in, they often indicate "white" on the census. As he sarcastically observes about the question concerning ethnic background, in an affected Persian accent, "Ethnic background? Vhite. Or Italian. Or whichever ethnicity is not currently making headlines."[27] The census is a sticking point for Jobrani and for many Iranian Americans because as Tehranian points

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[25]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 80.

[26]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 105.

[27]Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist*, 46.

out, “white privilege still reigns supreme, and, naturally, immigrant groups still seek white recognition”; they often check “white” due to an unwillingness to relinquish legally sanctioned whiteness, or for lack of a better option.[28] Despite changes to the 2000 census, which allowed Middle Eastern individuals such as Iranian Americans to identify themselves as “Other,” Tehranian notes that “it appears that very few Iranian Americans took the opportunity to do so. In fact, only 338,266 individuals in the United States identified themselves as Iranian.”[29] Surprised, Tehranian remarks that “any visitor to Los Angeles (often referred to as Tehrangeles or Irangeles) can attest that there are probably 338,266 individuals of Iranian descent living in Southern California, let alone the rest of the country.”[30]

Even nearly a decade later, Jobrani, who was part of the 2010 census effort to encourage Iranian Americans to identity as Other and “write in” *Iranian* so that they could be counted, laments:

> Iranians continue to mark the box that reads “white” and move on with their lives. Based on the last census in 2010, there are about 300,000 Iranians in America. Based on my personal experiences in Westwood, California, there are at least 300,000 Iranians at most Persian weddings. There have been estimates between 300,000 and 1.5 million Iranians in America. The reason for this wide discrepancy is that Iranians are not into filling out census forms. That’s because they want to lay low and avoid the government.[31]

His take is more humorous than Tehranian’s, but it confirms the same quagmire concerning race. Iranians attempt to pass for white, particularly as they see the denigrating mistreatment toward African Americans and other minorities. The solution is to change the census to offer more inclusive categories. In her memoir, Farsad adds that the United States should change the census: “How can we build policies or have a basic understanding of our country with that? We have five

[28]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 75.
[29]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 77.
[30]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 85.
[31]Jobrani, *I’m Not a Terrorist*, 46.

categories, but why not have 105 categories? [. . .] Let us figure out who actually lives in this country, how they identify, and what they need!"[32]

This attachment to whiteness for Iranians predates coming to America, as it was part of Pahlavi-era nation making that tenuously claimed Iranians were descendants of Aryans, just at a time when modern nation making in the Middle East attached itself to European self-determination movements.[33] Zia-Ebrahimi elaborates on Pahlavi-era revisionist narratives about *nezhad-e ariyayi* (Aryan race), noting Leon Poliakov's observation that "*le mythe aryen*"[34] found its roots in Reza Shah's renaming of Persia as Iran, or "land of the Aryans" and through Mohammad Reza Shah's self-styling as *ariyamehr* or the "Light of Aryans."[35] The myth, as Zia-Ebrahimi notes, "divides humankind into several races, and considers most Europeans, but also Iranians and Indians, as members of the Aryan race." While it was first philologically used to categorize Indo-European languages, it soon took on a political connotation through European claims to whiteness. As Zia-Ebrahimi observes, "Aryanism's political charge, infused with romantic imagery, intensified over time, propagating claims that the Aryan race was bestowed with a special destiny, that of supremacy over what were now deemed to be the 'others,' the 'inferior races.'"[36] It is not surprising, then, that both Pahlavi regimes, and by extension, Iranians involved in nationalization projects, would refer back to the ancient word *ariya* and wrongfully appropriate it as the malapropism *ariyayi*, in order to make a tenuous connection to Aryans reimagined as white Europeans.[37] The national revisions taking place throughout the twentieth century begin to account for the legacy of attachment to the myth that Iranians come from a Europeanized Aryan stock, particularly when they clutch for claims to whiteness in Euro-American spaces.

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[32]Negin Farsad, *How to Make White People Laugh* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 226.

[33]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 85; Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 11.

[34]Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the 'Aryan' Discourse in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 44 (2011): 445–72. Quote on p. 447.

[35]Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation," 446.

[36]Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation," 448.

[37]Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation," 447.

