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"You've Already Agreed to the Terms of Service": Surveillance Capitalism, the Data Double, and Resistance in Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*

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ABSTRACT

This article provides the first surveillance studies analysis of Laila Lalami's speculative novel *The Dream Hotel* (2025), which depicts a near-future America where the Crime Prevention Act authorizes indefinite detention of individuals flagged by predictive algorithms as imminent risks. Drawing on Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Ruha Benjamin's New Jim Code, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics—supplemented by theories of the surveillant assemblage, the state of exception, and racializing surveillance—the article argues that the novel's central concern is the gap between the person and the data double: the statistical surrogate that governs its subject while remaining inaccessible to challenge or self-knowledge. Six close readings trace how this gap is retroactively authorized by terms of service, institutionalized as carceral governance, technically produced through surveillant assemblage, and racially constructed through coded inequity. The same gap becomes the space of resistance: in individual tactics of evasion, coded speech, collective labor refusal, and solidarity that the risk score cannot prevent. The analysis tracks the way Sara Hussein's archival consciousness enables her to recognize the data double as a selection rather than a portrait, and her dream journal as a counter-archive reclaiming interior life from behavioral surplus extraction. The novel reveals both the totality of algorithmic governance and the human remainder it cannot eliminate.

KEYWORDS

Surveillance Capitalism

Data Double

Algorithmic Detention

New Jim Code

Everyday Resistance

Archival Consciousness

Introduction

The Dream Hotel (2025), Laila Lalami's most recent novel, opens with a direct address that is simultaneously a sales pitch and a legal maneuver: "You're a good person; if you were in a position to stop disaster, you probably would" (2). The passage catalogs preventable violence before concluding: "Picture the women. Picture the children. What if you could save them from these monsters? You don't have to do anything; you've already agreed to the terms of service" (2). The prologue performs a specific kind of ideological work, framing comprehensive surveillance as a moral imperative while burying its operative mechanism, data extraction, inside the mundane ritual of clicking "I agree." By invoking the terms of service, Lalami establishes her novel's central concern: how the data practices of surveillance capitalism combine with securitization discourse to produce regimes of pre-crime detention that claim benevolence while enacting violence.

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Gary Marx's foundational analysis of the "new surveillance" clarifies this dynamic. Unlike earlier surveillance projects that sought reform through the constant visibility of individuals, the new surveillance relies on remote data collection, is more likely to involve manipulation, and goes beyond the individual suspect to "categories of interest" ("What's New" 15). The terms of service are the perfect symbol of this transformation: a moment of pseudo-consent that masks comprehensive, automated data capture. The novel follows Sara Tamallawt Hussein, a historian of postcolonial Africa and archivist at the Getty Museum, who is detained at Madison retention center after an algorithm flags her as "an imminent risk" (37) based on data aggregated from a neuroprosthetic sleep monitor, social media posts, her cousin's criminal record, and her dreams. Sara has committed no crime and faces no formal charges; she is held indefinitely inside what attendants insist is "a retention center" rather than "a prison or a jail," retained "only until your forensic observation is complete" (4). The linguistic evasion is exemplary of how surveillance systems obscure their violence through euphemism. It points toward the novel's deepest structural concern: Sara is not governed as a person but as a data double, a statistical surrogate assembled from discrete flows that bears her name, circulates in institutional centers of calculation, and determines her liberty, yet answers to none of her self-knowledge or lived experience.

The Dream Hotel marks at once a continuity and a departure in Lalami's literary project. Her earlier fiction challenges colonial historiography and orientalist stereotypes through historical revision and multiperspectival narration; this novel extends her engagement with institutional violence and marginalized voices into the domain of algorithmic governance. It depicts a near-future America where the Crime Prevention Act (CPA), passed after a mass shooting at the Super Bowl halftime show (37), authorizes the Risk Assessment Administration (RAA) to identify and detain individuals deemed likely to commit future crimes based on predictive algorithms processing comprehensive behavioral data. The shift from historical to speculative fiction enables Lalami to theorize contemporary surveillance practices by extrapolating their logical conclusions, revealing how technologies marketed as convenient services become instruments of carceral control. Sara's professional experience with history and archives is not incidental to this project. It gives her a critical framework for recognizing what the RAA's database does and does not capture, and for understanding that any archive, however vast, is not flawless. Her archival consciousness becomes the foundation of her resistance, informing both her dream journal and her analysis of the strike's strategic logic.

