

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Narratives of Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*: Polyphony, Intersectionality, and Hidden Transcripts

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss3.6605

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Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 23-05-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* as a diasporic counter-narrative that highlights voices historically marginalized within the prevailing American cultural discourse. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Otherness and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, alongside Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts, the analysis frames Lalami's novel within a wider context of Arab-American writing as a space of resistance. *The Other Americans* disrupts conventional narratives of belonging, identity, and justice by emphasizing viewpoints influenced by racial, religious, and socio-economic marginalization. The paper argues that Lalami constructs a polyphonic narrative framework that challenges singular representations of the "American experience." The novel reveals the flaws in the dominant myth of the United States as an inclusive melting pot through its variety of voices. Through Said's framework, the novel exposes the mechanisms by which Arab and Muslim identities are constructed as cultural "Others," while Crenshaw's intersectionality clarifies how gender, race, and religion interact to shape layered diasporic experiences. Scott's "hidden transcripts" manifest in Lalami's depiction of private mourning, intergenerational memory, and implicit critique, through which she uncovers the political significance inherent in human narratives. *The Other Americans* challenges cultural hegemony and reasserts narrative authority for diasporic agency by shedding light on the marginalized subjectivities. The study illustrates how Lalami's work redefines the American literary canon by affirming the validity of marginalized perspectives, hence converting diasporic fiction into a kind of cultural and political action. Consequently, the book serves as both a medium for storytelling and a mechanism of resistance, illuminating the experiences of marginalized Americans.

KEYWORDS

Margins

Other Narratives

Diaspora

Hegemony

Resistance

Hidden Transcripts

Introduction

Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* reexamines American culture from the disparate viewpoints of diaspora, exile and marginalization. Lalami assembles a chorus of narrators comprising immigrants, veterans, and socially marginalized individuals, consequently constructing a counter-cartography of belonging that redefines the American identity via the perspectives of those excluded from the national narrative. The novel elucidates the concept of

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integration by demonstrating how ethnicity, religion, and coerced movement impose constraints and conditions on inclusion.

To examine these exclusions, this study draws on Edward Said's theorization of "Otherness," particularly as articulated in *Orientalism* (1978). Said argues that the "Orient" is not a geographical reality but a discursive construction produced by Western systems of knowledge and power, through which the East is represented as backward, irrational, and fundamentally different from the West (Said 2–3). This process of othering transforms cultural difference into hierarchy, establishing normative Western identity through contrast with a racialized and exoticized Other. In the American context, Arab and Muslim identities have frequently been framed through similar representational logics, especially in post-9/11 discourse. Lalami's novel interrogates precisely this mechanism, exposing how Arab-American subjects are positioned within narratives shaped by suspicion, securitization, and cultural misrecognition.

In addition, this research engages with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, first formulated in "Mapping the Margins" (1991). Crenshaw demonstrates that systems of oppression—such as race, gender, and class—do not operate independently but intersect to create specific and compounded forms of marginalization (1244). Intersectionality therefore provides a framework for understanding how Arab-American women in Lalami's fiction experience layered exclusions that cannot be reduced to a single axis of identity. The novel dramatizes the structural complexity of diasporic subjectivity by foregrounding characters who navigate the overlapping pressures of race, religion, gender, and migration.

This study argues that *The Other Americans* transforms narrative structure into a political act. Lalami challenges Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony—the process by which privileged groups secure compliance via ideology instead of coercion—through elements such as polyphony, fragmentation, and silence (Gramsci 12). Her interlaced voices articulate what James C. Scott refers to as hidden transcripts. These mundane acts of defiance enable marginalized individuals to regain their dignity within oppressive regimes (4). The novel's structure functions as an aesthetic embodiment of resistance, converting the politics of subaltern survival into a form of literature. By placing Said's theory of othering, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Gramsci's hegemony, and Scott's hidden transcripts in dialogue, this study conceptualizes Lalami's fiction as a site where representation, power, and resistance intersect. The novel not only contests dominant cultural narratives but also exposes how identity is structured through overlapping systems of ideological control. Additionally, this research examines how *The Other Americans* employs multiple perspectives to challenge cultural hegemony and redefine belonging within the Arab-American diaspora, how the novel transforms Scott's concept of hidden transcripts into narrative form through everyday practices such as silence, prayer, and artistic expression, and how gender and religion intersect in Lalami's portrayal of Arab-American identity to produce alternative understandings of selfhood.

This analysis, grounded in Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, examines how Lalami reclaims narrative power for voices that have been historically marginalized. Polyphony transforms into both an artistic choice and a counter-hegemonic practice, asserting that national identity should be understood as dialogic, contested, and unfinished. The work utilizes a textual-cultural approach, combining close reading with postcolonial and cultural theory. The research explores how Lalami's characters—Maryam, Nora, and Efraín—embody several modalities of resistance: through faith, memory, and ethical examination. The novel enacts what Gramsci refers to as a "war of position" within culture (Gramsci 137). Rather than engaging in combat, it is a long-lasting struggle waged via significance, compassion, and expression. Therefore, *The Other Americans* presents an alternative narrative about the United States, prioritizing diversity over unity and dissent above silence. Lalami's multifaceted narrative illustrates that identity is not a possession but a process

of negotiation, and that opposition can effect change without being overtly vocal. Lalami transforms fiction into a platform for dialogue by providing "the other Americans" with a voice. In this sense, the excluded are not merely symbols of exclusion; they greatly contribute to the re-writing of the national narrative.

