

The Dream as a Diasporic Para-technological Allegory in Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*

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Abstract: This paper examines Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* (2025) as a technological dystopia that exposes the neoliberal extension of market-driven rationality into the human psyche. Neoliberalism attempts to extend the figure of the *homo economicus* into a seamless *homo technologicus* seeking to capture even the most intimate terrains of subjectivity—dreams, emotions, and aspirations. The novel dramatizes neoliberal ambitions to render the subconscious a site of surveillance and control through the Dream saver implant and its risk-assessment algorithm. This article argues that Lalami's narrative imagines dreams as the last resistant territory of human subjectivity within a neoliberal technological order that seeks to transform consciousness into data. Dreams emerge as para-technological allegories that are ungovernable, resisting complete datafication. By combining Romantic conceptions of imagination with diasporic experiences of displacement and belonging, the novel reveals dreams as spaces that resist algorithmic capture and preserve forms of emotional knowledge unavailable to technological governance. As sites where “emotions are recollected in tranquility,” dreams position introspection as the last frontier of our humanity, suggesting that reducing experience to measurable data threatens forms of subjectivity that depend on ambiguity, memory, imagination, and emotional complexity.

Keywords: diaspora, dreams, emotions, neoliberalism, romanticism, technology

1. Introduction

What happens when even our dreams stop belonging to us?

This question, as haunting as it is, anchors Laila Lalami's 2025 novel *The Dream Hotel*. Set in a not-so-distant future, the story follows Moroccan American History professor Sara Hussein after an algorithm flags her as a threat because of a recurring dream where she accidentally pushes her husband into a river. The Risk Assessment Administration (RAA)—a state agency contracted to a private-prison firm—uses biometric data, online communications and, most importantly, Sara's dreams to calculate a ‘pre-crime’ risk score. With little explanation, Sara is detained in a heavily surveilled facility where she and other women spend their days feeding machine-learning models to reduce their scores. The prison guards are ‘attendants’ who walk around with their ‘Tekmerion’ devices to keep track, of not detainees, but of retainees’ scores (retainees like data to be kept in place and capitalized on) (Lalami 2025: 4). It is a world in which sleep and dreams are monitored through a neuroprosthetic chip implanted behind the ear and scanned twice a day to collect data (Lalami 2025: 5). Retainees are apprehended not for actions they've committed

but for their thoughts and dreams; they are assigned numbers, their emotions are analyzed for profit, and human subjectivity is translated into data. Humans are either ‘Clears’ or ‘Questionables’ in Lalami’s text, and life is a game where your thoughts determine your score and chances to win or lose (Lalami 2025: 12). YET the novel insists that there remains a space—our dreams and the feeling they carry—that technology cannot fully capture.

While many might think that sleeping entails rest for both the body and the mind, the mind actually works harder and better at night, unencumbered by distractions, making dreams what Deirdre Barrett calls ‘nocturnal productivity, as evinced in idioms like ‘sleep on it!’ (2001: ix). For Barrett, dreams are problem-solving spaces that rely on ‘hypnagogic imagery’—images that go through our mind while sleeping (2001: ix). Thus, dreams are sites where we produce emotions, thoughts, and even solutions. Jeannette Marie Mageo (2003) in *Dreaming and the Self: New Perspectives on Subjectivity, Identity, and Emotion* argues that ‘dreams speak a different language than the conscious mind—the language of the imagination—and investigate the nature of that language as it bears upon dreaming and the self’ (6). Dreams, thus, are imaginative expressions of human subjectivity, unique to each dreamer like finger prints, even if they share universal symbols. Mageo explicates that ‘people had a “pattern of dreaming” that was uniquely their own and that dream series evinced themes that were seldom finished in one dream’ (2003: 6). The strong ties between individualism, imagination, and dreams are a romantic sentiment. William Wordsworth, in his poem ‘Personal Talk,’ wrote:

Dreams, books, are each a world; and books, we know,
Are a substantial world, both pure and good:
Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,
Our pastime and our happiness will grow. (2012, originally 1820)

Wordsworth elevates dreams and books and describes them as living realms that feed the imagination. Speaking of ‘tendrils strong as flesh and blood,’ he fuses the organic with the imaginative, implying that dreams and books are extensions of human life itself. In his view, both dreaming and reading offer sanctuaries where feeling, memory and identity can take root and flourish as a counterbalance to the flattening effects of mechanized rationality. Seen in this light, Wordsworth’s poetry foreshadows the central tension in Lalami’s novel: how to safeguard our inner lives and emotional richness when confronted by the relentless encroachment of technology. Romantic writers collectively celebrated dreams and books as alternative worlds that function as refuges to prevent the reductionist transformation of human experiences facing the intrusion of technological advancement on life (to name a few: Coleridge’s ‘Frost at Midnight’ (Abrams and Greenblatt 2000: 457) and *Biographia Literaria* p. 159, Percy Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* p. 50, Keats’ ‘Lamia,’ and Blake’s *Milton*). In Lalami’s dystopian and heavily surveilled world where speed and data collection prevail, dreams become a site where ‘emotions are recollected in tranquility’ (Wordsworth 2018: 284). Our unconscious psyche works at its own speed and employs dreams to produce spontaneous emotions where we can reconnect with our humanity. Carl Jung argues that ‘[d]reams are impartial,

spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will' (1970: 149). Jung further explicates that dreams 'are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished, natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundations and run into an impasse' (1970: 149). In other words, we find an escape in our dreams when life becomes too suffocating. Just as Romantic writers invoked imagination and emotion as refuges from mechanized rationality, Lalami's dreams are a sanctuary of human freedom and resilience and are spaces that resist algorithmic capture. They operate alongside technology, revealing spaces of human freedom and emotional resilience.