Despite the growing scholarly attention to surveillance studies, the relationship between literature and surveillance has been underestimated. David Rosen and Aaron Santesso confirm there is "a serious deficiency in the field: not taking account, and certainly not the right kind of account, of literature and literary culture" (385). The gap matters because "literary fiction — in the broadest sense — has tackled the theme of surveillance in a way that parallels and complements ideas being developed in the social sciences," doing so "in a somewhat more nuanced way than cinematic fiction" while acknowledging "the increased complexity of surveillance since *Nineteen Eighty Four*" (Nellis 394). Andrea Brighenti adds that surveillance literature provides crucial insights into "contemporary visibility regimes" and "issues of social visibility and invisibility" (138). Analyzing the specific visibility regimes at play in Madison, this article shows how surveillance is not merely a metaphor but a lived, architectural reality for the novel's detainees, and how Lalami's narrative dramatizes the forms of resistance that remain possible within that architecture.

The central argument proceeds through several interconnected claims. Madison retention center is a site where surveillance capitalism's behavioral surplus extraction combines with necropolitical control to produce spaces of permanent suspicion. The novel reveals how subjects are fragmented into data doubles through neuroprosthetic monitoring and algorithmic

processing, creating a gap between person and statistical surrogate that the system exploits as its primary instrument of power. The Crime Prevention Act and its enforcement apparatus reproduce racialized and classed hierarchies through ostensibly neutral technical systems, instantiating what Ruha Benjamin terms the New Jim Code. Yet, even as the novel acknowledges the systemic nature of these constraints, it shows that Sara's archival consciousness and the detainees' collective solidarity constitute viable, if precarious, forms of resistance to algorithmic reduction, operating precisely in the gap that the data double cannot close. To date, no scholarly study has examined *The Dream Hotel* through the lens of surveillance studies, and this article aims to fill that gap.

Literature Review

Lalami's fiction has consistently engaged with questions of marginalization, power, and resistance to dominant narratives, and this body of scholarship provides the literary-critical context within which *The Dream Hotel*'s innovations become legible. *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* generated important scholarship on migration and mobility. Mariangela Palladino argues that the novel "disrupts dominant migration narratives by foregrounding (im)mobility and its transformative potential," showing how characters "experience empowerment and agency" even through failed migration attempts and forced immobility (6). Kimberly Segall centers gender and religious identity, arguing the novel "de-imperializes gender by re-reading immigrant stories through the religious identifications of female protagonists" (7). Brahim Barhoun and Laila Bourha draw attention to Lalami's refusal to reduce migration to simple narratives of departure and arrival, tracing her portrayal of the migrant's desperation across "the different stages of the migration journey: before moving abroad, while being in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and after settling on the other side of the borders" (23).

Secret Son (2010) depicts the struggles of Youssef El Mekki, a young Moroccan man navigating class inequality, political corruption, and the false promises of upward mobility in Casablanca, anticipating Lalami's later engagement with institutional violence by exposing how state power and economic structures conspire to foreclose possibilities for marginalized subjects. *The Moor's Account* (2014) received sustained attention for its "revisionist approach towards history" that assigns "narrative agency to a Muslim African historical figure who was part of the Spanish Narvaez expedition to America but was denied the opportunity to record his personal testimony" (Leila Farahani 2). Jehan Salam finds it a text that "depicts subaltern resistance and resilience against colonialism" and underscores "the novel's potential to rewrite the history of marginalized groups by giving voice to figures like Mustafa/Estebanico, who asserts his Muslim, Moroccan identity" (8). These readings position Lalami's work within broader postcolonial projects of epistemic decolonization, projects whose archival dimension is directly continuous with Sara Hussein's professional formation as a historian and digital archivist.

The Other Americans (2019) prompted studies on contemporary diasporic experience. Abdellah El Boubekri posits that the novel "creatively intertwines with major scholarly turns in diasporic literary criticism, moving from tropes of homesickness to transnationalism," and "grapples with white hegemonic spatiality and politics, intensifying unsettled identity issues for minorities" (9). Fitri Febrina examines how it "challenges prejudice and orientalist perceptions against Muslims and US-Muslims" via its representation of "Islamic tenets and values" (15). Mohammed Alami identifies a broader "transatlantic turn" in Lalami's recent work, contending that *The Moor's Account* and *The Other Americans* shift "the focus of transnational

constructions of identity in North African writing from the Afro-Euro trajectory toward the transatlantic formation in relation to Arab and African racial and cultural ones" (30). In the nonfiction *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America* (2020), Lalami argues that citizenship functions as a conditional status for those marked as other, tracing how belonging is perpetually withheld from Arab Americans, Muslims, and immigrants who must continuously prove their worthiness while white Americans enjoy an unearned presumption of it. Themes of conditional personhood and institutional suspicion provide the groundwork for her exploration of algorithmic detention.