The Sociohistorical Context: The Moroccan Diaspora and the Post-9/11 Arab-American Reality

The narrative world of *The Other Americans* unfolds within a sociohistorical moment shaped by the aftermath of September 11, 2001, a period that profoundly reconfigured the perception of Arab and Muslim identities in the United States. While Arab migration to the United States predates this event, the post-9/11 era marked a decisive shift in how these communities were represented and governed, as cultural difference became increasingly entangled with suspicion and securitization. In the years following 9/11, this shift was reinforced by security-driven policies and expanded surveillance practices that disproportionately targeted Arab and Muslim communities, further entrenching their position within regimes of suspicion and control. In this context, Arab and Muslim subjects were frequently positioned within discursive frameworks that reinforced their status as outsiders, a process that resonates with Edward Said's argument that the "Orient" is constructed through systems of representation that produce and sustain hierarchical distinctions between East and West (2–3). Rather than depicting exclusion as an abstract condition, Lalami's novel situates it within everyday life, where belonging is continually negotiated under the pressure of racialized perception.

This condition of unstable belonging is not only cultural but also structural. As Crenshaw demonstrates, systems of power such as race, gender, and class intersect to produce specific and layered forms of marginalization (1244). In the post-9/11 context, these intersections become particularly visible in the experiences of Arab-American subjects, whose identities are shaped simultaneously by ethnicity, religion, and geopolitical anxieties. *The Other Americans* reflects this complexity through characters who navigate not a single axis of exclusion, but a network of overlapping constraints that define the limits of their inclusion within American society.

Brahim Barhoun's analysis of Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* offers a useful perspective on contemporary mechanisms of control that resonate with the post-9/11 context depicted in *The Other Americans*. He shows that certain forms of governance operate through anticipatory logic, in which individuals may be identified and managed on the basis of predicted risk rather than demonstrated action (Barhoun 2). Within this post-9/11 climate of regulation and surveillance, such mechanisms help illuminate how Arab-American subjects are frequently perceived through suspicion and pre-emptive judgment. This emphasis on anticipatory control highlights how institutional frameworks shape the conditions under which subjects are recognized, evaluated, and constrained. Read in this light, the experiences depicted in *The Other Americans* can be understood not only as instances of social marginalization, but also as shaped by forms of regulation that define and constrain subjects in advance.

The Moroccan dimension of this post-9/11 condition of racialized and conditional belonging further complicates dominant understandings of diaspora. As Ali El Abdelaoui suggests, transnational literary production challenges fixed notions of home by foregrounding mobility, plurality, and the instability of belonging across cultural spaces (19). Rather than presenting migration as a linear movement from origin to destination, such perspectives emphasize the fluid and often contradictory nature of diasporic identity. Within this framework, Moroccan diasporic experience emerges as a site of negotiation, shaped both by internal affiliations and by external processes of categorization and exclusion.

Lalami's own nonfiction further illuminates these dynamics by providing an explicit articulation of the conditional nature of belonging in the United States. In *Conditional Citizens* (2020), she reflects on how citizenship does not necessarily secure full inclusion; rather, it remains conditioned by racial, religious, and immigrant identities that structure differential access to belonging. As she observes, her experience of American life "has never been entirely secure or comfortable," underscoring how belonging is continually negotiated rather than guaranteed (Lalami, *Conditional Citizens* 6). This insight deepens the novel's portrayal of characters who inhabit an in-between space, where formal inclusion coexists with social and cultural exclusion. Taken together, these sociohistorical and literary frameworks position *The Other Americans* as a critical exploration of how identity and belonging are negotiated in the post-9/11 United States.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Hegemony and the Contestation of "Common Sense"

Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony serves as the foundation for comprehending how authority functions via ideas rather than through force. In his book *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, he synthesizes that the state is the entire ensemble of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only defends its dominance, but obtains the active consent of those over whom it rules (259). Hegemony therefore lies in the ability to influence common sense—the regular, deeply unquestioned beliefs that seem customary due to their social construction. Hegemony is not a fixed consensus but an ongoing negotiation between dominant and subordinate groups. The privileged elite exerts influence not only through political dominance but also through what Gramsci refers to as intellectual and moral leadership, convincing others to embrace its beliefs and deem them universal. Civil society—encompassing educational institutions, media, religious organizations, and familial structures—serves as the pivotal arena for this conflict, as it is within this sphere that consent is cultivated and reaffirmed. Gramsci asserts that "A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before it has acquired the full 'coercive' power of the state" (12).

This insight broadens the notion of power beyond governmental apparatus to the domain of culture and discourse. Cultural production—art, literature, film—serves as a site where ideological perspectives are disputed and reinvented. Gramsci argues that political struggle must confront the entire "historical bloc," the interconnected network of cultural, ideological, and economic forces that sustain domination. For him, the war of position unfolds not only within institutions and formal political arenas but also across culture, education, and the everyday formation of common sense (137). In this framework, creative practice becomes central to political conflict. Literature, education, and media are not peripheral to politics; they form part of its extended battleground. In the American setting, the fabricated notion of exceptionalism illustrates hegemonic "common sense." It creates a manufactured cohesion of national virtue, production, and moral supremacy, while marginalizing racialized and immigrant populations in the narrative of identity. Whiteness, secular rationalism, and economic self-sufficiency emerge as unexamined standards by which "Americanness" is delineated. Stuart Hall expands Gramsci's dialectic of structure and agency to the domain of cultural identification, positing that identity encompasses both becoming and being, shaped by representation and what might be termed the politics of placement (225). This theoretical shift redefines identity from a fixed essence to a dynamic process, enabling numerous and fluid

subject perspectives. Culture, in this context, serves as both the channel and the object of ideological conflict.