Both Jobrani and Farsad poke fun at these misconceptions of Aryanness. In his memoir, Jobrani cites the Aryan myth as the reason for many Iranians' attachment to white racial identity. He explains:

> Growing up, most of my friends were white with a few Persians sprinkled in here and there. Before I go any further, I know that any Iranians reading this right now are thinking: *But Iranians ARE white*! That is true. Iranians are ethnically white. The word "Iran" derives from the word "Aryan." Our ancestors can be traced back to the Caucuses, so that makes us Caucasian – the original white people. Yes, Aryans were originally dark complexioned people with thick, hairy eyebrows. This is a point that many educated Iranians in the West insist on making.[38]

In this instance, Jobrani turns his comedic gaze to Iranians and addresses the old guard, in particular, who are attached to their whiteness vis-à-vis the Pahlavi romanticization of a distant past. Tehranian similarly observes, "they will tell you that the word Iran comes from the Sanskrit word meaning 'Land of the Aryans' and that they, not the Germans, are the original Aryans."[39] Gelareh Asayesh might put it best: "This tenuous link to the global ruling class permits Iranians to look down on the other people of the Middle East, most notably the Arabs, who had the temerity to defeat the faltering Persian Empire in the seventh century."[40] Maghbouleh also finds that for first-generation parents—who were "socialized into an Aryan and anti-Arab national history, 'Caucasian' geographic location, and concomitant white racial identity as children in Iran"—relinquishing these ties is hard, particularly when challenged by their children (second-generation immigrants), who might perceive themselves as people of color.[41] As Jobrani points out in his earlier observation, it is the Iranians educated in the West (the 1.5- and second-generation immigrants) who note that Aryan

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[38]Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist*, 46.

[39]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 85.

[40]Gelareh Asayesh, "I Grew Up Thinking I Was White," in *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*, ed. Lila Azam Zanganeh (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 12–19. Quote on p. 12. Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 179.

[41]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 11.

ancestors of Iranians who migrated from the Indian subcontinent were probably swarthy people of color as opposed to images of the fair-skinned Aryans reimagined by Hitler. Although there is an ambiguity in this passage concerning Jobrani's stance on Iranian whiteness, elsewhere throughout his memoir and in paratextual material, he refers to Iranians as people of color.

While Jobrani emphasizes the many instances wherein Iranians might consider themselves white, he also makes reference to their unfair marginality via their perceived brownness. As evident in the naming of his "Brown and Friendly" comedy tour, Jobrani attempts to educate Iranians and non-Iranians alike that Iranians can be racialized as brown and Other. He seems to refer to himself as a person of color, though he spends little time explaining his own racial self-perceptions. He admits, "In the West, despite our Caucasian heritage, Iranians are seen as more brown than white. If you don't believe me, try this test. Get an Iranian with a thick Persian accent and a unibrow and have him run up to the front of an airplane before the doors close for takeoff and tell the stewardess he doesn't feel well and needs to get off the plane."[42] What he goes on to imply is that Iranians can be stereotyped as threatening because of their perceived difference from white Americans. Per usual, he uses humor to trouble a stereotype with which he disagrees. To explain the racial ambiguity of Iranians further, Tehranian notes that "Middle Easterners are consistently subjected to a process of selective racialization" that renders them as white when they socially advance and exhibit positive values, and conversely as Other when they are seen as committing a transgression.[43] Here, Maghbouleh's notion of racial hinges is also helpful, since it describes the mechanisms for which doors seem to open for Iranians who are perceived as white as opposed to racial loopholes and opportunity loss for Iranians perceived as brown. As Maghbouleh notes, the racial hinge is symbolic, opening and closing access to whiteness depending on social demands, dramaturgy, and sometimes, legal codification.

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[42]Jobrani, *I'm Not a Terrorist*, 47.

[43]Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 73.

How to Make White People Laugh

On racial hinges and racial loopholes that account for the double consciousness experienced by Iranians in the diaspora, Negin Farsad's memoir, *How to Make White People Laugh*, is both entertaining and instructive. Farsad, who is a second-generation Iranian American, sees her navigation of race a bit differently from Jobrani. Rather than dance around questions of race and color, Farsad embraces her identity as a woman of color, often comparing her experience to other intersectional minorities in the United States. Like Jobrani, she employs humor to skillful effect. Her title makes clear references to her targeted audience: they are white people, and she intends to make them laugh. This title is visually echoed via her book cover, which features a silhouetted Farsad standing in front of—what we later learn to be—her TEDx PowerPoint visual, which inspired her ensuing memoir. In both cases, her life storytelling mixes humor, anti-racism discourse, and social justice principles to cogently discuss the liminality of Iranian Americans who feel estranged from whiteness.