The Dream Hotel extends these concerns into new terrain while maintaining continuity with Lalami's career-long engagement with marginalization and institutional violence. Where her earlier works challenge colonial historiography, depict border surveillance and migration control, explore everyday experiences of Muslim Americans navigating prejudice, and analyze the lived experience of precarious belonging, *The Dream Hotel* brings all of those issues together under the sign of algorithmic governance. The novel's speculative mode enables Lalami to theorize how suspicion becomes automated and institutionalized, and how precarious belonging is not merely experienced but architecturally enforced in the space of the retention center. Crucially, the novel's most significant formal innovation relative to Lalami's earlier work is the figure of the data double: Sara is not merely surveilled but replaced, for institutional purposes, by a statistical surrogate she cannot access or contest. This innovation demands a theoretical apparatus drawn from surveillance studies rather than postcolonial literary criticism alone, an apparatus that the following section establishes before the close reading demonstrates its analytical power.

Surveillance studies have developed a rich theoretical tradition for analyzing exactly the mechanisms that *The Dream Hotel* depicts. The foundational works of Michel Foucault on disciplinary power, extended by Shoshana Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism, Benjamin's analysis of the New Jim Code, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, provide the primary analytical lenses. Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson's surveillant assemblage, Simone Browne's racializing surveillance, and Giorgio Agamben's state of exception supply supplementary frameworks of particular relevance to the novel's carceral architecture. On the resistance side, John Gilliom and Torin Monahan's account of everyday resistance, Michel de Certeau's theory of tactics, Eric Stoddart's discursive-disclosive ethics, and David Lyon's ethics of care provide the vocabulary for reading what Sara and the other detainees manage to do within the constraints the system imposes. As Mike Nellis observes, the surveillance concepts bequeathed by Orwell and Kafka "long ceased to be adequate for grasping the varied forms, political complexity, multiple uses, ambivalent intentions and contradictory consequences of contemporary surveillance" (394). It is precisely this inadequacy that makes *The Dream Hotel* and its engagement with surveillance studies so timely.

Theoretical Framework

Three interlocking theoretical frameworks govern this analysis: Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Benjamin's New Jim Code, and Mbembe's necropolitics. Rather than applying these in sequence, the article reads them as a convergent system, each illuminating a different face of the same structure. A set of resistance theorists, including Gilliom and Monahan, de Certeau, Stoddart, and Lyon, operates throughout in productive tension with that structure, locating the human capacity that the system cannot fully foreclose.

Zuboff's surveillance capitalism is "a voracious and utterly novel commercial project" that unilaterally converts human experience into raw material, using machine intelligence to anticipate what people will do now, soon, and later (5). The project is animated by what Zuboff

calls "instrumentarian power": "*the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control*" (352, emphasis in original). Instrumentarian power depends on "one-way mirrors" that render users comprehensively visible while platform operations remain obscured (299). The resulting asymmetry, total visibility for the subject and opacity for the institution, is captured in what Zuboff terms the "shadow text" (185): a hidden account of behavioral surplus, derived from experience but unavailable to its source. Roger Clarke's concept of "dataveillance" reinforces the stakes of this asymmetry: when data are used outside their original context, the probability of misinterpreting them increases greatly, and "the individual's capacity to defend him or herself or to prosecute his or her innocence" is correspondingly compromised (506–07). In *The Dream Hotel*, Madison's detainees are rendered comprehensively visible while the algorithmic systems interpreting their data remain opaque. They are exiled from the shadow texts composed in their names and are governed by risk scores they cannot access or contest.

The shadow text has a material correlate in Haggerty and Ericson's concept of the "data double." The surveillant assemblage, that convergence of heterogeneous surveillance technologies into a single functional system, operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into discrete flows which are then reassembled into a statistical surrogate (606). Crucially, this data double is not a representation of the real individual but "a form of pragmatics: differentiated according to how useful [it is] in allowing institutions to make discriminations among populations" (614). Sara Hussein, detained for dreams she cannot control and a risk score she cannot challenge, is to the system a data double, a surrogate that bears her name yet answers to none of her self-knowledge or lived experience. That gap between person and data double is the structural foundation of both the system's power and the possibility of resisting it.