Dreams are not simply an escapade that diverts us from reality, but they are, as Elena Loizidou, puts it, political metaphors (2016: 124). Loizidou explains that diasporic dreams about returning home 'were dreams of freedom. Or, more precisely, they were freedom: the visual entry to a past of a familiar self and environment...articulate [a] longing for a lost self' (2016: 124). For Loizidou, 'the dream (its experience and a recounting) [is] an extension of the overt political acts of demonstrations and protests, tracking the flight to freedom (2016: 125). The dream as a political metaphor becomes an act of resistance that articulates diasporic struggles and negotiates solutions. This article departs from existing journalistic reviews of novel, that have largely focused on its depiction of surveillance, predictive governance, and the carceral use of technology by offering a theoretically grounded analysis of how dreams become spaces where human subjectivity resists algorithmic reduction. This paper argues Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* fuses romantic and diasporic dimensions. Diasporic dreams function as para-technological allegories that exist alongside data-driven surveillance, yet resist full quantification, making dreams allegorical vaults of emotions (Al-Dbow and Abbas 2025). Christine Rosen argues that our bodily expressions are a silent language of the self—a 'paralanguage' (2024: 35). I build on Rosen's insight by applying it to dreams; proposing that our dreams are para-technological allegories that are a silent language of the soul. I use the term "para-technological" to refer to affective and cultural forms of experience that operate beyond technological rationality and cannot be fully captured through algorithmic systems. Following Richard Walsh's (2012) distinction between dreams in literature, dream reports, and dreams as narratives, this paper treats Lalami's dreams both as literary devices and as representations of lived psychic experiences. The dream, in the novel, becomes a space where memory, cultural heritage, and longing are 'recollected in tranquility.' The dream's serene quality sets it apart from algorithmic speed and mechanical essence, making dreams in the text the only site that allows for human creativity, imagination, and individual expressions of emotions. The characters' dreams become tools of resistance, spaces in which they can express their needs and assert their subjectivity. When the dystopian apparatus tries to quantify intimate human experiences, Lalami uses Romantic motifs and natural imagery to signal that dreams operate as an allegory for a world beyond neoliberal logic.

Romantic writers can be read as diasporic figures; they experienced both literal and figurative displacement in their travels and in their poetry. The diasporic

status of Lalami's main character and her attachment to nature and constant need to disconnect and contemplate reinforce the allegorical reading of dreams as para-technologies. Sara's intense emotions—the need to belong, to be safe, to be loved, and the constant fear that results in hyperawareness of the self, the other, and of rules and authority manifest in dreams layered with meaning. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2008) in 'Rethinking diasporicity: embodiment, emotion, and the displaced origin' calls the diasporic experience an emotional diagram; arguing that the 'constructions of the self or the community of being are affected by the emotions or moods produced through displacement' (148). 'Emotional geographies shape migrant performances' both in the realm of dreams and while performing the self among others (Christou 2011: 256). Sara Ahmed's (2004) affective economy further shows that emotions do not remain private but attach to bodies, memories, and objects. Sara's diasporic vulnerability therefore becomes relational, circulating through fear, longing, and collective resistance. Sara's dreams range from anxieties about technological errors and professional misrepresentation to intimate scenes of desire, loss, and familial memory revealing a psychological fear of abandonment and unresolved attachment. Even when the RAA attempts to manipulate dream content by inserting images of carrots to control consumerism, her dreams resist coherence, producing unexpected, symbolic distortions that elude algorithmic interpretation. The dreams of other detainees similarly expose deeply personal fears and desires—ranging from economic precarity to interpersonal conflict—reducing the algorithm's predictive logic to a crude misreading of complex emotional lives. The novel, therefore, establishes a tension between technological memory and lived memory. While the Dreamsaver chip transforms dreams into analyzable data, the women's memories remain embodied, affective, and inseparable from their sense of identity and belonging. The diasporic main character in the novel is the epitome of an intense intrinsic need to belong, participate in society, and experience embodied human life. Sara's dreams are spaces where she navigates personal and collective challenges. According to Katherine Pratt Ewing (2003) diasporic dreams are 'a manifestation of the process of adaptation—and [are] key sites where culture and identity are negotiated' (44). Ewing adds that diasporic dreams acquire 'emotional salience' becoming 'a primary way in which individuals negotiate the experience of being caught between worlds and synthesize self-conceptions in their new situations' (Ewing 2003: 44). In other words, far from being rational cogs in an algorithmic machine, Lalami's characters live in the imagination and through emotions that no algorithm can touch.

Methodologically, this article is a qualitative close reading of *The Dream Hotel* combined with an eclectic theoretical framework that employs neoliberal theory, Romanticism, and diaspora studies and build on theories of surveillance capitalism and algorithmic governance as well. It brings Romantic theories of imagination and embodied experience into dialogue with diaspora studies and critiques of neoliberal datafication, using both scholarly and contextual sources on the novel to examine how Lalami represents dreams as sites of resistance. The three theoretical frameworks used in this essay do not simply operate beside one another. Romanticism explains the imaginative and affective force of dreams; diaspora

theory reveals how dreams carry fractured memories, identities, and forms of belonging; and surveillance-capitalism theory shows why these private experiences become valuable objects of technological capture. The concept of para-technology brings these approaches together. It describes dreams as experiences that exist alongside technological systems and may be recorded or interpreted by them, yet never become fully identical with the data through which those systems attempt to represent them. The article first situates the novel within neoliberal technologization and surveillance capitalism, then examines dreams as para-technological spaces, before turning to diaspora, nature, and art as forms of experience that expose the limits of algorithmic classification.

