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# **‘ASMR’ Autobiographies and the (Life-)Writing of Digital Subjectivity**

**Rob Gallagher**

**King’s College London**

## **Abstract**

For years a growing online subculture has been exchanging videos designed to induce ‘autonomous sensory meridian response’ (ASMR), a mysterious, blissfully relaxing tingling sensation held to alleviate anxiety, pain, insomnia and depression. Emerging from online health forums, ASMR culture today centres on YouTube, where ‘ASMRtists’ have used the feedback mechanisms built into social media to refine a repertoire of ‘trigger’ techniques. Exemplifying a wider trend for using ‘ambient media’ as mood modulators and task facilitators (Roquet 2016), ASMR culture’s use of the word ‘trigger’ is telling, gesturing towards what Halberstam (2014) sees as a shift away from the Freudian notion of ‘memory as a palimpsest’ towards one of memory as ‘a live wire sitting in the psyche waiting for a spark’, whereby digital subjects become a black-boxed node in a cybernetic circuit.

This shift has serious implications for the humanities, and is particularly resonant for scholars of life writing. As McNeill (2012) argues, digital technologies ‘complicate[] definitions of the self and its boundaries, both dismantling and sustaining the humanist subject in practices of personal narrative’ (65). The resulting friction is highlighted in ‘ASMR autobiographies’: texts narrating the author’s experiences of ASMR and their discovery of online ASMR communities. Echoing familiar auto/biographical forms, from medical case histories and coming out narratives to tales of religious conversion, these texts show that the models of subjectivity we have inherited from Enlightenment philosophy, religion, psychology and Romantic literature retain some cultural purchase. But they also suggest digital media are fostering new understandings of personhood informed by cybernetics, evolutionary psychology, behaviourism and neuroscience. Focusing on works by Andrew MacMuiris,

Andrea Seigel and Jon Kersey while also addressing a range of other texts, this article puts asks what ASMR autobiographies can tell us about digital subjectivity.

## **Introduction**

For much of the last decade a growing subculture of Internet users has been exchanging and creating videos designed to induce what they call ‘autonomous sensory meridian response’ (ASMR), a mysterious, blissfully relaxing tingling sensation held to alleviate anxiety, pain, insomnia and depression. Described in terms of ‘starbursts’ (Seigel, 2013) or shivers (Andersen, 2015: 684) that begin in the scalp and spread throughout the body, individuals report experiences of ASMR that go back decades. It was only in the late 2000s, however, that a discourse and a culture of ASMR began to coalesce, emerging from message boards, blogs, Yahoo groups and online health communities before migrating to platforms like Reddit, Facebook and YouTube, where a sizeable community of ‘ASMRtists’ now posts ‘trigger videos’ designed to elicit the sensation.

The growth of ASMR culture has attracted a good deal of interest from the ‘old media’ in the form of daytime TV segments, newspaper articles and radio interviews. Serving as inspiration for contemporary artists and avant-garde musicians, ASMRtists’ videos have also resonated with advertisers, spawning ASMR-style campaigns for everything from fried chicken to flat-pack wardrobes (Fowler, 2018). Academics, meanwhile, have considered the phenomenon from various perspectives. Some of this work has come from the fields of medicine and the biological sciences, addressing ASMR’s etiology, assessing claims as to its therapeutic benefits (Barratt and Davis, 2015; del Campo and Kehle, 2016) and unpacking its implications for clinical practice (Ahuja, 2013). In many cases, though, it has been scholars from the humanities who have been drawn to ASMR culture. ASMR videos have been read as products of gendered affective labour (Sadowski, 2016), as ‘symptomatic of... the poverty of care within the late digital capitalist contemporary moment’ (Bjelić, 2016: 103), as exemplifying the cultural agency of algorithms (Gallagher, 2016), and as pioneering new

forms of intimacy and posthuman eroticism (Andersen, 2015; Waldron, 2017); work from sound studies has considered them as a means of cultivating ‘sonic intimacy’ (Pettman, 2017: 20-21) or manifesting a ‘sonic agency of the weak’ (Labelle, 2018: 129); psychoanalytic critics have interpreted them as a sign of our ‘eroticis[ation]’ of the brain (de Vos, 2016: 135) or a means of negotiating the anxiety-inducing ‘lacklessness’ of digital culture (Manon, 2018: 242).