Benjamin's New Jim Code proposes that this data double is racially constructed. Benjamin argues that the New Jim Code consists in "*the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era*" (5, emphasis in original). Systems claiming neutrality encode inequity by replicating patterns of racial segregation, producing what Benjamin calls "coded inequity," which is a type of discrimination that is harder to detect, easier to deny, and more difficult to resist than its explicit precursors (11). Allan Sekula's analysis of nineteenth-century criminal identification systems as a "shadow archive" positioning disadvantaged individuals as "embodiments of the unworthy" (10) provides the historical genealogy. The RAA algorithm is a direct descendant of Bertillon's filing cabinet, automating sorting that was always already racialized. The consequence, as Oscar Gandy's concept of "cumulative disadvantage" makes precise, is that historical disadvantages accumulate over time and across categories of experience, producing racial effects within a society that may have formally renounced racial animus (12). Browne's concept of "racializing surveillance", those moments "when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries and bodies along racial lines" (16), names what results: a technology that actively produces and reifies racial categories rather than merely reflecting them.

Mbembe's necropolitics provides the third framework. Extending Foucault's biopower, the state's capacity to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (138), Mbembe argues that contemporary sovereignty operates through creating "death-worlds" where "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40). Necropolitics encompasses "the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11), determining "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (27). Madison's detention of people based on algorithmic predictions rather than criminal acts reflects this logic.

Its detainees occupy the liminal status that Agamben analyzes as bare life in *Homo Sacer*. They are neither prisoners serving sentences nor citizens enjoying rights, included in the surveillance apparatus only through exclusion from political meaning (82). Didier Bigo illuminates the democratic cost: "Security, when it forms exceptional measures beyond the realm of normal politics and the rule of law, paves the way for the destruction of democracy and its perversion into a permanent state of emergency, an everyday state of exception without end" (277). The three primary frameworks converge here: surveillance capitalism constructs the data double; the New Jim Code ensures that the data double is racially sorted; necropolitics transforms that sorting into a regime of social death.

Against this system, the resistance theorists assembled here do not form a symmetrical counter-system but locate, in different registers, what the primary frameworks cannot account for. Gilliom and Monahan distinguish "opposition" (public efforts to block or significantly change policy) from "resistance" (quieter, informal practices that seek to circumvent or disrupt surveillance systems) (405), a distinction essential to mapping the range of responses the novel depicts. Their account draws on de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which attends to the ways people operate within and poach upon structural constraints through fluid, agential tactics. In explicit contradistinction to Foucault's emphasis on discipline, de Certeau calls for scholarly attention to tactics as an affirmational response, asking not how discipline works but how people work within disciplinary structures, "conforming to them only in order to evade them" (xiv). The distinction between strategy, exercised by institutions from stable positions of power, and tactic, exercised by the relatively powerless from within the institution's own space, using its infrastructure against its purposes, is the most precise analytical tool available for reading the forms of resistance *The Dream Hotel* catalogs.

Stoddart, following Foucault's ethical writings, develops a discursive-disclosive approach that asks not only the normative question "What to do?" but the subjective question "Who am I?" The answer, Foucault contends, lies in the relationships one has with oneself through time: the ethical task is to understand what is shaping the self in order to identify scope for agency. This framework explains Sara's dream journal and archival thinking as practices of self-constitution rather than mere record, a prior condition of collective resistance. Stoddart's own contribution, "the skill of (in)visibility; the skill, within constraints, of managing how we make ourselves visible, less visible or even invisible within social space" (374), names the strategic navigation between exposure and concealment that the novel's resisters perform. Finally, Lyon articulates an ethics of care directly relevant to the novel's ending: "an appropriate ethic begins by hearing the voice of the Other. And social care starts with acceptance — not suspicion of the Other" (166). Together, these frameworks locate, in the novel's closing movement toward collective solidarity, a relational capacity that the data double cannot model and that surveillance capitalism cannot extract.

Close Reading: The Architecture of Algorithmic Detention

The close reading that follows is organized around six sections, each making the next possible. The frameworks established above are assumed rather than reintroduced; references are analytic applications rather than definitional summaries. The governing thread throughout is the gap between person and data double, the gap that the system exploits and that resistance, in all its forms, inhabits.