Farsad's approach is refreshing for Iranian Americans who have felt alienated from or dissatisfied with their legal white designation. From the very first words in her introduction's title, she heralds her ensuing reflections with "I Used to Be Black," which automatically signals an identity apart from the usual Iranian claims to whiteness.[44] Of course, the past tense quickly reminds the reader that there has been some sort of change or evolution from this idea. Still, what she refers to is her internalized feelings of being Other, which naturally coincided with what she had known of African American studies and the Black struggle. She quickly clears up impressions that she is trying to appropriate Blackness by disclosing, "To be clear, I'm actually an Iranian-American Muslim female comedian-slash-filmmaker" and quickly corrects any misperceptions that she is putting on some sort of racial "black face."[45] Elaborating further, she notes, "I used to feel black. Sometimes 'kinda pretty black,' occasionally 'really black,'

[44]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 1.
[45]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 1.

and, depending on how drunk I was, 'Don Cheadle.' I'm Iranian, an ethnically brown Muz type, and definitely not black."[46] Depending on the everyday racial loopholes that depict Farsad through a colorist spectrum, and on her personal sentiment and social mistreatment from others, her feelings of Otherness vary. Farsad signals a very different memoir from other Iranian American life writers who avoid answering questions about race. However exaggerated Farsad might be in her initial proclamations of Blackness, what seems sincere are her frequent pronouncements that she is brown and Muslim, and more authentically, that she is not in fact Black. It is funny to note that for many Iranians, as she points out, the fact that she is a female comedian also presents a marginalized community, albeit mostly amongst more traditional Iranians.

For Farsad, the attraction to Blackness stems from a desire to build coalitions between marginalized minorities. Especially because she grew up with immigrant parents, Farsad "felt like my minority and ethnic status was the flashpoint of national blame for some kind of social tension [. . .] So my still burgeoning mind decided to embrace the struggle, embrace that blackness. It was the only narrative around 'otherness' out there."[47] Karen Brodkin observes that this sense of belonging to a racialized category "comes from racial middleness: of an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness."[48] Aptly, Farsad notes about this experience, "That's what a lot of hyphenated Americans say to themselves when they glom onto the larger minority groups: close enough."[49] For Farsad, what is at stake is racial self-determination for Iranians who want to authentically embrace their national, cultural, and ethnic identities in the United States.

This type of coalition building is a cornerstone for social justice work, about which Farsad is passionate throughout her memoir. Additionally,

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[46]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 1.

[47]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 3.

[48]Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 2.

[49]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 6.

Farsad points out the precariousness of not being able to fully fit in. She feels a bit more at ease with the Black struggle and its fight, but at the same time, she is aware that she is white passing, admitting, "I can pass, but when the full scale of the whiteness hit me, I realized passing wasn't my choice. I didn't get to choose whiteness. You're *rewarded* whiteness."[50] This speaks to Maghbouleh's notion of Iranians and model minorities as racial hinges who are rewarded with whiteness and the privileges thereof. But even more so, it speaks to the racial ambiguity and complexity concerning Iranian social status, which Farsad is quick to point out. This ambiguity and complexity are not surprising, since "Iranians, who have from their arrival in the United States been legally situated inside whiteness, have been simultaneously escorted, framed, and deported out of its everyday social limits."[51]

After struggling with her racial identity, Farsad realizes that she must reject extra-cultural affiliations and articulate the paradoxes of Iranian American identity to bring her identity into existence. About her racial epiphany and self-acceptance, she observes:

> And that's when it struck me: I wasn't black, or Mexican or Asian or Russian. I was an Iranian-American Muslim female (the comedy, filmmaking, and honey-mustard enthusiasm didn't come till later). To large swaths of the American public, that meant I was a possibly dangerous brown person who potentially sympathized with Al Qaeda or Hezbollah. To other swaths of the American public, I was the kind of person who pronounced "Iran" in a way that didn't make it sound like a past-tense verb.[52]

Farsad's proclamations that she is both brown and an "Iranian-American Muslim female" are significant and direct identifiers, particularly because she acknowledges, like Jobrani, terrorist stereotypes lodged against Muslims. To counter this, she notes the potential power of intersectionality, stating, "The fight in being a woman and the fight

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[50]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 86.

[51]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 171.

[52]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 8.

in being a person of color is the same fight, but being a woman *and* a person of color just adds twelve extra steps."[53] This witty disclosure at the end of her observation injects some humor to vary the sting of her critique that evaluates her limited mobility in American society with respect to race and gender.

These identity struggles speak to Maghbouleh's research on the differences between first-generation and second-generation Iranian immigrants and their navigation of race. Maghbouleh finds that second-generation Iranian American immigrants come of age, "chafe against their social position at the limits of whiteness [. . .] by eschewing the 'white' category altogether."[54] In fact, Maghbouleh adds that because second-generation Iranian immigrants are "pushed outside the limits of whiteness,"[55] they operate in an in-between space, functioning as racial hinges, "crafting political identities as racial outsiders, banding together with other youth [. . .] and practicing an antiracist and strategically inclusive Iranianness [. . .] They are becoming brown by choice and by force."[56] This self-selection of brownness is significant because it allows Iranian Americans to properly address racial loopholes that allow for their everyday discrimination, while more powerfully reclaiming an identity that has been whitewashed by political machinations in Iran and in the United States.