2. Neoliberal technologization: reifying humans into data

The world of *The Dream Hotel* is built on the logic of neoliberal rationality, a worldview that prioritizes economic efficiency and market metrics above human relationships. In Lalami's novel, neoliberal enterprises attempt to quantify the psyche and extend predictive control to the human mind, but dreams emerge as spaces of artistic and imaginative resistance to this technologized logic. Wendy Brown (2015), in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* describes the neoliberal order as 'more termite like than lion like;' a 'soft power' that operates through enticing people to believe that free market economy is the only path to social equality and 'freedom' (35: 108). Individuals willingly and enthusiastically shed away cultural and societal relations to become homo economicus—an individual who 'approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct; it cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way' (Brown 2015: 39). Today, the neoliberal market is bound to digital technologies. As John Armitage argues, 'technology is now the only factor of production' (1999: 87). In other words, the pan-capitalist neoliberal conditions of production have deemed Marxian conception of the "labor process" outdated and focuses instead on "the technological and scientific processing of labour"—the datafication of labor itself (Armitage 1999: 88). This concentration of wealth venues in technological apparatuses creates a power imbalance that leads to neoliberal technological fascism, what Mirca Madianou calls technocolonialism—'the way that digital innovation, data and AI practices entrench power asymmetries and engender new forms of structural violence and new inequities' (2025: 5). Technocolonialism ensures that colonial structures 'are maintained through extracting value from the data of refugees and other crisis-affected people; and through extracting value from experimentation with new technologies in fragile situations for the benefit of stakeholders, including private companies' (Madianou 2025: 18). While Brown explains the neoliberal logic behind this system, Madianou shows how digital extraction extends older colonial structures of classification and control. The surveillance and constant datafication of the retainees in *The Dream Hotel*, repeatedly remind Sara of past Imperial projects. Her gaze falls on an attendants' tablets 'where a color-coded grid shows a list of retainees, their work assignments, current locations, and performance metrics, the numbers rolling at an astonishing speed. Again she's reminded of colonial censuses,' she is reminded of

‘the piles of ledgers maintained by small clerks across the empire...that made the extraction of labor more efficient’ (Lalami 2025: 229).

Neoliberal rationality thrives through data accumulation, analysis, and control of both data and datafied. Neoliberalism turns every aspect of human life into an economic enterprise by relying on data accumulation and data analysis to transform human experiences into quantifiable commodities (AlAmmouri 2020). This continuous tracking and data collection allows institutions to monetize individual behavior through prediction—as seen in online advertisements that analyze users’ digital activities and purchasing patterns to generate economic value through personalized and targeted ads. Kean Birch (2020) calls this ‘automated neoliberalism,’ a regime in which ‘markets are configured by digital platforms, personal lives are transformed through the accumulation of personal data, and social relations are automated through algorithms, distributed electronic ledgers, and rating systems’ (10). In this current automated neoliberal turn, ‘technology is less an extension of man than an invasion of him,’ writes Christine Rosen, to the point that abstaining from technology makes some feel dead (2024: 125-126). Shoshana Zuboff, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, similarly argues that the neoliberal market ‘claims human experiences as free raw material’ in order to achieve ‘behavioral modification’ (2019: 8). Through such datafication, the homo economicus evolves into a homo technologicus—a figure driven by market logic, focused on profit accumulation, responsibilized, and most importantly a technological figure. To be responsibilized is to become individually accountable for managing risks and outcomes that are shaped by broader social, economic, and political structures. Thus, the homo technologicus is not simply someone with prosthetic implants like the Dreamsaver chip; technology becomes internalized shaping the psyche. A homo technologicus is someone who exists within the technology; a set of data to be collected, interpreted and controlled.

Neoliberalism expels the subject and turns us into capital. As Byung-Chul Han notes we ‘deem ourselves subjugated subjects, but [we are] rather projects’ (2017: 8). Birch and Zuboff expose the economic value of datafication, while Han and Rosen extend this critique to its psychological and emotional effects. We think we are the customers in the neoliberal market, but in truth, we are the product being sold. Zuboff explains that ‘[w]e are the sources of surveillance capitalism’s crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation. Surveillance capitalism’s actual customers are the enterprises that trade in its markets for future behavior’ (2019: 17). It is important to note that this predominantly economic account surveillance capitalism does not fully capture how such systems operate across historically embedded structures of power. As Simone Browne (2015) and Ruha Benjamin (2019) demonstrate, surveillance practices are shaped by racialized histories and automated systems can reproduce inequality under the appearance of neutrality. In *The Dream Hotel*, almost all retainees have lost their jobs outside the facility and can no longer produce capital (Lalami 2025: 137-138). Nonetheless, the retainees themselves become capital that produces wealth, not for themselves but for the system. One of the retainees’ tasks is to enhance data collection and data analysis

processes: '[a]long with her response time, the counter at the bottom of her screen measures her accuracy. If she clicks on the same response too many times in a row, she could be deemed a bad employee—or worse, a saboteur. She has to consider each clip carefully, give a truthful answer' (Lalami 2025: 32). Any attempt 'to curtail the power of [the neoliberal] bloc by imposing capital flows, regulating financial markets, or controlling currencies can be portrayed as attacks' (Neubauer 2011: 210). The novel tells us that 'it's the parasitic logic of profit, which has wormed its way so deeply into the collective mind that to defy lucre is to mark oneself as a radical, or a criminal, or a lunatic' (Lalami 2025: 280). Sara also compares Madison, the facility where they are held, to a factory of data:

Madison is run like a factory, she thinks. The conveyor belts move twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It doesn't matter if there's a snowstorm or a tornado, if there's a presidential election or a championship finals game, if a worker is sick or pregnant or injured: the conveyor belts keep moving. Every detainee is processed through Safe-X's software, which keeps track of dates, infractions, and extensions. (Lalami 2025: 221)

All human experiences are automated and consequently datafied. In the novel, we have a 'virtual conjugal room,' NuSpirit which is a tool that plays sermons and prayers in any faith and any language, Nimble which pays bills, orders groceries, and decides meal plans according to availability of produce and health conditions of customers, and NaarPro app which is a phone app that detects fires and filters air (Lalami 2025: 90; 135; 173; 190). In such a world, where daily chores and feelings are delegated to AI systems, technologists become what Christine Rosen (2024) calls 'emotional mercenaries,' turning feeling into information. When 'we outsource the emotional labor of everyday life to apps and algorithms and bodily sensors, we are making technologies that effectively act as emotional mercenaries' (Rosen 2024: 138). Rosen adds that when 'our feelings become data, and our world is guided by sensors rather than sensitivity, our experience is no longer unique; it is mere information' (Rosen 2024: 138). When our emotions are outsourced to mercenary-like technologists they become weapons used to control and regulate the human.

The detainees' labor exposes the neoliberal commodification of survival and care. The incarcerated women work nonstop, but these Jobs that they have subject them to certain staged circumstances for the purposes of varied data collection sets. Moreover, the money they make working long exhausting shifts go back to Safe-X through limiting merchandise possibilities and overcharging for simple commodities (Lalami 2025: 9). For example, 'apples are available as premium items for eight dollars per unit' and if they want to use email, it is '\$400 every two months' (Lalami 2025: 84; 28). After a wild fire, and an evacuation that lasts a week, the women are asked to go 'on twelve-hour shifts...to make up for lost hours' (Lalami 2025: 216). They are even responsible for their own health problems. One of the detainees does not get health care because she is blamed for not exercising: 'The broker said I couldn't qualify for a better plan that covers my medications because I didn't log enough steps per day...It's a question of responsibility' (Lalami 2025: 87). Under neoliberalism, even the patient is optimized rather than cared for,

reducing care to technical tasks and diminishing emotional engagement. As Birch notes, neoliberalism ‘frames almost everything around us as an asset or a potential asset; that is, as a resource that can be owned and that can generate future earnings’ and thus constant labor is a condition for survival (2020: 11). In Lalami’s text, the retainees’ relationships, emotions, and personal data are like a ‘new oil or “new asset class” emphasising the fact that it has to be mined and processed before it can be transformed into something valuable’ that can be sold to ‘data brokers’ who ‘track and trade personal data through various means’ (Birch 2020: 20).

Resisting this technologized neoliberal order seems impossible: unplugging is impractical, and refusing to work intangible. Yet, Tiffany A. Dykstra-DeVette (2018) argues that ‘women who choose not to work may feel empowered to make decisions for the family and themselves without fitting the expectations of an economically liberated new citizen who is now free to participate in the economy by working, earning, and spending’ (9). Dykstra-DeVette adds that ‘cultural difference can be a site of resistance to neoliberal principles’ (2018: 9). Data collection ‘facilitates intervention in the psyche and enables influence to take place on a pre-reflexive level’ (Han 2017: 15). Datafication of emotions and the psyche ‘is making it possible to predict human behaviour. This means that the future is becoming calculable and controllable’ (Han 2017: 14). To this end, ‘[s]ecrets, foreignness and otherness represent impediments to unbounded communication. In the name of transparency, they are to be eliminated’ (Han 2017: 14). The algorithm is blind, not because it lacks information but because its epistemological framework privileges quantifiable data over cultural difference, emotion, and embodied experience—creating cracks through which resistance appears. The algorithm fails at analyzing Sara’s diasporic affect, post-partum anxiety, and her longing for home. When Sara calls for a strike, she weaponizes her womanhood and diasporic status to reject the imposed dehumanizing neoliberal logic: ‘We have to stop working. This place can’t run without us, and the longer they hold us, the more money they make... Why should we contribute to our own detention? We should make *them* pay for having us here. We have to stop working’ (Lalami 2025: 222). Sara’s strike is more than a simple refusal to labor—it is an attempt to reclaim agency within a system that attempts to reduce her identity to algorithmic assessment. While Sara experiences the violence of institutional confinement and technological surveillance, the novel does not position her solely as a victim or a tragic figure as her resistance emerges from the persistence of emotional, embodied, and imaginative forms of subjectivity that exceed algorithmic capture. When she adamantly testifies that she loves her husband and would never hurt him, she is told: ‘the data doesn’t lie’ (Lalami 2025: 292). This blind faith in data dehumanizes and alienates subjects, turning each into a migrant of their own experiences. Zuboff observes that ‘the disruptions of the twenty-first century have turned these exquisite anxieties [of emigrants] and longings of dislocation into a universal story that engulfs each one of us’ (2019: 12). The dialectical nature of technology; its power to both connect and alienate, leaves us in a diasporic, dream-like state. This movement from economic extraction to psychic and diasporic alienation brings these frameworks into dialogue. Brown, Birch, and Zuboff explain the market logic

of datafication; Han and Rosen reveal its psychological and emotional effects; and Madianou exposes its colonial continuities. Romantic and diasporic thought, in turn, locate resistance in memory, longing, and imagination—experiences that cannot be fully reduced to data. Wendy Brown in her essay ‘American Nightmare: Neoconservatism, Neoliberalism, and De-democratization’ calls the neoliberal project ‘dream-work,’ a composition that lacks coherence, is irrational, and contradictory (2006: 690). If neoliberalism is a dream-work, then Lalami’s *The Dream Hotel* turns the dream inward reclaiming it as a site of imaginative rebellion. Dreams in the novel become para-technological spaces: intimate, affective, and filled with gaps that defy the logic of datafication. Diasporic dreams; emotional recollections of lost homes, reinstate the imaginative authority of the human psyche as a site of spiritual renewal. In this way, Lalami invokes Romantic sensibility as an antidote to technocratic surveillance. Having established how technological control operates, the discussion now turns to the ways dreams and everyday workarounds expose its limits.

