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Book Review: Tung-Hui Hu’s *Digital Lethargy*

The word lethargy comes from the Greek word for “forgetting” (same as the river Lethe, from which the living drinks to pass into death). Those affected by lethargy, a pathological condition, fall into a state of inactivity, drowsiness, and a complete oblivion of who they are, what they ought to do. Lethargy took many forms throughout history, such as the invention and criminalization of sloth and vagrancy in the nineteenth century, the post-industrial revolution emergence of fatigue, and the contemporary workplace burnout that ought to be treated to create better, indefatigable workers for both “manual” and “mental” work. Today, lethargy characterizes the entrapped state of users and servers within the uneven thrall of digital capitalism across race, gender, and class. In his new book, *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches From an Age of Disconnection*, poet and digital media scholar Tung-hui Hu takes up forms of disengagement, exhaustion, and passivity in the digital age as they divide but also laterally unite the digital underclass and the agential user. Entering conversations with scholars of race, work, performance, and digital media, as well as a wide range of contemporary artists, Hu contemplates the critical and social capacities lodged within lethargy, a state that denotes “the failures of subjectivity in an age where each minute act of self-expression, choice, and autonomy is converted to data and capital” (Hu xii).

In the introduction, Hu gives a vivid description of what lethargy looks like across the user-server divide: For users, lethargy takes form as the exhaustion of being constantly prod into a state of apparently agential activity through the interactivity of network technology and client-server computing. Any form of disengagement from the digital world ought to be “treated by algorithms that prod the user into individuating themselves through a stream of clicks, or by social networks that remind the user of opportunities missed, or by trackers and sensors that convert even the failure to respond [...] into a form of data” (Hu viii). The act of picking and choosing might feel liberating and empowering, fulfilling the liberal selfhood of “being yourself,” yet the mandate to express, to participate, and to individuate oneself is exactly the conversion of one’s selfhood and personhood into streams of commodified data and capital. The promised newness, excitement, and interactivity of technology mine engagement and self-expression, turning choice into a compulsion, and leave behind a vague feeling of disappointment and disengagement – a blockaged sense of “not wanting to be oneself” that for Hu characterizes lethargy (ix).

The privilege of choice and to “be yourself” however is not afforded equally to everyone. Whereas the user chooses, acts, and uses services, their interactivity and engagement are realized through the “serves” – not just computing technology but casualized, hidden human labor that completes the circuit and fulfills services on-demand. These are “workers who rent out their spare time and resources for small, even minuscule jobs. Whether data gathering, transcription, Uber drivers, social media bots, they are an “army of freelancers across the globe [who] log on and await instructions but typically have little choice in whom they will work for” (Hu xiv). They wait for, and wait on, the user to give instructions and make decisions. Throughout the book, Hu develops the observation that client-server computing is the infrastructural and racial form of digital capitalism. It is a racializing and differentiating mechanism that posits the difference between the human and the non-human, the subject and the object. The distinction between user and server is no doubt traversed by the history of racism, colonialism, and imperialism. On one hand, there are the “(predominantly white, live, human) bodies of users, and on the other, the (racialized, bot-like, imitative, lethargic) bodies of outsiders” – those who sell their personhood in exchange for livelihood in the digital world (Hu xix). In other words, users and servers experience lethargy differently and differentially.

Yet rather than pathologizing the condition of lethargy as something to be treated and ameliorated, whether by tech companies or first world scholars of digital media who prescribe for marginalized subjects their form of resistance, Hu examines the potential of lethargy as an aesthetic and analytical category, as well as a scholarly intervention. Rather than construing forms of lethargy as political acts of willful resistance or even refusal, Hu’s important intervention is to first articulate the forms of political and social personhood, livelihood, (un)feelings, and desires that simply brush up against the perfect, enclosed feedback loop of digital capitalism. In part, Hu’s intervention is a narrative one, where he poses the following question: “what is the narrative of an object [the server] that does not visibly act but simply waits to receive action?” (19). In other words, this method allows Hu to dwell with the lives of “objects,” or, the human infrastructure of digital capitalism, not to redemptively restore their humanity, but to examine the blurred, yet policed, border between the human and the object, the bot, or the machine under digital capitalism. Lethargy, as Hu writes, “is a drag” (xxix). By inhabiting it, we allow it to “weigh down our ability to rush to solutions, and forces us to listen to the unresolved present. It slows us down within the crises induced by technology” (xxix). In other words, lethargy opens up a critical landscape that rethinks what it means to ethically engage with the oppressed subjects of digital capitalism.