Contemporary criticism of Arab-American fiction highlights the enduring influence of these ideological configurations in twenty-first-century narratives. Aymane Edouihri, in his reading of *The Other Americans*, argues that Lalami exposes the subtle mechanisms through which Arab subjects are constructed as perpetual outsiders within American discourse, thereby situating the novel within ongoing debates about otherness and disillusionment (65). Similarly, Abdellah El Boubekri contends that diasporic belonging in Lalami's fiction emerges not as assimilation but as negotiation, a process shaped by racialization and civic conditionality. These readings extend Gramsci's insight into cultural consent by showing how hegemonic "common sense" continues to define who may legitimately inhabit the national space (El Boubekri, "New Ways of Belonging" 931).

In this context, literature functions as a domain of symbolic conflict. It can either strengthen hegemonic assumptions by replicating dominant modes of representation or disrupt them by amplifying alternative epistemologies and voices marginalized from the national narrative. Barbara Harlow's influential concept of resistance literature supports this view; she describes it as a form of writing driven by a political need to turn cultural expression into a site of struggle (32).

Collectively, these theories frame cultural production as both a tool and a domain of hegemony. Gramsci's "war of position" is both political and aesthetic: a persistent effort to alter the frameworks of perception, emotion, and cognition that uphold power. The ideological value of literature lies in its ability to illuminate what common sense conceals—to articulate the contradictions that ideology presents as coherence, and to suggest novel perspectives on collective existence.

The Politics of the Hidden Transcripts

James C. Scott's concept of hidden transcripts transformed the analysis of power by redirecting focus from explicit acts of rebellion to the nuanced, daily activities through which subaltern individuals challenge oppression. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott differentiates between the public transcript—the overt display of conformity required by authority—and the hidden transcript—the offstage communication, gesture, or action through which subordinates express critique, irony, or defiance. In this context, Scott asserts, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott xii). This theoretical framework challenges dichotomous interpretations of power as solely submission versus rebellion. It unveils a multifaceted range of resistance that functions beneath the apparent facade of social order.

Hidden transcripts arise in contexts where power structures enforce discretion. They appear via coded language, comedy, rumors, or the deliberate usage of silence, as Scott notes: "Gossip is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression… The power to gossip is more democratically distributed than power, property, and income, and, certainly, than the freedom to speak openly" (142). These "infrapolitical" models, as later designated by Scott, are not subversive in the traditional sense; they do not seek to dismantle regimes abruptly. Instead, they are cumulative: a gradual, hidden effort that maintains dignity and memory throughout oppressive circumstances. Resistance, in this context, is not an occurrence but a practice—a persistent reaffirmation of subjectivity amid settings that seek to obliterate it.

This understanding of resistance as practice rather than spectacle is particularly visible in recent readings of contemporary Arab diasporic fiction. Amal Al-Khayyat and Yousef Awad, in their study of Lalami's narrative technique, note that even seemingly peripheral elements—such as the recurrence of weather patterns—operate as subtle narrative devices that register tension, displacement, and unease (42). Rather than foregrounding open confrontation, the novel diffuses critique across atmosphere, memory, and interiority. Such strategies resonate with Scott's conception of infrapolitics: dissent is rarely declamatory; it is embedded within texture, mood, and repetition. In this sense, Lalami's fiction does not dramatize rebellion; it renders visible the quiet labor of endurance.

Rather than equating resistance with open confrontation, this approach directs attention to the quieter adjustments and coded gestures that structure everyday experience: how individuals navigate limitations and create zones of autonomy inside the gaps of authority. Actions like silence, adherence to rituals, memory preservation, or nuanced behavioral modifications gain significance precisely due to their commonplace nature. The hidden transcript converts the mundane into rebellion, not via confrontation but through perseverance. The notion also reveals the performative aspect of power itself: the ruling class relies on public obedience to maintain legitimacy, although this performance is inherently unstable as subordinates engage in it tactically rather than authentically. Each manifestation of compliance possesses the capacity to undermine authority. Consequently, control inherently harbors the potential for its own challenge: the notion that what seems to be consent may actually disguise underlying resistance.

This ambiguity between consent and resistance has particular resonance in post-9/11 representations of Muslim and Arab subjects. As Sahar Aziz demonstrates, racialization frequently transforms religious identity into a visible marker of political suspicion, rendering everyday life a site of surveillance (7). Promise Frank Ejiofor similarly argues that Islamophobia must be understood not as episodic hostility but as a structural condition embedded in public discourse (Ejiofor). Read alongside Scott's framework, such scholarship clarifies how compliance may operate strategically within environments structured by scrutiny. What appears as silence may conceal negotiation; what appears as conformity may preserve dignity.

Subsequently, theorists in cultural and postcolonial studies, such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, expanded upon Scott's findings within the conceptual domain. Bhabha's notion of mimicry corresponds with the logic of hidden transcripts: it is "nearly the same, but not quite" (122), and thus constitutes a form of replication that unsettles authority through imperfect imitation. Likewise, Spivak's insights on the subaltern voice emphasize that silence can signify refusal rather than mere absence (307–08). In all instances, resistance resides not in shattering quiet but in redefining its meaning. The concept of hidden transcripts thus expands the realm of political imagination; it acknowledges that the contestation of hegemony transpires not only in protests or manifestos but also in gestures, rituals, and narratives. The notion reinterprets agency as the ability to signal differently—converting obedience into irony, restriction into inventiveness, and invisibility into resilience. Scott and his successors reveal the moral acuity of the disadvantaged and restore to them the capacity to narrate their own experiences through subtle acts of resistance.