1. Retroactive Authorization

The novel's prologue performs an act of interpellation that is simultaneously an act of legal fiction:

> You're a good person; if you were in a position to stop disaster, you probably would. Whenever a woman's murder captures headlines, your first instinct is to ask why no one did anything about the cuts and bruises for which she sought treatment, the boyfriend's repeated violations of the court's restraining order, the alarming texts he sent … Picture the women. Picture the children. What if you could save them from these monsters? You don't have to do anything; you've already agreed to the terms of service. (2)

The closing sentence performs the novel's founding operation. Consent has already been given. The construction of the data double, and all that follows from it, is authorized by an agreement signed before the novel begins. In Marx's understanding, the new surveillance integrates automated data collection "into routine activity," rendering it invisible and effectively involuntary (15). The terms of service are the ritual through which this invisibility is juridically secured: not consent freely given but consent presupposed, retroactive, and irrevocable.

What the terms of service authorize is not the monitoring of Sara Hussein as a person but the construction of a statistical surrogate. The prologue's emotional machinery, "picture the women," "picture the children," is Zuboff's instrumentarian power in its purest form. It wraps the carceral infrastructure of data extraction in the language of heroic protection, making the one-way mirror invisible behind an appeal to moral feeling. Bigo's analysis of anticipatory security completes the picture: the more data the state gathers preemptively, the greater the security offered, which makes comprehensive data collection not only legally permitted but morally obligatory as well (277). The novel's entire architecture follows from this fait accompli. By the time Sara arrives at Madison, a data double built from two hundred sources already speaks for her, and she has, technically, authorized it.

2. Commercial Infrastructure and Carceral Governance

The Crime Prevention Act converts the data double from a commercial instrument into an instrument of state detention. Passed after a mass shooting at the Super Bowl halftime show killed 118 people on live television (37), the CPA authorizes "broad access to private records" and permits authorities to use "commercial data-analytics tools" in their investigations (37). Functionally, this is the annexation of surveillance capitalism's existing infrastructure by carceral power. The behavioral surplus OmniCloud had accumulated for commercial purposes becomes the raw material of risk scores that determine liberty.

Agamben's state of exception names the legal form this takes. The CPA suspends the ordinary legal distinction between the accused and the innocent, creating a new category of person that Agamben terms bare life: "included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" (8). Sara becomes *homo sacer* in this precise sense. She is subject to indefinite detention but is unable to access the protections of criminal procedure. When she loses her library access in retaliation for organizing the strike, she reflects that "the library is her only connection to the free world; losing it removes any pretense about her situation. She has no rights at Madison, despite what the handbook may say; she has privileges only, which can be revoked at signs of defiance" (447). The distinction between rights and privileges is exactly Agamben's distinction between political existence and bare life.

Through Safe-X's ability to extend detentions without judicial oversight (38), the privatization of detention authority showcases the convergence of the three primary frameworks at their most concrete. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism provides the infrastructure; Benjamin's New Jim Code ensures it sorts populations along racial lines while claiming objectivity; Mbembe's necropolitics names the outcome: populations rendered socially dead, their data doubles circulating in institutional spaces while their persons are warehoused in facilities whose profit depends on continued detention. Senior Attendant Hinton's declaration to Sara captures the theological dimension of this convergence: "The algorithm knows what you're thinking of doing, before even you know it. That's a scientific fact" (72). The data double is not merely a surrogate for Sara; in the system's logic, it is more authoritative about her intentions than her own consciousness.

3. The Surveillant Assemblage at Madison

Madison's surveillance infrastructure replaces the visible apparatus of incarceration with the continuous technical production of the data double. There are "no watchtowers, no steel doors, no concertina wire" (13), and Safe-X's palo verde trees "shield part of the main building from view and, especially when they're blooming, add to its charm" (138). Guardian cameras with emotion-tracking software monitor movement and expression (12); temperature sensors generate locational data; neuroprosthetics scan neural activity during sleep; Tekmerion devices allow attendants to file behavioral reports in real time (96). Each captures a different flow from Sara's body and routes it into OmniCloud, where flows are assembled into the surrogate that the RAA addresses as her risk.
The insatiability of this process is structural:

> Sara looks up to find Hinton watching them — as if the neuroprosthetics, the temperature sensors, and the cameras equipped with Guardian emotion-tracking software aren't enough. The OmniCloud is never satisfied with the data it already has. It always seeks more, in new formats or from new sources, including human collectors. (18)