In each of the six chapters of *Digital Lethargy*, Hu looks at a variety of creative and cultural objects, such as memoirs, choreography, performance, digital art, and memes, to articulate forms of disengagement, disassociation, and depersonalization that may be characterized by lethargy under digital capitalism. Each chapter spends time with and untangles diverging threads surrounding each case study of lethargy. As shown throughout the book, Hu’s intervention is particularly valuable as he articulates the ways of endurance, being (together), doing nothing, waiting, and staying put that are more muted than outright resistance but create temporary breaks, deferrals, and pauses within the constant drive of digital capitalism to convert every form of action (and passivity) into value. The loose analytical lens of lethargy undoes the “racialized aspiration for humanity” (a term Hu borrows from Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora) and the “crisis-driven solutions and interventions” that often come with the study of oppression and exploitation. Rather, Hu’s project is not concerned with agendas for political acts or the subversion and reinscription of norms, but the “rich and thriving set of capacities that adhere” to states of exhaustion, waiting, and passivity (27). While it is difficult to tether the idea of “lethargy” to any existing registers of critique, as it often functions across multiple – whether aesthetic, affective, or political, Hu has shown that it is best to think of the “present as a state of lethargy” (27). To understand the present as a state of lethargy means to “embody a pessimistic dwelling in the now” in order to unsettle its lethargic hold on every waking and sleeping minute spent as server/user (27). A more capacious and dynamic *now* emerges from Hu’s work.

The first chapter, entitled “Start When It’s Too Late,” highlights two important threads of *Digital Lethargy*: race and objecthood. In this chapter, Hu examines Heike Genssler’s memoir *Seasonal Associate* about being a short-term Amazon warehouse worker at a crucial node of digital capitalism: in the storehouses and inventories where objects (both physical and human) await on digital orders to fulfill. The temporality of waiting turns contract workers like Genssler into objects that receive action: “the subject slackens from a doer into an object of forces out of her reach: algorithms that calculate employer performance or production quotas, algorithms that respond to consumer desires and wants [...]” (14). This relationship between subject and object, user and server is not only characteristic of digital capitalism, but, as Hu argues, entangled with racialization. One of the key claims that Hu makes throughout the book is the close bond between digital and racial capitalism. “The division between subjects and objects,” as Hu writes, “is [....] the very goal of racialization, which makes some bodies objects and makes other subjects seem universal” (15). The white subject is authorized to act, and to act on objects. To undo this division at the core of racial capitalism, the strategy is not to make objects into subjects, but to lean into objecthood in order to unsettle the division.

Drawing from the work of Asian American studies (Anne Anlin Cheng) and Black studies (Kevin Quashie) scholars who think through the thingness and objecthood of racialized people, Hu argues that to be an object is to “endure through their thingness” (14). Using the term in conversation with performance scholar Lara Shalson, Hu defines endurance as an exploration of “the capacity of bodies to be acted upon” (15). The use of “capacity” here is evocative, as it does not limit itself within the frame of receiving violence and resisting to reverse it. Endurance serves instead “as its own field of potential, separate from protest or resistance,” for “the lethargic process of waiting in digital capitalism is not a process of waiting for a (political) future ot arrive but a process of endurance, of waiting or remaining within an unbearable situation” (16). While endurance might seem like a pessimism that recognizes the impossibility of escape, this lethargic stance is an ethical one when thinking from the perspective of racialized objects. “Far from a null state that should be redeemed and brought to liveness,” lethargy and objecthood denotes a thriving sets of capacities, “another kind of life” that is “lived, laterally,” even though curtailed from the normative, public life of subjects and framed by violence (16).