3. Dreams as para-technologies in *The Dream Hotel*

The Dream Hotel (2025) is a nuanced critique of algorithmic governance that does not reduce technology to an abstract enemy. Instead, it foregrounds the people who design, deploy and experience technological systems, revealing possibilities for resistance and reconnection. In order to understand how dreams function as para-technologies, it is necessary to disentangle technology from technocracy. *The Dream Hotel* is not a text about resisting technological advancements, but is a text about resisting and overcoming the feelings of alienation that result from datafying personal experiences. One of the pressing queries the novel poses is who ‘are the invisible hands controlling technology packaging their own ideology’ (Cao 2025: 2). The novel’s characters are not luddites, but are tech savvy professionals who use smartphones, home security surveillance, and multiple AI tools as part of daily life. Sara herself, an archivist, relies on digital databases for her work which helps her understand that the algorithm is not neutral or impartial, despite RAA agents’ insistence on the algorithms’ objectivity:

If she protests that she’s been a victim of discrimination, he points to the algorithm, which treats people as an anonymous collection of data points and cannot be accused of fault or bias. The algorithm is objective. It doesn’t know who you are or what you look like, he’ll say, it scores everyone using the same metrics. But for all this insistence on the fairness of the algorithm, Sara is pretty sure that what really landed her at Madison were her insolent remarks to Moss and Segura, who felt disrespected and wanted to teach her a lesson. (Lalami 2025: 110)

The algorithm’s supposed impartiality thus masks a hierarchy of human power. As another passage reminds us, ‘the algorithm was written by people. That’s who put us at Madison. People, not machines’ (Lalami 2025: 58). This insistence on human agency undermines arguments that algorithms are autonomous forces. It invites readers to examine who benefits from data driven governance and who is rendered vulnerable. The discussion in this section moves from the novel’s critique

of technocratic control, to dreams and ‘workarounds’ as para-technological practices, and finally to diaspora, nature, and art as forms of meaning the algorithm cannot fully read.

The problem arises when technological tools become instruments of punishment in the hands of the Risk Assessment Agency (RAA). As Lalami notes, one inspiration for her fictional algorithm was the current American financial credit score system (FICO)—‘now woven into every part of our lives, determining whether and where we can rent or buy’ (A Conversation 2025: 2). Lalami imagines the RAA computing a similar score ‘for crime,’ an extrapolation that exposes the thin line between financial metrics and predictive policing. Another spark came from the author’s personal experience when her smartphone offered travel times to a yoga class she had never set, demonstrating how devices infer users’ habits without explicit consent (Miranda 2025: 4). These anecdotes illustrate how familiar conveniences become platforms for data collection of personal experiences; the unease they provoke forms the novel’s psychological backdrop. In the acknowledgement section of the novel, Lalami notes that her research drew on the past; ‘the phrase “precaution, not punishment” was inspired by’ the American claim that ‘immigration detention was not imprisonment in a legal sense’ (2025: 322). This historicizing gestures to the cyclicity of control: industrial revolutions repeatedly generate systems that quantify and discipline bodies, only to inspire counter movements that value contemplation and connection. Sara understands that human relations and connecting to her fellow detainees is what saved her, revealing that resistance emerges not from rejecting technology but from reclaiming forms of connection and solidarity that cannot be reduced to algorithmic calculation: ‘isolation is the opposite of salvation...she owes her release to the women who joined together to say no,’ then Sara adds: ‘Even if it wasn’t apparent to them right now, they had to work together to find a way’ (Lalami 2025: 321). The novel does not present connection as necessarily opposed to technology, rather, it distinguishes between technologies that reduce human experiences to data and technological practices that facilitate solidarity and care. The narrative ends with an act of digital connection that is also an act of solidarity: Sara takes her father’s device, types a friend’s name and hits ‘CONNECT’ (Lalami 2025: 322). This finale does not reject technology; it repurposes it to sustain community across distances, embodying the para-technological ethic the novel advocates.

In other words, technological control inevitably produces resistance. By placing dreams within this dialectic, Lalami shows that para-technologies are not anti-technologies; they are sites where human beings reappropriate tools of control. The retention center’s monotony echoes Weir Mitchell’s rest cure, which enforced women’s passivity under the guise of medical treatment, while Sara’s dream journal echoes Gilman’s writing as a means of preserving subjective experiences against institutional control. Yet, like Gilman’s narrator, Sara transforms the imposed conditions of confinement into a space of imaginative resistance. The detainees whisper in monotone to avoid audio capture; Sara learns to blur her voice into the collective noise of the dormitory (Lalami 2025: 12). The hum of industrial washers in the laundry room provides cover for conversations that might otherwise be