Hinton's filing reports on his Tekmerion is not supplementing the cameras but feeding a different flow into the assemblage. No single technology suffices because data doubles are never complete, and incompleteness justifies further collection. The neuroprosthetic makes this logic most intimate. Each morning begins with a scan: Hinton "points the scanner at the back of her skull, and the scanner gives a beep, indicating that the neuroprosthetic on Retainee M-7493002 [username: Sara T. Hussein] hasn't been tampered with overnight" (6). The brackets in that designation tell the whole story: Sara's chosen name is syntactically subordinated to her institutional identifier, which is itself merely a handle for the data double the system addresses. When Officer Segura tells her that dreams are "among the two hundred data sources used by the crime-prediction algorithm," she thought "that she might be hallucinating" (98). However, the shocking truth is that even the unconscious has been recruited into the construction of the surrogate.

4. Archival Consciousness and Individual Tactics

The assemblage described in the preceding section does not merely precede resistance; it produces the conditions of its possibility. The gap it opens between person and data double is not a space that emerges once surveillance has done its work, but one that is constituted

alongside it, making resistance structurally contemporaneous with the apparatus rather than simply reactive to it.

Sara's immediate internalization of this extraction, "So who is she to say that her dreams have no meaning? If her dreams about Elias raised concerns with the RAA, then perhaps she ought to look for the reason within herself, and stop blaming the algorithm for her own impulses" (136), illustrates Benjamin's coded inequity at its most insidious: resistance is foreclosed because the subject begins to doubt herself rather than the system. The data double has been so thoroughly naturalized that Sara momentarily inhabits its perspective on herself.

It is at this precise point that the first counter-practice emerges, and it does so from within the institution's own infrastructure, not against it from outside. This is de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactic made concrete. Madison operates strategically. It commands the space, sets the rules, and accumulates the data. What Sara and the other women do is tactical: they operate in the spaces and moments that the strategy produces but cannot fully control. The laundry room is Madison's own facility. Its "steady thrum of the machines means they can have private conversations, which is almost impossible anywhere else at Madison" (81). The thrum is not Sara's resource; it is Madison's noise, produced by Madison's machines, but she poaches on it, turning the institution's own infrastructure into a space of communication the institution cannot monitor and working within the cracks of the imposed order.

Sara's dream journal operates in the same register but at a more intimate level, a tactic applied to the innermost space the assemblage has colonized. The RAA treats dreams as behavioral surplus; the journal refuses this appropriation, claiming the same dream-content as material for self-knowledge. In Foucault's ethical formulation, and Stoddart's elaboration on it, this is the practice of asking "Who am I?" rather than accepting the institution's answer. It is understanding what is shaping the self in order to identify the scope for agency. Sara's archival training makes this practice both natural and analytically precise. As a digital archivist who knows that any database, however vast, is "hopelessly limited in its ability to document the lives of ordinary people" (89), she understands that the RAA's data double is not a portrait of her but a selection, indexed by the terms the algorithm uses and blind to everything else. The journal is her counter-archive: "It has taught her to be in conversation with herself, to pay closer attention to the inner workings of her mind, to notice where imagination draws from emotion or intellect" (125). Where the data double answers the question of who Sara is with a risk score, the journal answers it with an exploration of her inner being that no algorithm has the ability to mine.

5. Racial Construction of the Data Double

The data double encodes more than just Sara's individual history. In fact, it encodes the racial history that precedes her. Officer Segura's pronunciation of her name on arrival, "'Sara Tamallawt Hussein,' the officer said, drawing out every syllable. 'Did I pronounce that right?'" (24), performs what Browne terms "branding": the marking of a racialized subject for special institutional attention (93). The name is already a data point that activates what Jasbir Puar calls the "violent chaotic shuttling" between the statistical informational ontologies of "Muslim" and "terrorist" (367). No explicit bias is required; the assemblage does the work.

Her cousin's criminal record raises Sara's score through genetic association: "The [DNA] data had been harvested and now it was being used to tie her to her knucklehead cousin. Zach was, what, forty-one or forty-two?" (70). This is Gandy's cumulative disadvantage operationalized in algorithmic form. The disproportionate criminalization of communities of color is encoded in the criminal records that seed the training data, producing risk scores that

extend detention for people like Sara and generate new records that feed future algorithms. The loop is self-reinforcing and self-concealing. Browne's racializing surveillance names what it produces: a technology that exercises "a 'power to define what is in or out of place'" (16), constructing the statistical population of risky individuals as racially marked through the accumulated weight of data that racial history has already sorted.