As this work shows, ASMR opens onto some of the key issues in digital culture: our ever-more intimate relationship with networked devices; the changing character of work; the formation of communities and collective identities online; the implications of algorithmic systems for human agency; the influence of medical breakthroughs on popular conceptions of the body and brain; the emergence of new cultural forms that prioritise feeling over meaning. As Manon asserts, ‘regardless of whether culture is broadly aware of ASMR’s existence’ it remains ‘emblematically millennial... a definitive marker of twenty-first century living’ (ibid. 244) - and, one might add, of digital subjectivity. To study it is to reckon with the profound methodological and epistemological questions facing the humanities in the digital era.

Most scholarly accounts of ASMR culture focus on ASMRtists’ videos, the technologies used to create them and the platforms used to distribute them. I want to look instead at a selection of what I’m calling ‘ASMR autobiographies’: texts narrating the authors’ experiences of ASMR and their discovery of the online culture devoted to it. These texts often appeal to traditional, humanistic conceptions of the subject, even as they gesture towards the new understandings of subjectivity and selfhood emerging in the wake of digitization. This tension within ASMR culture has not gone unremarked upon by critics, who have argued that the trigger video form is more radical than its exponents perhaps realise or are willing to admit (ibid. 232; Andersen, 2015: 685). Rather than reading ASMR autobiographies as denying or failing to recognize what is remarkable and potentially transgressive about ASMR, however, I see them as consciously grappling with the same issues that have drawn scholars to the

subculture. Taking cues from life writing theory, this article will show how first-hand accounts of ASMR inherit and rework familiar auto/biographical forms and genres in the attempt to convey what the transition to digital subjectivity feels like.

I intend for the term ASMR autobiographies to encompass everything from essays, radio interviews and vlogs to tweets, forum posts and the personal anecdotes that often feature in both academic (Bjelić, 2016: 101) and journalistic (Marshall, 2018) writing on the subject. While the article will consider a range of examples I have chosen to focus on three texts in particular: Andrew MacMuiris' *Unnamed Feeling* blog (2010-2013), novelist Andrea Seigel's audio essay for the podcast *This American Life* (2013) and Jon Kersey's 'Notes on the Emergence of ASMR Theory' (2014). A number of factors have informed this selection. These texts date from a moment when ASMR was just beginning to enter the cultural mainstream and the terms for subsequent discussions were being set. They also date from what already feels like an earlier phase in online culture, and, as such, provide an opportunity to think about how modes of self-presentation have shifted as new platforms have emerged and the mechanisms governing the production and consumption of web content have developed. Finally, they are recognisably rooted in formal and stylistic conventions familiar from pre-digital life writing. While the article also addresses an array of less traditional ASMR autobiographies, the fact that these texts are in many ways so conventional serves to highlight the difficulty of reconciling the phenomena they discuss with the conceptual models that still underpin much life writing.

My analysis of these texts is broken into three sections, respectively centred on searching, sexuality and infancy. Searching plays a key role in ASMR autobiographies, which tend to conform to the 'self-discovery/disclosure paradigm... that structures... modern notions of how identities work' (Gray, 2009: 1181). If digital technologies have cemented this framing of identity as something 'out there' to be sought and found, I propose that ASMR autobiographies can help us to think through its implications. The article then moves on to sex, a controversial subject within ASMR culture. While popular pundits have repeatedly

proposed that trigger videos might be seen as a form of ‘soft-soft-core porn’ (Roy, 2014) or ‘female porn’ (Brand, 2015), the ASMR community has, for the most part, vehemently resisted such readings – despite having initially used terms like ‘braingasm’ to describe the sensation. The question of sexuality has also divided academic critics of ASMR culture (see de Vos, 2016: 133-5; Manon, 2018: 240; Andersen, 2015; Waldron, 2017). Here I draw on the work of Angerer (2015) to argue that ASMR’s vexed relationship with sex must be understood in the context of ‘the replacement of the *dispositif* of sex by that of affect’ (xv, 115). Having done so, I move on to consider how representations of infancy and childhood function in ASMR discourse. Seemingly self-evident today, the notion that childhood experiences are a formative influence on the adult personality was in fact popularized by Romantic life writers like Rousseau and Wordsworth before becoming a key tenet of psychoanalysis (Anderson 2011: 51, 58). While ASMR autobiographies often describe episodes from childhood, many are ultimately less interested in the timeframe of individual biography than they are the ‘deep time’ of human evolution. This preference, I argue, reflects digital culture’s propensity to think as much in terms of species-level capacities and population-wide tendencies as individual lives and personalities. The conclusion reiterates the claim that by analyzing how ASMR autobiographies draw on and depart from life writing conventions we can gain a fuller sense of what it means to become digital subjects – a concept I will expand upon before turning to the texts.