recorded: ‘the steady thrum of the machines means they can have private conversations, which is almost impossible anywhere else at Madison’ (Lalami 2025: 55). Here technology, designed to cleanse clothes, becomes a shield for privacy; the novel thus refuses simple binaries of good or bad technology (Lalami 2025: 55). The detainees also engage in their own surveillance gathering intelligence about the staff, ‘learning their schedules, their tastes, their habits and quirks’ (Lalami 2025: 251). As the detainees collectively observe, RAA agents might be more lenient at the start of their shifts because they are rested; and detainees interviewed during early release appointments may perform better and have higher chances of being released (Lalami 2025: 55). Such tactical knowledge relies on mundane data collection—watching guard rotations, noting body language—that reclaims agency within the carceral space. Sara eventually realizes that ‘the attendants spend so much time monitoring us...it never occurs to them that we’ve been monitoring them, too’ (Lalami 2025: 251). Sara also notes that layered surveillance is historical; contemplating an Arnautoff mural (the only painting in the facility) she notices that ‘as the laborers kneel in the furrows, they’re watched by the foreman in blue dungarees, and later by the artist in his studio, and later yet by her, the process transforming them from people into objects’ (Lalami 2025: 205). The mural suggests that surveillance is not a new technological phenomenon; rather, digital surveillance represents the latest stage in a longer history of transforming human beings into observable, classifiable, and manageable objects. Data collection, thus, is often reciprocal and layered. While cameras whirr and dreams are uploaded, the detainees surveil the surveillant, turning observation into solidarity. This reversal is crucial: dreams may be harvested, but waking life remains a realm where information flows in multiple directions. This reversal shifts the discussion from the machinery of surveillance to the ways the detainees reclaim agency within it.

Segura, the airport security agent who fervently believes in the algorithm, insists that dreams are not imaginative or emotional, but rather reveal our subconscious desires without lies or justifications:

“Nothing is random,” he said with frightening conviction. Didn’t she know that dreams were windows into the subconscious? They showed connections between our thoughts and actions while remaining free of lies or justifications. They revealed our fears, desires, and petty jealousies with greater honesty than we would ever allow in our waking moments. They were valuable precisely because they exposed the most private parts of ourselves, from repressed memories to future plans. (Lalami 2025: 66)

While dreams, for Segura, are not random—and the algorithm’s task is simply to read the signs—for Sara, dreaming is a space where her mind processes trauma and yearning in ways the algorithm cannot comprehend. The RAA designates her dream of fighting off an attacker as ‘violent’ and therefore predictive of crime. Sara interprets it as a response to eleven months of unjust accusation—a ‘psychic burden she has found hard to carry’ (Lalami 2025: 306). In this sense, dreams register lived experiences that resist algorithmic interpretation and expose the gap between data and consciousness. They constitute a ‘paralanguage’ of the

soul; translating inner life into allegories that technology misreads (Rosen 2024: 35). '[D]reams draw simultaneously from multiple waking-life sources, utilizing fragments of past experience to construct novel scenarios anticipating future events' (Wamsley 2021: 2). Dreams create a bridge between the past and the present, between the present and the future; an emblematic bridge that is made up of contextualized and personal experiences involving cultural and spiritual norms that the algorithm does not count as viable information. Algorithmic analysis of dreams becomes an act of misreading, akin to the work of 'a fortune-teller reading tea leaves,' as 'the algorithm made up stories as it was going along, until it found one that was plausible enough to please its audience' (Lalami 2025: 306). Sara, being an archivist, recognizes the impossibility of total data capture:

This is the kind of detail that makes the historian in Sara smile. If a record collection of the magnitude of the HRS, funded by the federal government and employing thousands of record keepers, can't provide a completely accurate portrait of the past, why should she believe that the database maintained by the RAA is reliable? It's an automated archive, but like ancient archives it, too, must have gaps. For starters, the RAA is missing information from all kinds of people: undocumented immigrants, people without fixed addresses, the few among the elderly or the disabled who don't use smart devices, along with cranks, hermits, bohemians, and objectors. (Lalami 2025: 103)

Dreams, like these archival absences, remain both imperceptible and profoundly intelligible—in the Platonic sense of fixed, rational forms, but as shifting symbols that occupy the twilight between sense and understanding (Plato 1995: 247c–d). Thus, 'taming the temperamental beast that is human emotion might prove a challenge contemporary technology cannot—or perhaps, should not—try to overcome' (Rosen 2024: 114). The problem, then, is not that dreams lack meaning, but that their meanings remain contextual, unstable, and irreducible to a single predictive score.

The title *The Dream Hotel* itself carries dialectic connotations: hotels are places of temporary rest, sites to which one retreats to recover before re-entering everyday life, but Lalami's detention center, functions like a perverse hotel where sleep is both a commodity and a threat. The title subtly critiques how neoliberalism turns imagination into a commodity, recasting the promise of comfort as a metaphor for confinement—alluding to the liminal nature of human existence. This satirization of the title evokes the precarious balance between consciousness and unconsciousness, captivity and freedom, surveillance and intimacy. The formalistic features of the text echo this instability as the story often unfolds like a dream that questions its own reality. Sara is constantly uncertain whether she is dreaming or awake, and readers share her disorientation: '[t]he dream cedes to reality' (Lalami 2025: 3). The convergence of dreams and waking life into a hazed sentience extends the resistance of dreams into conscious experiences. As the novel progresses, the boundaries between dreams and reality blur, making way for resistance to leak from dreams and seep into reality. Formally, this instability unsettles the binaries—real/virtual, productive/unproductive, and rational/emotional—on which

technocratic classification depends. Rosen argues that data-collection companies construct our digital doubles and impose those personas upon us until ‘we no longer can distinguish between reality and the virtual’ (Lalami 2025: 145). Sara often enquires: ‘Is this real?...The table, the chairs, the blank walls of the visiting room were real, but reality itself had become slippery’ (Lalami 2025: 36; 34). The retention center’s in-between status—neither prison nor home—also mirrors the liminality of dreaming. Retainees are not yet convicted but are not free; similarly, dreams occupy the threshold between conscious desires and unconscious fears. This in-betweenness resonates with diasporic identities, which are defined by mobility and belonging to multiple places simultaneously. Lalami plays on this parallel when the women develop ‘workarounds’ to surveillance: whispering, passing contraband, looking for camera blind spots. Sara ponders: ‘Maybe past and present aren’t all that different ... We’ve managed to find workarounds to surveillance ... even as we know that breaking the rules may lengthen our confinement’ (Lalami 2025: 205). The phrase ‘workarounds’ evokes hacking culture, which suggests that creativity flourishes under constraint. Dreams, in this context, are not fantasies of escape but blueprints for reconfiguring reality.

