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# *The Dream Hotel*, by Laila Lalami. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 2025. 336 pp., ISBN: 978-0-593-31760-0.

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# Book Review

## *The Dream Hotel*, by Laila Lalami. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 2025. 336 pp., ISBN: 978-0-593-31760-0.

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Laila Lalami is a Moroccan-American novelist and professor whose fiction has consistently examined how legal, administrative, and social structures render certain individuals—migrants, colonized subjects, racialized others—vulnerable to institutional classification and exclusion. From *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), which portrays Moroccan migrants attempting to cross into Spain, to *Secret Son* (2009), *The Moor's Account* (2014)—a Pulitzer Prize finalist—and *The Other Americans* (2019), Lalami has repeatedly interrogated questions of belonging, legal precarity, historical erasure, and state power. Her nonfiction work, *Conditional Citizens* (2020), further explores the conditional nature of citizenship in the United States and the fragility of civic inclusion. *The Dream Hotel* (2025), her fifth work of fiction, marks a shift into speculative near-future fiction while extending her longstanding concerns with governance and institutional authority into the terrain of predictive detention and neurotechnological control. The novel can be read at the intersection of three literary traditions: the Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmare, the surveillance dystopian novel, and the theoretical novel that embeds its argument within narrative form.

The novel follows Sara Tamallawt Hussein, a Moroccan-American museum archivist returning to Los Angeles from a conference in London when she is flagged at passport control by Scout, an AI security system that assigns citizens "risk scores." Although she has no criminal record, Sara is deemed an imminent threat under the Crime Prevention Act and transferred to Madison, a privately run retention center housed in a former elementary school. Her score has been calculated through a matrix of financial records, social media activity, biometric data, and dream content harvested by the Dreamsaver Neuroprosthetic she once implanted to improve her sleep. Initially told that she will be held for twenty-one days, Sara gradually realizes that her detention is indefinite, governed not by past wrongdoing but by algorithmic predictions of crimes she might commit. As she adjusts to life inside Madison, participates in institutional labor, and ultimately joins a strike organized by fellow detainees, the novel traces her slow recognition that innocence carries no operative weight in a system structured around risk rather than evidence.

*The Dream Hotel* departs from dystopian traditions that rely on spectacle and instead stages domination through bureaucratic procedure. The Crime Prevention Act permits the preventative detention of individuals deemed likely to commit crimes, redefining confinement as precaution rather than punishment and thereby sidestepping procedural protections. Lalami's portrayal suggests that predictive detention is not an unprecedented innovation but an extension of established legal logics that separate confinement from conviction. Detention becomes managerial rather than juridical, framed as care rather than punishment, even as it produces identical material effects. The doctrine evokes prior legal precedent *Wong Wing v. United States* (1896), in which the Supreme Court permitted administrative immigration detention outside the criminal process, effectively allowing the state to confine individuals without the procedural protections that would apply to criminal punishment. Lalami maps this historical

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logic onto the novel's near-future detention apparatus, suggesting that the Crime Prevention Act is not a rupture but an extension of an existing legal tradition of precautionary confinement.

The Risk Assessment Administration calculates criminal potential through an expansive aggregation of data points: financial histories, familial networks, biometric signatures, online traces, and—most disturbingly—dream content. In extending governance into the unconscious, the novel does not merely borrow from prior discussions of dream life under authoritarianism; it reframes the unconscious itself as administrable territory. Here, crucially, the unconscious is not used metaphorically as an internal space but is instead shown to be a governable field, subject to the same administrative logics as physical movement or financial conduct. Accordingly, *The Dream Hotel* fits into a larger body of intellectual history that includes Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams* (1968), where she explores the role of dreaming during authoritarian regimes, as well as pre-modern interpretations of dreams (e.g., those attributed to Ibn Sirin,[1] and connects with contemporary critiques of voluntary servitude and carceral experimentation. Lalami also cites Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and *I, Pierre Rivière*, in addition to Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, as part of her explorations of institutions governing individuals through surveillance.

When Officer Segura asserts that "the algorithm is holistic" (47), the claim functions less as an explanation than as a closure. The multiplication of data sources becomes an epistemological shield. In this world, the proliferation of inputs does not deepen understanding but renders contestation impossible. The system appears comprehensive; therefore, it appears correct. Data becomes an ideological instrument, reversing the burden of proof so that the institution is presumed objective while the subject is presumed suspect. Glitches, backlogs, bureaucratic apathy, and procedural ad-hocism recur throughout the narrative, demonstrating that algorithmic control does not need to be internally coherent to exert power over subjects.

