

**Tung-Hui Hu.** *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2022. 288 pp.

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Doom-scrolling through your social media feed at 2 a.m. An infinitely looping GIF. The endless exhaustion that stems from the constant pressure to “be yourself” in a world where every one of your choices is converted into mineable data. These are a few of countless examples that Tung-Hui Hu uses to illustrate what he calls *digital lethargy*—a uniquely present-day affect characterized by emotional blockage, inaction, and ambivalence. In his ambitious and genre-defying new book, *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection*, Hu grapples with what it means to write about a feeling rather than a specific technology or geographic locale. Like cultural critic Sianne Ngai, whose influence is palpable, the book theorizes and traces the emergence of a feeling considered bad or undesirable in order to better understand the historical present.<sup>1</sup> Each chapter of *Digital Lethargy* closely engages with a contemporary artistic or literary object that is “recessive, self-defeating, even passive” in order to argue for the importance of lethargic feelings in and of themselves (p. xx). From Heike Geissler’s *Seasonal Associate* (a 2014 memoir of her time working in an Amazon warehouse) to Tega Brain and Surya Mattu’s *Unfit Bits Metronome* (a piece consisting of a Fitbit strapped to a metronome so a human user can fake their steps), these works demonstrate the ways in which lethargy might provide an alternative to today’s technology-driven crisis mentality. As Hu argues, it might help readers better understand their own relationship to the always-on temporality of digital capitalism and even personhood itself.

*Digital Lethargy* expands on Hu’s argument about digital subjectivity first outlined in *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (2015), in which tech companies capitalize on the idea of the “empowered” user who exerts sovereignty over a passive, nonhuman server.<sup>2</sup> The user/server binary, Hu argues here, is an exemplar of racial capitalism, in which selfhood is not afforded to everyone in the same way (in a recurring example, he cites how microworkers in East Asia and the Global South who engage in repetitive tasks like tagging photos or clicking *like* on social media posts are frequently stereotyped as inherently “robot-like” and better-suited to menial labor [p. 83]). But because lethargy is a shared burden—albeit an uneven one—that transcends the user/server divide, it also shows how the lines between the two are blurrier than they seem. One key argument the book makes is that lethargy helps demystify the ideology of liveness sold to users that is so often equated with agency and choice. By contrast, lethargic feelings inhabit a “dead time” in which activities such as waiting and killing time become a form of political survival where “to endure something is to mark time differently” (pp. 27, 61).

Endurance, Hu argues, has been virtually ignored by critics as a mode of existing in today’s always-on temporality. In his discussion of outsourced labor in the Philippines, India, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, Hu counters common liberal critiques of oppression and exploitation. Not only are these narratives paternalistic, he argues—they assume that the so-called digital underclass is coming from a position of ignorance—but they also reveal the ways in which the widely held Western values of freedom and choice can be limiting when it comes to understanding the workings of digital capitalism. By looking to moments of joy, creativity, and ambition among microworkers in the Global South, he reveals how rather than being naively taken advantage of, these workers have a much more ambivalent relationship to their own labor than they are typically given credit for. Hu urges his readers to take these lethargic feelings seriously: they present an alternative to the typical paradigm of resistance and in turn help us better understand the way social

1. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015).

2. Tung Hui-Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), p. 59.

inequalities like race, class, and gender are embedded within our everyday interactions with digital interfaces.

*Digital Lethargy* is a deeply personal and experimental work: Hu frequently draws from his previous employment as a network engineer, as well as anecdotes about the (often racialized) burdens of selfhood he has faced online and in the workplace. His second career as a published poet is also evident in lines like “What is it like to live inside ‘dead’ time?,” and an elegiac postscript written entirely in the second person (p. xxiv). While reading, I started to notice lethargic feelings everywhere: not only could I finally put a name to my own ambivalence towards ubiquitous tech and the burdens of selfhood, but I saw it in the media I consumed. I saw it in Bo Burnham’s quarantine Netflix special *Inside* (2021), in the languid musical phrasings of Lana Del Rey, and in the bilingual Spanish-English series *Los Espookys* (2019–), in which a gig worker finds employment in one episode as a “human Fitbit.” And isn’t this the most we can ask of ourselves as scholars, that we provide a new lens through which our readers can view the world? Despite its subject matter, *Digital Lethargy* is a surprisingly uplifting read: it encourages us to pause, contemplate, and “do nothing” for a few quiet minutes, before we have to return to the relentless rhythms of digital life (p. 83).

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