The novel does not confine its alternatives to dreams. Nature, art, and embodied connection carry this challenge into waking life through forms of perception and care that cannot be easily standardized. Romantic writers often questioned the dominance of instrumental reason by emphasizing forms of knowledge rooted in perception, emotion, and embodied experience; the Metropolitan Museum notes that Romantics ‘presented [nature] as an alternative to the ordered world of Enlightenment thought’ (Galitz 2004: 1). In *The Dream Hotel* this legacy surfaces in the characters’ turn to art and nature within the techno carceral space. Sara finds solace in looking out the window and in contemplating nature: ‘This morning the sky is cloudy. A flock of blackbirds gathers in formation, then breaks off again before disappearing from sight’ (Lalami 2025: 8). Nature, for Sara, becomes a constant in a world filled with variables; a healing companion. She longs for nature and wishes she could go back to nature to feel at peace again; she remembers ‘Mirror Lake, up in Yosemite,’ she ‘remembers with startling clarity how it felt to sit under a view of Half Dome, with only the drone of bees and the whirring of grasshoppers in her ears’ and hopes she could feel free again (Lalami 2025: 30). ‘She wants to lie on that lakeside again and see only nature from horizon to horizon’ (Lalami 2025: 30). John Muir describes Yosemite mountains in, *Our National Parks* (1903), as a ‘magnificent realm’ (13). Muir adds that when you ‘[c]limb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees’ (1903: 56). Ralph Waldo Emerson concurs that in the woods, ‘I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, which nature cannot repair’ (1849: 8).

Nature in Lalami’s text not only appears as a comforting realm that frees humans, but it is also portrayed as a circuit-breaker of technological control. For romantic writers and artists, nature is a sovereign power—not simply a vessel of the sublime to be contemplated and admired. It is an untamable force that operates on a scale beyond human control, often acting to correct human anomalies and sins.

In *The Dream Hotel*, a wildfire renders all technological devices void and useless: '[a]ll of a sudden the lights go out. The hum of the service station, the hiss of the refrigerator, the whirr of the cameras—all these stop at once...the fire has damaged the power grid' (Lalami 2025: 199). This throws the attendants into a frenzy as they become like deer caught in the headlights—blinded, powerless, and stripped of technological mediation. Here nature dwarfs and overcomes human systems. Percy Shelley in 'Mont Blanc' describes nature as a force that has the ability to incapacitate humans and human inventions:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd;
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (1817: 176)

For Shelley, nature 'repeals large codes of fraud and woe.' These 'large codes' could be read as the very systems of technological control in *The Dream Hotel*. The wildfire in the novel, like Shelley's mountain, acts as a force that shuts all 'codes of fraud and woe.' Nature 'teaches awful doubt' inspiring and at the same time enforcing a break from technologically mediated existence. This leads to what Sara identifies as 'a sip of freedom' as technologies of surveillance become inoperative (Lalami 2025: 217). The previous excerpt from Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' ends with an emphasis on the importance of reconciliating with nature, which aligns with Sara's intrinsic and insistent need to connect, love, and be loved as she feels alienated and abandoned in the retention center.

Accordingly, Sara engages in romantic practices, both consciously and subconsciously (in her dreams), not only because they offer escape but also because they foster emotional and communal bonds. The novel explores bodily needs that defy datafication. Sara describes 'skin hunger': 'hunger is ordinary, it's what people experience every day. Hunger can be satisfied immediately, and repeatedly. What she felt was different; it was starvation' (Lalami 2025: 35). Starvation for touch and affection cannot be satisfied as easily as hunger for food. Modern technologies, Christine Rosen notes, increasingly mediate social interactions, diminishing our ability to read body language and sense unspoken feelings. In Rosen's words, attention to one another's physical presence is central to humanity; technologies 'cannot satisfy all of those needs' (2024: 53). *The Dream Hotel* dramatizes this truth. Sara's yearning for human contact contrasts with the RAA's emphasis on remote monitoring—while nature presents alternatives. Lalami turns the private, subjective experience of dreaming into a collective practice of resistance; it's not only Sara's dream, but a shared dream of a group of women forced to undergo technological bias under the pretense of crime prevention. (This alludes to Martin Luther King's 'I have a Dream' which encapsulates the collective aspirations of oppressed bodies in America in the 1960's). In one scene, a detainee flirts with an attendant, leveraging her femininity to secure a favor (Lalami 2025: 155); in

another, the group discusses which RAA agents are more lenient based on their moods (Lalami 2025: 55). Such interactions illustrate that solidarity requires reading emotional cues, adapting to social contexts and trusting one another—skills that cannot be automated. Sara's final act of connection—calling Toya using her father's cellphone—underscores the message: technology can be a medium of solidarity when used with intentions. What matters here is the movement from private feeling to collective solidarity. Shared aspiration counters the individualized logic of data capitalism.

