


Border Control

Her novel *The Dream Hotel* explores a sci-fi vision of detention and dream surveillance – but to Moroccan American author Laila Lalami, the nightmare is all too real.

by **Mek Yimam**

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When Laila Lalami got the idea for her latest novel, which is set in a near-future surveillance state, one of the first things she did was re-read Orwell's *1984*. It struck her as quaint that Orwell had imagined it'd take an external, authoritarian force to embed surveillance tools into our lives. Four decades on from the speculative year of that title, we find ourselves giving away more and more personal data in exchange for convenience, although the extent of our free will in that exchange is increasingly questionable.

Prior to Zoom-ing from her LA home, the author ran an errand. "I was just at the pharmacy, trying to pick up a prescription, and the pharmacist said, 'I can tell you when your prescription is ready. Here, download this app.'" With frustration, Lalami adds, "She was right in front of me, but she wouldn't give it to me until I, you know, *downloaded the app*. How much of this is really willful at this stage?"

In *The Dream Hotel*, the author places Big Tech front and centre of a dystopian future. When protagonist Sara Hussein undergoes security screening at LAX airport, she is flagged as being at risk of committing a future crime against her husband, based on her digital data – including emails,

social media interactions and data from her dreams. To make possible the surveillance of dreams, the author imagined an apparatus implanted in the brain, with users susceptible to ignoring the fine print and waiving rights to their subconscious in return for the promise of better sleep. Separated from her husband and infant twins, Sara endures indefinite detention without trial, as well as the gradual erosion of her dignity, power and grasp of reality.

When Lalami started writing the novel, her protagonist was a male computer programmer working for the tech company behind the sleep aid. Feeling the story didn't have traction, the author cast it aside until after she completed her fifth book *The Other Americans* (2019). Things fell into place when she switched to a female protagonist, lending an additional layer to the novel's themes.



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"We live in a patriarchy, which is a system of control," Lalami says, "and every system of control depends on surveillance for its disciplinary functions."

Sara's career further underscores questions about data collection. Lalami originally cast the character as a museum archivist, and then revised it to digital archivist – connecting ideas of the archives of old to the ever-expanding archives of the digital age. In Sara's background as a historian of post-colonial Africa, Lalami found "a way to bring in ideas about what happened when European powers colonised Africa, and took over both the land and the creation of archives around the land and its people".

However, while refining characterisation, there was never a question about ethnicity. "I want to create a body of work that places Moroccan characters at the centre of stories, whether those stories take place in the past, present or future," she says.

For Lalami, the parallels between Big Tech's ambitions and older forms of empire are evident. Born and raised in post-colonial Morocco, Lalami lived in the North African country until early adulthood. "I saw what my grandparents, what my parents, and what I went through as a result of 44 years of French presence in Morocco, and what it did to our political system, our social system, our educational system, our culture. All of that interruption and its consequences."

When extrapolating Big Tech's ambitions into the near future, it made sense to the author that if all our data were captured, the next frontier would be the capture and commodification of our unconscious. In the case of Big Tech, Lalami says, "instead of extracting sugar or cotton or rum or any of the commodities that drove other empires, the resource is data, and it's the nature of empire to be dissatisfied with the amount of extraction it can get".

The Dream Hotel raises questions around the ownership of our bodies, the data they produce and, ultimately, our freedom. Lalami is troubled by the slow but steady claim Big Tech is making on this corporal information: "One of

the fundamental things about freedom is this idea that you own your body. You get to decide what to do with its labour – whether to sell that labour or to make it work for you."

This perspective has allowed Lalami to recast her own digital habits. Upon waking, she asks herself, "Do I want the first thing that I do to be reach for my phone, click onto social media and make more money for Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk?"

Lalami renders a plausible future surveillance state by drawing from life, taking trends she's observed to their logical conclusion. "I found at least some inspiration from the policy of administrative detention that Israel uses on Palestinians, where Palestinians are detained without charge for six months," she says. "They could conceivably be in prison for several years without ever knowing why."

She also looked to the treatment of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants by many Western countries. "The United States government imprisoning a person because of a dream doesn't seem so far-fetched to me because we are, in effect, imprisoning immigrants when all they want is to take part in the American Dream," Lalami says.

The author's promotional tour for *The Dream Hotel* includes upcoming events in Melbourne and Sydney. The Adelaide leg of the trip was cancelled when Lalami joined over 150 other authors in withdrawing from Adelaide Writers' Week, following the Adelaide Festival board's decision to disinvite Palestinian Australian writer Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah. "We've seen in the last two years, at least in the US, any number of organisations implode over the question of Gaza," Lalami says, "so this wasn't a huge surprise to me." She finds hope not only in the large show of solidarity by writers, but also in the signal that the Festival's cancellation and public apologies send. "All these people who say that arts don't matter and we shouldn't fund them – we have daily proof that, in fact, arts do matter, or else people wouldn't be going to these extents to stop some people from speaking."

While readers may feel *The Dream Hotel* is prescient and frighteningly plausible, its author offers optimism: "They want us to believe that the march of technology is unstoppable, but the future is not yet decided."

Lalami points out that we shouldn't underestimate the inherent difficulty in controlling human beings.

"Every time you take the trouble to say, 'No, I'm not downloading the app, and you need to give me my medication over the counter right now', that is a gesture to our freedom. We need to do more of that, both individually and as communities, as pressure groups; work together in solidarity; work together to vote together." ■

THE DREAM HOTEL IS OUT NOW. LAILA LALAMI APPEARS AT THE WHEELER CENTRE IN MELBOURNE ON 4 MARCH, AND AT SYDNEY'S ALL ABOUT WOMEN FESTIVAL ON 8 MARCH.