Considering the revival of anti-Iranian and anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11, the acceptance of Iranian and Muslim identities as people of color can allow Iranian Americans to push back against their liminal positions between whiteness and Blackness. In response to post-9/11 racist surges of what Farsad calls "Muz-hate,"[57] the author sagely observes "the need to shoehorn Islam as the major reason for everything in post-9/11 America defines so much of how we see mainstream American Muslims. We've created an arsenal of

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[53]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 102.

[54]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 171.

[55]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 171.

[56]Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 172.

[57]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 7.

icons based on this shoehorning, and those icons do not represent me or fit my worldview."[58] The word *me* is significant here as it highlights Farsad's ownership over her Muslim identity and her repudiation of Islamophobia, which does not fit her world view. Furthermore, she spends some time discussing Islamophobic iconography, demonstrating the intensifying stereotyping of Muslims as backward and threatening. As she notes about white Americans' perceptions of Muslims, "**Islam** = the promotion of violence. **Muslims** = violent people with dusty faces always running around the desert. **The Middle East** = a place full of violent people with dusty faces always running around the desert, plus women shrouded in what appear to be blankets."[59] Throughout the text, Farsad pays particular attention to the way stereotyped images become recycled and reified, drawing attention to the "violent" and "dusty" qualities that have permeated Euro-American orientalist imaginations about the Middle East for centuries, from the paintings of Jean-August-Dominique Ingres to the ravings of Bill Maher.

Fully acknowledging these multiple identities and their subsequent marginalization by the white majority, Farsad finally concludes that there is not a neat racial construction of her intersectional identities. She refers to this liminality as a "Third Thing": "I'm a Third Thing- Islam doesn't explain me, Iranian poetry doesn't explain me, and apple pie doesn't explain me. And yet I understand all of these things. Being a Third Thing is a designation for people who straddle worlds, who may have a foot in every door yet their butt is hovering between door frames and they may even have more than two feet, and either way they're definitely going to pull a groin muscle."[60]

Farsad hits the nail on the head for many Iranian American Muslims: they are hybridized in a tertiary space where they experience becoming a "Third Thing" that exists between worlds. There is a "thirdness," perhaps even a triple consciousness, that allows Iranian Americans to be aware of their difference, which speaks to the way in which

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[58]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 143.

[59]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 7. Emphasis in original.

[60]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 144.

Iranians have to identify themselves in distinct racial, ethnic, and religious categories (not just lumped in with whites). Consequently, Farsad notes that when one is "the *de facto* voice of your people's Third Thing subgroup [. . .] the people in the First and Second Things aren't necessarily going to like it."[61] Farsad, who attended graduate school for a master's degree in African American studies, is surely referencing Stuart Hall's and Homi Bhabha's works on liminality, hybridity, and the "Third Space." Briefly, in Hall's prolific body of work, the author often points to hybridity as a way for those with diasporic cultural identity to negotiate a footing in liminal spaces. In particular, through creolization of cultural practices, those in the diaspora can start to describe themselves in new tertiary terms, as opposed to binary ones of tradition and opposition.[62] This relates well to Bhabha's notions of hybridity in *The Location of Culture*, wherein all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a negotiated "Third Space" that defies binary positionality between the colonizer and the colonized.[63] In the in-between third space, there is a burden for producing new cultural modes of belonging that recognize the complexity of transcultural identity. For Farsad, this third space signals the possibility for a hybrid identity that blends together her Muslim faith, Iranian ethnicity, and American surroundings.

The mention of becoming a "de facto voice" begins to touch on Farsad's mission throughout her memoir: to use humor to collapse binary categories and unsettle seemingly established truths. Farsad notes the impact of accepting her multilayered identity on her comedy and ability to use her voice. Her sense of urgency is announced at the beginning of the memoir:

> I needed to come out of the closet. I wasn't helping anyone by glossing over my real identity. *This* was my struggle, and I had work to do! There [were] 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide whose identity

[61]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 146–47.

[62]Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–37.

[63]Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 37.