The economic function of this racial sorting is that it produces differentiated populations for differentiated extraction. Those marked "CLEAR" remain consumers whose behavioral surplus feeds commercial platforms; those marked "QUESTIONABLE" become detainees whose labor generates revenue for Safe-X and whose dream-data generates behavioral surplus for Dreamsaver Inc. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism reaches its logical conclusion: every population, at every point in the sorting hierarchy, yields extractable value. The racial marking is not a failure of the system but a feature of it, the mechanism by which populations are allocated to their appropriate extraction functions. Sara's reflection names the political consequence with precision: "We blame the algorithm for our predicament, she thinks, but the algorithm was written by people. That's who put us at Madison. People, not machines" (86). Her archival training sharpens this recognition further. She knows that no indexing system is neutral, that every classification scheme reflects the choices of the people who built it, and that those choices have consequences for whose lives are rendered legible and whose are not.

6. Collective Resistance and the Unclosable Gap

The novel's institutional landscape has been deliberately stripped of formal mechanisms of accountability. The RAA's algorithms are protected as "proprietary sources" (125); courts define "retention as precaution, not punishment" (116); grievances are to be resolved "informally" (252); and private contractors extend detention without judicial oversight (10). Bigo's permanent state of exception requires the erosion of exactly these mechanisms (277). The question the novel poses is whether resistance remains possible when formal redress has been systematically foreclosed. The answer it arrives at is affirmative, but only because the gap between person and data double that the system exploits is also the gap through which resistance can operate.

The tactics established in section 4 intensify as the novel progresses. Victoria Aguilar's sabotage of Madison's Guardian cameras, going beyond ripping the cords to also breaking the lenses and cutting off the emergency batteries so that every one of the twenty-two cameras will have to be replaced (391), creates two weeks of partial invisibility, a space in which women "speak in whispers, look for camera blind spots, pass contraband through toilets or showers" (312). When retaliation makes even ordinary language dangerous, coded speech takes over: Sara is "afraid to use words like strike or boycott and must resort to codes like crossword or cricket" (453). These are all de Certeau's tactics, poaching on the institution's own space, using its silences and blind spots, conforming to its surface rules only in order to evade them. They work precisely because the data double, however comprehensive, cannot fully close the cracks of the imposed order: it can model risk scores, but it cannot model the meaning of the word "crossword" spoken in a laundry room.

The strike itself shifts register from tactic to what Gilliom and Monahan distinguish as opposition: a public, organized refusal that seeks to change rather than merely evade. Sara articulates its logic: "We have to stop working. This place can't run without us, and the longer they hold us, the more money they make… But if we refuse to work, their costs go up, and their revenue goes down" (338). This is not merely an economic calculation; it is an assertion that the data double cannot perform Sara's labor. The surrogate governs her, but it cannot replace her. When Toya declares "You're free to work … and we're free to not" (379), she captures the

essential point: the freedom the system grants, to work, to comply, to contribute to one's own detention, as Sara puts it (222), is also, by its own logic, a freedom to refuse. The strike makes visible what coded inequity conceals: the human labor sustaining the system. The data double has no hands.

The document Sara must sign to release "Safe-X of legal, medical, and financial liability for the time she has spent at Madison" and to accept "not to disparage the company" (478) crystallizes the system's final move: purchasing individual exit at the price of collective abandonment and future silence. The gag order is the data double's last word. Sara's nightmare on her first night home makes the persistence of the surrogate visceral. In the dream, Hinton tells her, "Why would I do that? I have you right here on this screen" (489), refusing her release because the data double still flags her as retained. Even physically free, the surrogate persists, continuing to circulate in centers of calculation, adjusting her risk score for every contact she maintains.

The call to Toya is the novel's answer to that nightmare. Sara's father and husband stare. She should think of her risk score, stay away from QUESTIONABLES, but Sara understands something they cannot: "What they don't see, what they can never truly see unless they had been like her confined and controlled, is that isolation is the opposite of salvation, that she owes her release to the women who joined together to say no" (493).

Freedom, she tells them, is "teeming and complicated and, yes, risky, and it can only be written in the company of others" (493). Lyon's ethics of care is here made into action: "an appropriate ethic begins by hearing the voice of the Other. And social care starts with acceptance — not suspicion of the Other" (166). The data double governs Sara as an isolated individual, a risk score, a set of flagged associations, and a statistical profile. It cannot model the recognition that isolation is the opposite of salvation, because that recognition exists in the relational space the surrogate cannot reach. When Sara takes her father's phone and "types Toya's name, then hits CONNECT" (494), she exercises what Stoddart calls the skill of (in)visibility in its most radical form. She is making herself visible to Toya and accepting the risk score consequence because she has decided that the data double's verdict on whom she is permitted to contact is not the final word on who she is.