Madison reinforces this logic architecturally and linguistically. "The attendants never call the women prisoners. They say retainees, residents, enrollees, and sometimes program participants" (4). Euphemism does not soften violence; it reorganizes it. The terminology reframes indefinite confinement as participation in a program. Within this framework, Sara attempts to prove her innocence, only to discover that innocence has no ontological standing in a regime built on prediction. Her internal transformation is one of the novel's most devastating insights: she begins to question not whether she has committed a crime, but whether she possesses a latent criminal potential.

Sara's profession as an archivist intensifies this critique. Trained to analyze how institutional records are produced and decontextualized, she becomes subject to the same archival violence. Furthermore, this choice deepens Shoshana Zuboff's analysis in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* in a way that critical theory alone cannot achieve: it supplies the singular, embodied experience of a person trained to read documents who has now herself been reduced to one. While Zuboff's work provides a sociologically precise description of the macroeconomic structure of behavioral extraction, it does so at a level of abstraction that can be perceived as both totalizing and agent-less. Lalami substantiates this abstract architecture by giving it a name, a prison, and a single woman trained to read documents, but who is now reduced to one. This, in turn, enables the critique of surveillance capitalism to become both visceral and narratively legible and to contribute a new perspective on the question of how theory traverses disciplinary boundaries. The novel suggests that the problem is not simply that algorithms misinterpret individuals, but that institutions produce categories of misreadable persons and then punish subjects for inhabiting those categories. When risk becomes the ontological basis of governance, individuals are reduced to bundles of data points, and citizenship becomes a variable that can be toggled on and off.

The violence of this system is embedded less in spectacle than in repetition and contractual procedure. As Sara observes, "Madison is run like a factory. The conveyor belts move twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week" (221). The conveyor belt captures the temporal structure of predictive detention: continuous processing without resolution. Hearings are deferred. Privileges are revoked. Appeals disappear into administrative backlog. Injury is rendered grammatical error.

The novel's treatment of dreams marks its most formally ambitious intervention. When the narrative presents a debate over whether a dream can be considered as evidence, it is not merely a legal issue, but rather a commercial issue, because if dreams can be made intelligible, then they can be made profitable. Dreams represent behaviorally generated surplus, extracted from areas of life that should not be appropriable, and subsequently converted into wealth through computational processes. However, the book extends the idea of extraction: dreams are not merely harvested; they are shaped by the system that interprets them. The system produces the unconscious that it claims to measure, collapsing the distinction between observation and production. This represents the most extreme extension of the logic of surveillance capitalism, as it eliminates the distinction between observation and production.

The Dreamsaver Neuroprosthetic, marketed as wellness and productivity optimization, functions as the state's most intimate witness. "You don't have to do anything; you've already agreed to the terms of service" (2). Consent precedes coercion. Complicity is embedded in convenience. Through the language of wellness and optimization, the subject has created an internalized mechanism of surveillance capitalism. Rather than being simply "watched," the subject has also given consent to be their own most intimate witness. The novel captures this with chilling economy, and this internalization of the apparatus reflects a more accurate account of how surveillance capitalism actually operates. It does not exert itself through the spectacular external application of control technology, but rather through the voluntary acceptance of instruments that make the self completely transparent to institutions that it can hardly perceive.

Even the whimsical dream of the hovering carrot underscores this instability. Sara rides a hovering carrot as if it were a horse. She rises above Los Angeles, viewing the sparkling city as if it were jewels placed upon black velvet. What appears buoyant or absurd, however, is susceptible to contamination—to corporate incursion into involuntary imagery. The text indicates the possibility of product placement leakage, suggesting that the unconscious is not a free space but a contested archive.

Race and immigrant identity structure the distribution of risk. The microaggression embedded in "So what are you?" (136) is not incidental but diagnostic. Sara's Moroccan heritage, the pressure to remain invisible, and the stereotypes of the difficult woman illustrate how risk is unequally distributed across social categories. The legibility of the subject is already racialized and gendered before the algorithm claims to calculate it, and *The Dream Hotel* extends Foucauldian analyses to interrogate the racially organized architecture of contemporary risk, since the creation of delinquency depends upon hierarchies the system disavows having created.