Art, in *The Dream Hotel*, also appears as a site of shared aspirations and a medium through which the retainees can find comfort and connection to a more beautiful life. Carl Jung argues that 'dreams as well as the paintings, when subjected to careful scrutiny, yield a meaningful content which could be described as an epiphany' (1970: 406). This epiphany transpires in Lalami's text through the retainees' contemplation of Victor Arnautoff's mural. Standing under this painting for even a moment, according to Sara, feels 'like stepping back a hundred years in time' but it is 'always a little startling to move from the artwork to the next hallway, one wall of which is lined end to end with bright computer screens that display the work assignments' (Lalami 2025: 9). Lalami juxtaposes these moments of artistic and creative releases with images of surveillance to highlight the tension between contemplation and control. The longing for unmeasured time and unmediated experiences encapsulates Romantic nostalgia while acknowledging the transformative reach of technological advancements. Technology isolates and alienates, but the 'paralysing feeling of nothingness and lostness is compensated by the dreams' and through art in Lalami's text (Jung 1970: 351). An employee at Dreamsaver Inc admits that art is AI's blind spot. While reporting to his superiors in a meeting on AI's advancing skills in interpreting images, he says; '[b]asically our interpretations get exponentially worse when artistic renderings appear, especially if they're woven in seamlessly with concrete objects' (Lalami 2025: 184). Thus, art remains one of the most compelling ways to convey human experiences. As Aldous Huxley observes, 'good art possesses a kind of super-truth' as it has the 'power of communication' to 'put things across' (1957: 5). Art requires contemplation which in turn forces us to pause; a skill that we have lost in the twenty first century due to heavy reliance on technological tools that have led to the elimination of 'waiting' as we experienced it before the age of digital technologies (Rosen 2024: 157). The narrative slows down to describe art and dreams in sensational details—sensations that resist quantification. Such scenes in *The Dream Hotel* mirror Romantic nature poetry's attention to the sublime as an experience that transcends rational comprehension, positioning art and dreams as para-technological spaces that resist digital technologies' logic of measurement and control.

Sara's Moroccan American identity adds another dimension to the limits of algorithmic classification. Her memories, inherited caution, and divided sense of belonging make her especially vulnerable to systems that treat difference as statistical deviation. Sara's father, being a first-generation immigrant, '[a]ll his life he had tried to instill in her the immigrant's habit of caution, reminding her to

follow the rules, avoid unnecessary attention, and give careful consideration to decisions she made' (Lalami 2025: 73). This cautionary lesson to his children 'owed less to his training as a physicist than to the immigrant's chronic fear of anyone in a government uniform' (Lalami 2025: 19). This demonstrates that diaspora is not a momentary phase but a permanent condition. 'The journey of a migrant does not start and end at the borders; it begins much earlier and may last for a lifetime' (Barhoun and Bourha 2023: 13). Sara, while she despises her father's attitudes, recognizes that her diasporic status exposes her to technological bias and screening: 'familiar prejudices are built into new tools, which search for specific deviations from an enforced norm' (Hildyard 2025: 2). The algorithm cannot be neutral as it is fed data that is saturated with human biases and stereotypes. Sara's problem arises when her data is decoded as an 'outlier':

But that is the trouble. The merchants of data who've spent decades building a taxonomy of human behavior find outliers troublesome. By definition outliers aren't predictable, which also means they're not profitable. Soon, their actions become aberrant, their ideas peculiar, their lives transgressive: they are delinquents. (Lalami 2025: 309)

The text suggests that human behavior has become a commodity whose value depends on its predictability. Individuals who fall outside statistical norms (outliers) are not merely regarded as different; they are gradually constructed as social and economic problems because they resist algorithmic classification and monetization. Being branded as an outlier enrages Sara, yet it is also what empowers her. The algorithmic act of situating Sara as detached highlights computations' failure to account for diasporic hybrid identities. As Abdellah Elboubekri (2014) explicates, diasporic identity involves a 'transnational perspective that enables a blatant contesting of the suppressive structures of hegemonic Homes' (252). Elboubekri's notion of a transnational diaspora recalls Zuboff's argument that we are all migrants under surveillance, suggesting that Lalami's novel constitutes 'a form of diaspora writing from within' (Barhoun and Bourha 2023: 20). This internalization of the diasporic condition that is charged with layered memories and emotions in *The Dream Hotel*, frustrates the algorithm's attempt at universal classification and shatters the fantasy of a homo technologicus devoid of feeling, reaffirming humanity's irreducible emotional complexity through allegories of dreams.

4. Conclusion: reclaiming the dream

By asking what happens when dreams no longer belong to us, Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* invites readers to question the limits of data-driven logic and to imagine forms of resistance fashioned through dreams, emotions, art and nature. The novel depicts a world where the neoliberal rationality reduces individuals to data points and capitalizes on dreams through datafication enterprises, shedding light on the risks of living a life driven by predictive algorithms and biometric surveillance. The text also draws on Romanticism to affirm the value of subjective experiences. Dreams become para-technologies that serve as sanctuaries where emotions can be recollected in tranquility, beyond the reach of quantification. Through invoking the sacredness of dreams and the communal bonds formed

around them, Lalami suggests that not all human life can be commodified. Dreams and nature represent forms of resistance because they preserve forms of human experience—emotion, uncertainty, imagination, and connection—that cannot be fully translated into algorithmic data. Diaspora in the novel complicates the narrative by bringing intense emotions of belonging, protection and cultural memory—feelings that elude the algorithm’s calculations, revealing the inadequacy of purely technical approaches to social risk. Ultimately, *The Dream Hotel* shows that the modern homo technologicus is not a desensitized machine-like individual, but an emotional being entrapped within the psyche through surveillance capitalism. Our dreams are thus our most potent tools for resisting the privatization of the psyche. As Christine Rosen warns, we must reclaim serendipity, community and risk; Lalami’s story adds that we must also reclaim our dreams.

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