Her archival consciousness underlies this final act as much as her solidarity does. Sara knows, from a career spent understanding what archives can and cannot capture, that the data double assembled in her name is not her, that it is indexed by the terms the algorithm uses, blind to everything those terms do not cover. The call to Toya inhabits that blindness. *The Dream Hotel* does not end with liberation: the OmniCloud still tracks, the risk score still calculates, and the institutions that authorized Madison remain intact. What has changed is that Sara now holds two things simultaneously: the knowledge that the system is total and the knowledge that it is not totalizing. The data double is comprehensive but not complete. It cannot close the gap between the surrogate and the person, cannot decode "crossword," cannot prevent the call to Toya, and cannot control her freedom to choose and act. In that incapacity, in what the surrogate cannot reach, the novel locates something more durable than just a program for liberation: the human remainder that algorithmic governance, however sophisticated, cannot eliminate.

Conclusion

The Dream Hotel constitutes a crucial intervention in contemporary literature's engagement with surveillance capitalism and algorithmic governance. By depicting a near-future America where the Crime Prevention Act authorizes pre-crime detention based on comprehensive behavioral data extraction, Lalami uncovers the carceral potentials latent in technologies

marketed as convenient services. The novel's central contribution is structural rather than merely thematic: the primary instrument of algorithmic power is not visibility as such but the gap between the person and the data double, the statistical surrogate that governs Sara Hussein's liberty while remaining inaccessible to her challenge or self-knowledge. It is this gap, and not simply the fact of being watched, that makes Madison's regime of detention so difficult to contest and so important to theorize.

The six sections of the close reading have traced how this gap is installed, institutionalized, technically produced, and racially constructed, before showing how it is inhabited, partially and precariously, by resistance. The prologue's terms of service retroactively authorize the data double's construction. The Crime Prevention Act converts that commercial infrastructure into carceral governance, producing bare life at the convergence of Zuboff, Agamben, and Mbembe. Madison's surveillant assemblage continuously feeds the surrogate. Sara's archival consciousness, trained to recognize what any indexing system cannot capture, grounds her first counter-practices: the laundry room as tactical space and the dream journal as counter-archive. The algorithm's racial construction, encoded through cumulative disadvantage rather than declared intention, reveals the data double to be a product of racial history as much as individual behavior. When collective resistance comes, it operates in the gap the data double cannot close, in the word "crossword," in the strike's assertion that the surrogate cannot perform Sara's labor, and finally in the call to Toya.

Where Zuboff demonstrates how commercial platforms extract behavioral surplus for prediction and targeted advertising, Lalami exposes how the same extraction practices enable predictive policing and indefinite detention. Where Ruha Benjamin demonstrates how algorithmic systems encode historical discrimination while claiming objectivity, Lalami shows how such systems produce spaces of permanent suspicion, making proving innocence formally impossible, when the burden of proof has been reversed before the subject knows it has been assumed. By showing how Sara's name, her cousin's criminal record, and her dreams are each processed as risk data without her knowledge or consent, Lalami dramatizes what Clarke deems to be the fundamental danger of dataveillance, the individual's inability to defend against the conclusions of a system whose operations remain opaque.

Sara's archival consciousness runs through all six sections as the thread connecting professional formation to political resistance. Her recognition that the RAA's database is not perfect in its attempt to scrutinize the daily activities of common people is not merely personal insight but a structural critique: no indexing system is neutral, every classification scheme reflects the choices of its builders, and the data double assembled in her name is a selection, not a portrait. This understanding grounds her final act, the call to Toya. By deliberately inhabiting the blind spot the algorithm cannot reach, she performs an act of resistance that is as much archivally informed as it is political. For surveillance studies, the novel demonstrates the value of literary representation for theorizing the phenomenological and political dimensions of monitoring that quantitative analysis may miss. The data double is comprehensive but not complete. It cannot decode "crossword," cannot model the recognition that isolation is the opposite of salvation, and cannot prevent the call to Toya. The novel's closing insight, therefore, is not utopian but structural: no matter how refined the predictive apparatus, something in human experience persistently exceeds what data can capture or governance can contain.

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