The second and third chapters of the book extend Hu’s intervention of narrating from and taking seriously the perspective of the server/object in digital capitalism. Hu explores the potentiality of objecthood by expanding on the idea of “recessive action,” a narrative feature coined by literary scholar Anne-Lise Francois. Recessive action “operates in perpendicular to narrative time;” they are “moments that don’t develop the story” and “work to create a different temporal structure” (for example, doom-scrolling). The title of the chapter “Wait, Then Give Up,” aptly captures the recessive and self-defeating state that one feels “from the position of being stuck inside a digital system that is all but impossible to escape” (33). When every glitch and error are subsumed within the constantly self-updating feedback loop of digital capitalism, and even “down time,” or moments of inaction and disengagement, is calculated and monetized into big data, Hu proposes that recessive action harbors a kind of agency. Close reading contemporary artworks of Katherine Behar, Tega Brain, Surya Mattu, and Yoshua Okón, Hu observes how forms of fatigue, exhaustion, and laboriousness disturbs the “frictionless movement and flexibility” idealized by digital capitalism and neoliberalism (50). Analyzing Behar’s *Data’s Entry*, a performance artwork that “request[s] the maximum amount of effort and discomfort from [the] performers,” Hu observes how it “replaces the idea of ‘doing nothing’ as resistance with the questions of embodiment raised by ‘doing nothing,’ whether out of exhaustion, fatigue, race, or gender” (60). To use Hu’s words, leaning into and enduring the state of lethargy is to “mark time differently” in a way that gives alternative shapes to the temporality of waiting and disengagement, despite their subsumption into the frictionless temporality of digital capitalism (61).

Each of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explores different forms of collectivity and proximity that are alternative to the sociality of a group of individuated consumers. In these chapters, Hu not only extrapolates the effect of algorithmically sorting and categorizing people into consumer groups, but also proposes modes of being together that undo the individuation and differentiation of populations. Looking at the artworks of Erica Scourti, Hu observes how they allow us to “let go of our claim of being complex, individual subjects in search of others with common interests, and still find ourselves together, however lethargically, with others online” (145). Within the constant formation and destruction of algorithmic categories, “such forms of relationality,” Hu argues, “are already flourishing within the space of digital capitalism, rather than outside it” (128). In the sixth and final chapter, Hu engages with the work of Puerto Rican dancer and performance artist nibia pastrana santiago to situate lethargic agency in idleness. Without losing sight of the specific legacy of imperialism and colonialism in Puerto Rico that has led to its becoming a destination for touristic idleness, as well as the increasing impossibility of political action, Hu doubles down on the idea that lethargy is “not automatically a creative or revolutionary act [...]” but “a sign of an encounter or friction between multiple modes of time” (162). In fact, the deferral of action reveals precisely that “that action need not always be actualized for it to have an effect in the world,” potentially leading to a political (in)action of other means (164).

Overall, despite the broad use of the term lethargy throughout the book and often in contradictory manners, the breadth of materials and cases covered do not indicate a lack of specificity. Rather, examining a wide range of materials, Hu does not give in to any apparent aporias or frustrations of being stuck (being “lethargic”), nor does he draw any prescriptive path to “unoppress” the oppressed. Instead, Hu dwells with the muted and often contradictory forms of lethargy that surface as unfulfilled affects, passivities, and the absence of action. Lethargy as a method attends to the pauses, difficult movements, deferrals, and vigilance that syncopate the rhythm of digital capitalism. Hu’s additional intervention to critics of digital capitalism is to take seriously the aspirations and desires, despite how recessive and self-defeating them might appear, of the underclass of digital capitalism. However, despite Hu’s deep engagement with a variety of materials, the book fails to tie them together in a meaningful way. For example, despite engaging with both artistic works and real world case studies of digital capitalism both from Hu’s own observations and the work of other scholars, Hu falls short of the basic step of establishing why this interpretive method might be crucial for examining lethargy. Moreover, this method begs the question: to what extent is lethargy at the register of the aesthetic equivalent to lethargy at the material register, when, of course, those registers were never defined in the first place? Lethargy in this sense appears more like a constellation of materials rather than a singular definition or method – this might after all be the point of the book. Like the effect of lethargy itself, the book harbors many latent threads for further exploration for scholars of digital media and makes spaces for unique, even contradictory constellations that untangle the complex effects of digital capitalism.

Works Cited

Hu, Tung-hui. *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection*. The MIT Press, 2022.