Recent scholarship on *The Other Americans* extends this conversation by examining how belonging itself becomes conditional within contemporary American discourse. El Boubekri, in his book review of Lalami's *Conditional Citizens*, frames citizenship as contingent upon racial legibility ("Conditional Citizens" 231). Rachid Lamghari further demonstrates how gendered space shapes diasporic subjectivity (883). Yet these studies, while illuminating civic, spatial, and gendered dimensions of belonging, tend to privilege thematic concerns over narrative structure. What remains less explored is how Lalami's polyphonic form itself operates as a

counter-hegemonic intervention, redistributing authority across voices rather than merely representing marginality. The next section therefore shifts attention to this structural dimension of the novel's counter-hegemonic strategy.

Close Reading

Polyphony as Counter-Hegemony: The Refusal of a Single "American Story" in *The Other Americans*

From its first pages, *The Other Americans* challenges the notion of a singular, cohesive narrative. Nora, the first narrator, reflects: "Whenever I think about that moment, these two contradictory images come to me: my father struggling for breath on the cracked asphalt, and me drinking champagne with my roommate" (Lalami, *Other Americans* 5). This notable contrast between death and everyday existence clearly indicates Lalami's rejection of resolution and proportion. This highlights the primary conflict of the novel: the disparity between individual experience and societal apathy. The readers find themselves in a fragmented environment where the concepts of belonging and alienation are intertwined, reflecting the state of the American community as a whole. The narrative of the novel is presented through the perspectives of nine distinct narrators—immigrants, veterans, workers, and family members—each contributing a fragment of truth. No single viewpoint prevails; meaning arises instead from the interplay among multiple perspectives. This narrative structure reconfigures polyphony as a form of resistance. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains, polyphony refers to a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" that coexist within the same artistic work, none subordinated to an authorial hierarchy (6). In such a form, truth becomes dialogic rather than absolute, shaped by interaction rather than proclamation. Lalami's use of polyphony performs precisely this function. Her dispersed voices undermine the ideological uniformity that Antonio Gramsci calls "common sense," the uncritical acceptance of a dominant worldview. Lalami converts consensus into conversation by distributing narrative authority across social margins; her novel questions whether any singular "American story" can ever encompass the contradictions, silences, and multiplicities that define national identity. In *The Other Americans*, each chapter responds to, reinterprets, or adds complexity to another. Nora's grief, Maryam's faith, Jeremy's guilt, and Efraín's silence intertwine to form an intricate weave of viewpoints that collectively reveal the fractures within the nation. The novel exemplifies what Bakhtin refers to as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices" through this interplay. The reader engages actively in this dialogue, obliged to embrace multiple, at times contradictory, truths simultaneously.

Lalami's decision to divide narrative authority among a variety of characters demonstrates a profound ethical and political purpose. Through her work, she amplifies the voices of immigrants, racial minorities, and those often overlooked by society, thereby elevating storytelling to a profound act of acknowledgment. In a society where the margins are frequently discussed yet seldom acknowledged, her novel asserts that literature serves as a crucial space for justice. The process of reading transforms into a collaborative endeavor: meaning is not simply provided but constructed through active listening, inquiry, and comparative analysis. Every reader, similar to each character, must come to terms with the experience of uncertainty.

Additionally, Driss's hit-and-run becomes the novel's central point of rupture, yet *The Other Americans* pointedly refuses to grant any single narrator the authority to define its meaning. Rather than presenting the accident as a fixed event, Lalami disperses it across multiple

consciousnesses, each shaped by fear, memory, and positional vulnerability. Efraín's testimony illustrates how narrative fragmentation emerges from precarity:

> That's when I heard a car speeding toward the intersection and then a dull sound. Bump. Like that. I looked up, and the car was already making a turn onto the side street. The old man rolled off the hood and landed facedown in the gutter. And the car didn't even stop. It went on as if it had only hit a can or a plastic bottle. (Lalami, *Other Americans* 14)

The clipped syntax—"Bump. Like that"—mirrors the shock of the moment while also signaling the incompleteness of perception. Efraín does not narrate with authority; he reconstructs from fragments. The simile reducing the victim to "a can or a plastic bottle" exposes the moral numbness embedded in the act, but it also reflects how violence is rendered ordinary within public space. His hesitation to report the crime further complicates the narrative of justice: "Did you forget what happened to Araceli? … Before she knew what was happening to her, Immigration was at her door" (14). Here, the ellipsis functions not merely as punctuation but as political suspension. The pause between memory and consequence embodies the strategy of survival. Efraín's silence is not apathy; it is structured by fear. Polyphony, then, does not simply diversify perspective—it exposes the unequal risks attached to speech itself.

Nora reads her father's death as part of a broader pattern of anti-immigrant hostility, while Coleman renders it a procedural matter, his official tone flattening the emotional and political stakes into bureaucratic language. Efraín, the only direct witness, approaches the event with fear shaped by his undocumented status, knowing that visibility can be dangerous. Maryam interprets the loss through the longer history of exile and political repression that has shaped her life, carrying the grief of displacement into the American present. A.J. obscures his guilt in resentment, offering yet another distorted vantage point, whereas Jeremy filters the event through trauma, loyalty, and the complicated intimacy of his relationship with Nora. These voices do not resolve into a single, authoritative explanation; their very dissonance resists the hegemonic impulse to produce one "official" story. Nora later articulates this epistemological incompleteness when she reflects: "Maybe that's all we ever get—the parts" (257). The dash interrupts the sentence, visually enacting fragmentation. Knowledge appears cumulative and partial rather than totalizing. Polyphony therefore functions as a structural refusal of closure: the novel resists converting lived experience into a unified national narrative. By allowing competing interpretations to coexist, Lalami destabilizes the dominance of institutional narratives and redistributes interpretive power to those who are usually unheard. In this fractured chorus, polyphony becomes more than a stylistic choice—it is the means by which the novel challenges the authority of any singular, hegemonic understanding of what Driss's death signifies.