In this context, Sara's strike emerges as the novel's most critical counter-infrastructure. By withholding labor, detainees acknowledge that the conveyor belt depends on their participation. It becomes a pragmatic acknowledgment that the conveyor belt upon which detainees are processed relies upon detainee labor and that withholding labor may be one of the few ways to exert pressure on a system fundamentally designed to preclude detainee voices. The retaliation—canceled visits, revoked library access, commissary closures framed as technical issues, criminalized barter after detainees have been forced into a state of necessity—reveals the system's elasticity. Resistance is absorbed, reclassified, and disciplined. If the novel is fundamentally concerned with showing how systems make resistance illegible, the strike's

relatively clean arc risks contradicting that very argument. Nevertheless, the escalation of retaliation against the strikers is clearly illustrated throughout.

This tension between institutional language and material harm is where Allen Hornblum's analysis of prison experiments in *Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison* becomes most illuminating, for the novel implies a continuation from historical carceral laboratories to current-day data-driven trials. Consent is consistently present as a fiction, since detainees are required to sign whatever documents are placed before them in order to survive. Thus, the novel connects the contracts that detainee prisoners are bound by and the terms of service of corporations into a single grammar of coerced consent, demonstrating that modern governance elicits compliance through the conversion of necessity into consent.

Sara's release is neither just nor restorative. As she is operationally disruptive, the strike at the facility creates instability, and her file has become administratively burdensome (given that it contains "inconclusive" data), the recommendation for her release is made and then approved based upon the requirement that she remain silent. The non-disparagement clause and liability waiver function as an exit tax on speech, thereby establishing that freedom comes as a contract rather than as restoration. Detention transforms time into shapeless accumulation, and surveillance persists internally through dreams of being scanned and written up. The carceral survives as habit. This suggests that surveillance is not only something that happens outside of the individual; instead, surveillance becomes a habituated way of thinking about one's own body.

*The Dream Hotel*'s greatest contribution to previous research, however, lies in its reframing of predictive policing. Much of the academic literature on the subject has appropriately addressed the racial biases inherent in algorithmically derived systems, subsequently reproduced as objective through the lens of computation. However, Lalami's novel shifts the focus of the critique from the level of the algorithms themselves, both upstream to the very concept of risk and downstream to what detention does to one's experience of time and interiority. Thus, we move from methods of processing to the question of how a governance system treats possibility as punishable. This is a more radical critique than a call for bias correction, since it questions the idea that the system can be made just by making it accurate. It interrogates whether a governance system structured around anticipation can ever be reconciled with justice.

Unlike many examples of speculative fiction that have dealt with algorithmic governance over the past few decades, *The Dream Hotel* refuses techno-solutionism. There is no hack, no digital subversion, no corrective recalibration. The problem is not malfunction but design. The system works. That is precisely the danger. The novel's refusal to include digital resistance is itself a theoretically sophisticated rejection of techno-solutionism and an insistence that the issue at hand is not the malfunction of the system, but rather the design and functioning of the system itself.

With that being said, the conceptual framework for *The Dream Hotel* is, on occasion, almost too neat: Zuboff, Foucault, and Beradt fit into their appointed slots with minimal friction. One could reasonably suggest that *The Dream Hotel* illustrates theory as much as it tests theory. The strike, the zine, and the coded language of the strikers are all portrayed sympathetically and carry strong narrative momentum. However, they are resolved somewhat quickly and at a level of legibility that sits uneasily with the rest of the novel's skepticism toward any form of institutional or communal intelligibility. Finally, the dream sequences, which happen to be the novel's most formally experimental section, occasionally indulge in whimsy at the expense of the analytical pressure of the rest of the novel. While the flying carrot dream is tonally bold, it treads a thin line, and the question of whether the novel successfully earned its surrealism, or if

the dreams at times diminished the tension in the prose, is not easily dismissed. These limitations notwithstanding, *The Dream Hotel* constitutes a formally ambitious and politically urgent contribution to the literature of surveillance, migration, and the increasingly porous boundary between the carceral and the civic.

## Notes

1. Dream interpretation texts attributed to Ibn Sirin (Muhammad ibn Sirin, 654–728 CE) circulate in numerous editions and translations of varying scholarly reliability. The most widely cited English-language edition is *Dreams and Interpretations*, though its attribution and textual lineage remain contested among scholars of Islamic dream theory. Lalami's invocation positions the novel within a pre-modern interpretive tradition in which dreams carried theological and symbolic meaning—a deliberate contrast to the novel's treatment of dreams as administrative evidence.