> was being hijacked! People needed to know that secular, fun Muslims who smell nice are the norm- more the norm than the dusty brown people we were seeing on television. And I had to let people know it with the only tool I had: comedy.[64]

Returning to those "dusty brown" stereotypes, Farsad senses the importance of coming to terms with her identity instead of culturally affiliating with Black identity or other ambiguously ethnic identities. Rather, Farsad takes up the mantle of diversifying images about Muslims, carving out a space for herself as a secular Muslim, despite white American expectations and Islamic hardliner denials that she may not be Muslim enough to make these claims. These rhetorical and comedic approaches, which she dubs "social justice comedy,"[65] enable Farsad to engage in "educational accounting," a strategy of informing cultural outsiders about one's culture in order to help non-Iranians to confront their ignorance.[66] In fact, in her conclusion, Farsad highlights the importance of this educational accounting: "Do people ask where you're from? That's great! Let 'em know. Don't assume that they're otherizing you [. . .] you're a teacher. Yeah, I know you didn't sign up to be a teacher."[67] Using her oft-employed sarcasm, Farsad acknowledges what she is asking of her readers: to either take the time to educate others or to be educated as part of her plan to build coalitions in her social justice work.

In order to understand her motivations for using comedy and penning her memoir, it is important to consider the following rhetorical question posed by Farsad: "Why aren't minorities in the United States building bridges and finding the commonality?"[68] It is a central question that births her comedic memoir since she makes the argument that comedy can propel people to laugh and "start fewer wars."[69] Continuing, she

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[64]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 8.

[65]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 9.

[66]Amir Marvasti and Karyn D. McKinney, *Middle Eastern Lives in America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

[67]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 227.

[68]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 62.

[69]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 27.

notes, "I think laughter is the key to all sorts of conflict resolution, and in these pages I want to show you how, why, where, and when this laughter is useful [. . .] Comedy is the great lubricant, metaphorically, for easing people into tough discussions [. . .] I wanna lube up the whole nation [. . .] I won't stop until we all just get along."[70] This last reference to getting along is similar to the messages echoed throughout Dumas's and Jobrani's memoirs. It is interesting that despite their varying approaches to navigating race, they all agree on taking a moderate approach that aims to establish common ground.

Additionally, on an aesthetic level, comedy and its use in life writing can allow authors like Farsad and Jobrani to inspire change and provide conflict resolution. According to Indira Ghose, "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 [. . .] Laughter is a strategy of self-defence that enables us to face sources of fear or pain."[71] Humor and its byproduct, laughter, are certainly helpful tools for releasing tension. This is because "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."[72]

In Farsad's case, she mentions numerous times throughout her memoir that she wishes to educate those (namely, white people) who are interested in evolving their views about Iranian Americans. According to Farsad, that is the ultimate point of her memoir: to use her voice to educate white people, who possess so much control and power in America. Discussing her reasons for writing, Farsad offers two motivations. First, she declares, "I want to give voice to the multi-hyphenated Americans caught in the margins. I want to give

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[70]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 27.

[71]Indira Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 7.

[72]Hai, "Laughing with an Iranian American Woman," 274.

voice to all those feelings of self-censorship and cross-cultural pressures that they feel. I want mainstream American culture to take note, because we can't be ignored anymore, and recognizing us is a matter of social justice."[73] Using one's voice and asserting one's agency is very important to Farsad, particularly as she attempts to counter invisibility because she advocates standing up and speaking out as a woman of color. Her second motivation pertains to audience: to address white people, who hold so much institutional power. Anticipating questions about her book's title and focus, Farsad reflexively asks, "Why do white people matter anyway? Because, here's the thing: White people (still) sorta control stuff."[74] As a way to undercut that power, Farsad employs humor to "break up the truth" by unsettling accepted notions of race.[75]

Ultimately, as an innovative aesthetic, humor has the ability to undercut traditional beliefs, while at the same time, create connections between comedian life storytellers and their captive readers. Both Maz Jobrani and Negin Farsad aim to laugh at life's hypocrisies and absurdities with their readers. If they are laughing at anyone, it is themselves. Furthermore, they both reevaluate traumatic moments from their lives and expose the barbs that racists hurled at them. But, as each comedian advances from childhood to adulthood, they refocus their attention on using comedy to explore their racialization. Along the way, they also reject stereotypes lodged against them, ranging from model minority to terrorist. In contrast to other Iranian American memoirists, both Jobrani and Farsad ask challenging questions about the way in which Iranians have been legally categorized as white but paradoxically mistreated as Other. While many Iranian Americans cling to whiteness—and by extension, white privilege—these two authors poke holes in those arguments. They assert themselves as people of color who use comedy to build bridges and coalitions with other ethnic minorities who also find that they are unchecking the white box.

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[73]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 24.

[74]Farsad, *White People Laugh*, 24.

[75]Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, ed., *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 10.