Moreover, the fragmentation of the novel, characterized by its shifts in time, tone, and voice, mirrors the dislocations inherent in the experience of diaspora. This formal instability becomes visible in Nora's reflection near the novel's conclusion: "Home was wide-open spaces, pristine light, silence that wasn't quite silence. Home, above all, was the family who loved me" (282). The repetition of "Home" followed by redefinition signals reconstruction rather than inheritance. Belonging is not asserted as stable territory; it is narratively assembled. The polyphonic design allows "home" to emerge from dialogue, grief, and memory rather than from national myth. The experience of immigrants, characterized by the processes of translation and the presence of uncertainty, fundamentally shapes the narrative itself. Memory disrupts the linear progression of time; individual suffering intertwines with shared narratives. This framework illustrates the notion that identity in exile is inherently multifaceted and never fully

realized. The multiplicity of the novel is thus not merely decorative; it serves as a formal reflection of displacement. The fragmented narrative reflects the complex experience of navigating two worlds while struggling for acceptance in both.

Lalami redefines narrative as a collective endeavor by removing absolute power from individual narrators. In her fiction, truth is consistently depicted as communal, incomplete, and open to dispute. Nora acknowledges: "Maybe that's all we ever get—the parts" (257). This acknowledgment reflects the novel's view of knowledge as a collective and incomplete pursuit. Polyphony here is not decorative multiplicity; it is a structural refusal of singular authority. The novel contests the idea that a nation can be narrated through one coherent voice. Instead, it produces a dialogic America and an ongoing conversation among citizens, immigrants, believers, skeptics, and witnesses.

The framework utilized in *The Other Americans* reexamines the notion of resistance since Lalami's resistance is not defined by explicit rebellion or ideological stances, but rather by a nuanced insistence on the coexistence of diverse truths. The novel serves as a political instrument, reallocating narrative power and converting fiction into a space where underrepresented voices express their experiences in their own languages and according to their own definitions. This approach allows *The Other Americans* to transform its form into a vehicle for political discourse. The polyphonic design contests the notion that a nation can be defined by a single voice or experience; instead, it creates a dialogic America—an enduring conversation among citizens, immigrants, believers, skeptics, and outsiders. Lalami's counter-hegemonic art is grounded in her rejection of essentialism; she highlights that understanding, similar to belonging, ought to be perpetually open-ended. By incorporating voices that have been historically marginalized, the author reconfigures the "American story" into a collective chorus instead of a singular monologue—an endeavor characterized by speaking, remembering, and listening that seeks to bridge the divides established by power dynamics.

Subtle Dissent: Hidden Transcripts in the Margins of Everyday Life

As it was previously mentioned in the theoretical part, the hidden strategies employed by marginalized groups to maintain their dignity in the face of oppression do not directly challenge authority; rather, they gradually undermine it by fostering alternative moral frameworks, languages, and forms of solidarity. Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* emerges as a literary representation of infrapolitics—the nuanced, internal acts of self-assertion that take place implicitly without the awareness of the state, the market, and societal biases.

Lalami's novel, marked by polyphony and fragmentation, skillfully converts Scott's political actions into a literary examination of resilience. The narrators occupy the spaces between belonging and exclusion: an immigrant mother constrained by traditional gender norms; an undocumented worker who maneuvers through life with caution; a daughter who contests the idea of injustice as just coincidence. Individuals need to negotiate through what Scott describes as the "dialectic of disguise and surveillance," where their existence relies on their ability to articulate truth (14). Lalami transforms mundane actions into a means of political discourse. The simple manifestations of Maryam's religious devotion illustrate this dynamic. Early in the novel, after a public family dispute, Maryam describes how she withdraws from the escalating argument without surrendering her agency:

> For a long time after my husband died, I felt as if I were caught in a heavy fog, unable to see my way forward… my daughters started arguing about my husband's will. They

> couldn't even wait to get home to do it, they were yelling at each other in front of everyone, deaf to my pleas to lower their voices, and after a while I gave up, folded my hands in my lap, closed my eyes, and recited the Surat al-Nas, over and over again. (Lalami, *Other Americans* 74)

This portrayal of quiet may suggest a sense of submission; yet Scott underscores that some of the most effective forms of resistance operate "in disguised or culturally acceptable forms" that remain hidden beneath outward conformity (36–37). Maryam's prayer acts as a personal redefinition of her power, reaffirming her internal autonomy in a society that frequently views Muslim women with skepticism or fragility. This passage matters because it frames prayer as a chosen response to a situation where Maryam's voice is repeatedly overridden. The movement from pleading to recitation is not capitulation; it is a shift in register. She cannot control the public scene, but she can control her inward posture—"folded," "closed," "recited." The expression "over and over again" signifies not only a ritual pattern; it transforms religious recitation into an act of self-containment. Maryam's silence acquires substantial meaning within the framework of patriarchal and racialized scrutiny. By her deliberate avoidance of confrontation, she simultaneously opposes any form of imposition by her oppressors. Her faith embodies a private dialogue with the divine—an unwavering comprehension of existence. Lalami, in her depiction of Maryam, redefines prayer as a mode of counter-speech, establishing an escape within language where the individual can convey significance that surpasses oppressive influences.

Efraín, the undocumented worker, on the other hand, embodies another dimension of the hidden transcripts—what could be referred to as the language of survival. After Efraín witnesses the hit-and-run, his narration oscillates between moral clarity and survival logic, and Lalami renders that oscillation through an extended, sensory recollection rather than a neat moral statement:

> The only problem is the chain. That's what happened that night. I had to stop when the chain fell off… I got down on my knees and started draping the chain by feel… That's when I heard a car speeding toward the intersection and then a dull sound. Bump. Like that. I looked up, and the car was already making a turn onto the side street. The old man rolled off the hood and landed facedown in the gutter. And the car didn't even stop. It went on as if it had only hit a can or a plastic bottle… 'Did you forget what happened to Araceli?' I said… When they came to take her statement, they found out she didn't have her papers. Before she knew what was happening to her, Immigration was at her door. (14)

The narrative does not rush to the "lesson." It lingers on bodily labor—knees on the ground, hands "dirty," the chain restored "by feel." That slow, tactile buildup makes the collision feel like an interruption of survival itself, not merely a plot event. The line "Bump. Like that" compresses trauma into minimal speech, as if language cannot fully carry what has happened. Crucially, the Araceli memory shows why public truth-telling is unevenly distributed: the same act that signals civic responsibility for some (calling the police) becomes a deportation trigger for others. Efraín's reluctance therefore reads as an infrapolitical strategy—an ethics shaped by risk—rather than as a personal failure of courage. Every ellipsis signals uncertainty, while each instance of "I told myself" reflects an internal dialogue grappling with moral dilemmas and fear. As Scott notes, subordinate groups often develop a repertoire of dissimulation and self-protection, a set of gestures and speech strategies that allow them to endure domination without surrendering their sense of self (Scott 18). Efraín's internal monologue reflects the essence of

this culture; he employs invisibility as a means of self-defense, his language reflects the fearful traces of surveillance and scrutiny and the constant reluctance. Yet Lalami also shows that invisibility is costly: the hidden transcript does not disappear—it returns as obsessive recall, sharpening the very details Efraín tries to suppress:

> But another part of me scrupulously tracked all the mishaps and setbacks I had suffered since the night of the accident and held up the tally to me at every opportunity. The longer I refused to come forward, the longer the list grew… Perhaps memory is not merely the preservation of a moment in the mind, but the process of repeatedly returning to it, carefully breaking it up in parts and assembling them again… Several times a day, I returned to that moment on the highway, seeing it differently each time. (Lalami, *Other Americans* 126)

This passage deepens Scott's framework by revealing an interior dimension of hidden transcripts: silence does not produce peace, but repeated re-narration. The phrase "scrupulously tracked" reads like self-surveillance, as if Efraín has internalized the logic of policing. His memory "break[ing] it up in parts and assembling [it] again" echoes the novel's broader fragmentation, but here the fragmentation is psychological—an attempt to make the event survivable by reorganizing it. The result is not liberation but a growing "list" of perceived consequences, which makes his eventual disclosure feel less like sudden bravery than like a limit reached.

Efraín's eventual choice to testify to the police is not a glorious admission; rather, it represents a deliberate act of disclosure that jeopardizes partial invisibility in an effort to restore moral order—fully aware that truth, in this context, is a privilege not equally accessible. Lalami reconceptualizes, through this disclosure, political agency as the ability to determine the time and manner of one's vocalization, balancing the moral issues of truth against the strategies of survival.

The hidden transcripts in *The Other Americans* take an intellectual and ethical form through Nora, the artist-daughter who is unwilling to accept her father's death as merely natural or accidental. She insists: "I couldn't discount the arson, erase the small insults, untether the hit-and-run from the time and place in which it happened" (45), a challenge to what Scott refers to as "the official script of legitimacy." In the public transcript of American law and media, tragedies are often depoliticized and presented as isolated incidents. Nora rejects "accident" as an explanation and instead reads her father's death within a wider social pattern—a convergence of class, race, and xenophobia. In linking scattered signs, she exposes the violence hidden in claims of neutrality and resists the habit of separating events from their intersecting causes. Nora's father is a Moroccan immigrant; the incident was dismissed, but she attempted to take matters into her own hands and assert their existence. Her emphasis on sequence and context reinforces Scott's suggestion that subaltern groups must reconstruct the causal patterns behind injustice, especially when dominant narratives frame oppression as accidental or random (23). Hence, Nora's investigative drive reflects the reader's own endeavor within Lalami's multifaceted structure: to understand how individual narratives intertwine to uncover broader systemic truths. Her resistance is interpretative; she asserts that understanding itself constitutes a moral action.

In combining Maryam's devotion, Efraín's prudence, and Nora's doubt, Lalami creates a spectrum of dissent that encompasses emotional, linguistic, and intellectual dimensions. Every character in the novel speaks within what Scott describes as the tightly controlled boundaries of the public transcript, where only certain forms of expression are safe (136). Yet even inside

these constraints, they develop subtle modes of meaning. Maryam's quiet recitation becomes a way to anchor identity in faith; Efraín's reluctance and scattered ellipses register the pressure of fear and the politics of survival; and Nora's insistence on connecting events transforms personal pain into a form of critical insight. The characters' gestures create an implicit narrative of resistance that exists alongside the main storyline of the novel. Lalami encourages readers to engage with this unstated space to perceive what lies beyond the explicit dialogue that identifies power within subtle truths and internal consistencies.

Lalami's employment of a multiplicity of perspectives effectively embodies Scott's concept within the narrative structure since the novel tends to use alternating first-person chapters to reflect the fragmented and frequently conflicting voices that make up the hidden transcripts of society. Every voice contributes a dimension to the shared critique, yet they do not converge into a singular authoritative position. Instead, Lalami transforms the novel into a platform for exploring those concealed discourses that the wider community often overlooks.

At the end of *The Other Americans*, resistance transforms from a mere display of rebellion into an integral way of life for the characters. The faith of Maryam, the reluctant confession of Efraín, and the inquiry of Nora together assert the importance of narrating life according to their own perspectives. Lalami's characters may not achieve victory in the public sphere; instead, they endure in the private space, where memory, faith, and language remain unrestrained. Lalami transforms Scott's anthropological insight into a literary approach, suggesting that the most profound political stance can manifest in the subtlest ways. Hidden transcripts, in this sense, allow one to acknowledge invisibility as a form of agency and resilience as a source of power.

Living at the Intersections: Women, Faith, and Diasporic Struggle

If the previous section examined hidden transcripts as subtle strategies of survival, this section turns to the gendered dimensions of that survival. In *The Other Americans*, women do not simply endure marginalization; they inhabit overlapping pressures of faith, migration, motherhood, and public scrutiny. Lalami renders these intersections not through ideological declaration but through intimate, embodied scenes.

Female characters in *The Other Americans* are placed in what Kimberlé Crenshaw explains as "the intersectional location of women of color," a social space where gender, race, class, and religion interact to create unique forms of marginality. Lalami does not portray intersectionality as an immovable victimhood. Instead, she frames it as a site of knowledge and resilience where alternative belonging paradigms can develop. Her women actively interpret oppression, creating a "diasporic space" where memory, faith, and resistance coexist (Brah 208). The novel dramatizes how the gendered and diasporic elements merge to create counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal and colonial power structures, especially through Maryam and Nora, mother and daughter.

Maryam's early memories of childhood in Morocco reveal a maternal rebellion that carries considerable significance. The following quote reveals a hidden history of female involvement: "Karima Ait-Yaacoub was the voice of the student movement… they put her on all the posters, after she went to prison. My mother used to say that when Karima spoke at rallies, people stopped breathing" (Lalami, *Other Americans* 49). The addition of "people stopped breathing" transforms Karima from symbolic presence into embodied force. By recalling this figure, Maryam situates herself within a lineage of dissent that predates her migration. Her present restraint in California must therefore be read not as submission but as historical adaptation; resistance has changed form, not disappeared. It also implies that Maryam's current resistance was rooted in her youth's revolutionary struggles. The reference to Karima's imprisonment

symbolizes the repercussions of telling the truth under oppressive governments but also prepares Maryam's consciousness as a moral successor. Thus, Lalami re-inscribes women into both Moroccan and transnational diasporic history. Crenshaw's framework helps clarify this dynamic: intersectionality exposes the kinds of erasure that emerge when multiple systems of oppression overlap (1244). Maryam's recollection is personal and political because it defies erasure and reintroduces women's struggle to resistance.

In her later reflection she reveals: "After our friend Brahim was arrested, I told Driss we should move to California, but he disagreed. He was still in thrall to his Marxist ideas. He said things would change. I said I didn't want to wait for change" (Lalami, *Other Americans* 52). The previous statement redefines agency: Maryam is pragmatic while Driss is ideologically strict; he adheres to political idealism while she practices survival strategies. The juxtaposition between "things would change" and "I didn't want to wait" stages a quiet ideological debate. Driss's faith lies in historical progression; Maryam's faith lies in immediate protection. The refusal "I didn't want to wait" carries understated authority. Migration becomes her strategic intervention rather than reluctant accompaniment. Her decision to emigrate, seemingly credited to following her husband, appears to be autonomous and well-considered. In this sense, Lalami twists the gendered script: Maryam's pragmatism preserves the family, not Driss's ideological fanaticism. The novel challenges the masculinist myth of revolutionary heroism by arguing that feminine resilience, which is protective, adaptive, and strategic, constitutes a form of activism. Besides, Maryam's journey shows how faith and practicality turn surrender into rebellion; her religious and cultural determination gives her strength in the American diaspora. For instance, her insistence on Islamic funeral procedures for her spouse despite governmental and social pressures is deemed an assertion, not conservatism; her refusal to blindly and forcibly assimilate asserts her right to define dignity. She adds: "He would have wanted it this way. He always said that if anything happened to him, he wanted to be buried according to Muslim custom, facing Mecca" (102). She defied well-meaning people who suggested abiding by the Western system of burial. The specificity of "facing Mecca" grounds faith in spatial orientation, not abstraction.

In insisting on ritual continuity, Maryam resists the subtle expectation that assimilation requires religious dilution. Her tone is not defensive; it is declarative. The sentence structure—short, unembellished—mirrors her clarity. In a cultural context where Muslim identity is frequently politicized, this moment reframes faith as dignity rather than defiance. Intersectionality here operates through quiet steadfastness. In this vein, religion for Maryam now signifies autonomy, not restriction, so Lalami views and employs faith as a tool for women's self-definition. Western feminists generally view Islam as a barrier to female emancipation; Maryam's religiosity, by contrast, preserves identity in exile via ancestral roots, and her calm insistence on ritual continuity challenges Orientalist notions of religious women as passive carriers of ethnic tradition.

Nora's resistance is more overt: while Maryam endures, Nora opposes patriarchy through speech and explicit expression. She recollects her mother's words: "My mother once told me I should find a nice Muslim doctor. 'It would make things easier,' she said" (178). The phrase "make things easier" reveals generational survival logic. Marriage is framed not as romance but as protection. Yet Nora hears constraint in that ease. Her resistance to prescribed belonging signals the tension between inherited caution and second-generation autonomy. Intersectionality here unfolds within intimacy: love and regulation coexist in the same sentence. Nora's refusal to pursue art, develop cross-racial and religious relationships, and challenge received truths perpetuates her mother's previous influence in a different way. However, her defiance is difficult; Lalami ironically and compassionately illustrates this dilemma. Nora's effort to define herself beyond Moroccan conservatism and American conformity demonstrates

diasporic feminism's double struggle: visibility risks bringing about exoticization. Moreover, in admitting, "I had spent so much of my life trying to leave this place, and now I was not sure where else I belonged" (279), Nora asserts that diasporic feminism could be a space filled with uncertainty. Nora's struggle is not merely against patriarchal expectation but against the instability of belonging itself. Intersectionality here is geographical and emotional: departure and attachment coexist. Unlike Maryam's rooted continuity, Nora inhabits mobility as both freedom and loss.

The intergenerational dialogue presented by Lalami reframes feminism as a diasporic negotiation, not a Western product. Maryam's endurance and Nora's expression are complementary methods in a shared female survival history; their frequent disputes over religion, marriage, and belonging show resistance's changing language over time and space. Nora expresses herself through critique and invention, while Maryam uses memory and ritual. Both women fight the linear structure that excludes women of color by ignoring their multiple identities (Crenshaw 139–67). Their diverse modes of agency—piety, art, prayer, and speech—form a feminist praxis that spans East and West, tradition and modernity. Lalami subverts religion especially in this context. Islam is typically the Otherized element against which liberal secularism defines itself in American culture. Lalami opposes this derogatory hierarchy by making Maryam, a pious Muslim woman, practice a counter-hegemonic Islam based on compassion, justice, and memory. Thus, the novel attempts to reclaim spiritual authority from colonial distortion and internal patriarchy. Nora's art reflects this agency via reconfiguration: she turns grief into art; her painting is a means of remembering, like her mother's prayer. One woman resists erasure by spiritual ritual; the other, through portrayal. The novel's primary feminist solidarity is their reluctance to forget, whether by reciting Surat al-Nas or painting the emptiness left by her father's death. Either way, Lalami's narrative merges spiritual and secular resistance as moral perseverance.

The Other Americans presents intersectionality as convergence rather than fragmentation: gender, religion, and race do not operate as isolated categories but intersect to shape diasporic identity in tandem. Through Maryam and Nora, Lalami moves between two female subjectivities, two modes of struggle, and two forms of belonging, allowing their differences to illuminate rather than cancel one another. Maryam's resilience is rooted in ritual continuity and embodied memory, while Nora's resistance unfolds through questioning, artistic expression, and interpretive insistence. Their trajectories demonstrate that home, memory, and selfhood are not inherited states but ongoing negotiations shaped by migration, generational tension, and cultural scrutiny. In refusing neat closure, the novel affirms that resistance is not spectacle but persistence. Faith and dissent do not follow opposing paths; they can work alongside one another as strategies for sustaining dignity within overlapping systems of racialized and gendered surveillance. By allowing both women to inhabit distinct yet interconnected forms of agency, Lalami suggests that belonging itself must remain open, dialogic, and continually reimagined.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *The Other Americans* does more than represent diasporic marginality; it transforms narrative structure into a counter-hegemonic practice. By placing Said's theory of othering, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and Scott's hidden transcripts into dialogue, the analysis has demonstrated that Lalami's novel does not merely depict exclusion. It redistributes narrative authority itself. Through polyphony, fragmentation, ritual, and memory, the text resists the consolidation of a singular "American story" and instead constructs belonging as dialogic and contested.

Where much existing scholarship on Lalami has focused on themes of displacement, racialization, or civic conditionality, this study offers a structural reading. It shows how the novel's form enacts the very politics it describes. Polyphony is not decorative multiplicity; it is a deliberate refusal of epistemic centralization. Silence is not absence; it is strategy. Faith is not a leftover tradition from the past; it is agency. By grounding these claims in sustained close reading, this article demonstrates how narrative technique becomes a site of resistance within contemporary Arab-American fiction.

In engaging with recent criticism on diasporic belonging and post-9/11 representation, this study extends the discussion by foregrounding gendered and generational negotiations as integral to counter-hegemonic practice. Maryam's ritual continuity and Nora's interpretive defiance are not opposing models of feminism but interconnected responses to overlapping systems of scrutiny. The novel therefore reframes intersectionality as lived convergence rather than theoretical abstraction.

Future scholarship may build upon this approach by examining how polyphonic form operates across a broader corpus of Arab-American and Muslim diasporic writing, particularly in relation to surveillance, memory, and intergenerational transmission. Comparative studies might further explore how narrative multiplicity challenges national mythologies beyond the American context. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of how contemporary fiction negotiates power not only through thematic content but through narrative structure.

Ultimately, Lalami's narrative in *The Other Americans* is bound through dialogue and discourse rather than forced and hegemonic ideology, her literature converts storytelling into a moral field where the voiceless articulate and the readers have a responsibility to listen. *The Other Americans* elevates the subtle expressions of resilience, redefining the political by illustrating that power is contested not only in public demonstrations, but also through the relentless determination and willingness of individuals who refuse to be marginalized.

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