### **Neurons and Networks**

While there are many factors at play in the emergence of digital subjectivity, this article will be concerned with two developments in particular. The first is the emergence of search engines, social media, video streaming platforms and algorithmic content curation mechanisms. ASMR autobiographies give a sense of how these systems have begun to inform both our methods of sharing our lives and our modes of understanding subjectivity. They demonstrate how, in the ‘culture of search’ inaugurated by Google, we have come to ‘incorporate “the searcher” as a component of personal identity’ (Hillis, Petit and Jarrett,

2012: 5), while also showing how digital platforms configure relationships between single users and broader collectivities and assemblages. The second development I wish to address is the growing purchase of ‘neurobiological conceptions of personhood’ (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013: 9). Emerging in the wake of ‘very real advances in the understanding of the brain, made possible by new technologies’ (Smail, 2008: 118), ASMR culture has looked to neuroscience for a better understanding of the tingles, and with it, a means of legitimising a phenomenon that has often been treated as weird, seedy or ridiculous. Whatever else it is, ASMR is an index of the cultural cachet of neurocentric accounts of identity, behaviour and subjectivity.

These developments – the emergence of new neuro technologies and discourses on the one hand and that of a social web driven by demography and data-mining on the other – should both be seen in terms of a broader tendency to view bodies, brains and digital technologies (and indeed more or less everything else) as nodes in cybernetic networks through which energy and information flow. ASMR video culture provides a valuable case study in how this logic shapes online activity. While it is, to be sure, a product of human intentionality and creativity, it also speaks to the agency of nonhuman actors and of techno-organic circuits, and exemplifies a growing tendency to treat media less as expressive works than as mood modulators and task facilitators, means of eliciting optimal psychosomatic states (Gallagher, 2016). Not everyone experiences ASMR, and, as Barratt and Davis (2015) confirm, those who do will not necessarily react in the same way to the same stimuli. The responses ASMR videos evoke vary in character and intensity, from euphoric tingling to serene contentment, drowsiness to a sense of enhanced focus. Common triggers include whispering, soft sounds (such as scratching, tapping and rustling), deliberate gestures and ‘close personal attention’. Accordingly, ASMRtists’ videos are often formatted as roleplays wherein performers address the camera in tones of hushed solicitude, perhaps taking on the guise of an optometrist administering an eye test, a shop assistant complimenting us on our outfit or some other figure responsible for providing care, expert assistance or affirmation. Other videos privilege

haptics and texture over interpersonal dynamics, and might feature ASMRtists eating, manipulating feathers, sand or slime, or diligently performing delicate tasks – in her ASMR autobiography Chelsea Fagan (2012) confides that ‘one of my favourite [triggers] is watching someone draw an intricate drawing, perhaps while they whisper about nonsense’. Videos frequently contain in-jokes, allusions and intertextual references designed to create a sense of belonging (in one recent video ASMRtist WhispersRed dresses up as the painter and broadcaster Bob Ross, who has, as we shall see, become something of an ASMR icon (WhispersRed ASMR, 2018)), and the trigger video form has also cross-bred with other popular genres, resulting in ASMR unboxing videos, ASMR videogame walkthroughs, and whispered readings of Hollywood starlets’ biographies. There are, then, many kinds of ASMR video and many reasons why viewers consume them. In general, though, it feels fair to say that ASMRtists’ videos function less as ‘texts’ to be interpreted or narratives to be followed than as ‘inputs’ that succeed or fail in producing the desired physiological ‘output’, whether that be tingles, sleep, a feeling of tranquility or relief from pain. For many viewers their primary value is as what Smail (2008) calls ‘autotropic’ devices: ‘mechanisms that influence the body chemistry of the self’ (174).

While the same could be said of many media forms (witness Williams’ influential work on cinematic ‘body genres’ like pornography and melodrama (1991: 3)), recent years have seen a marked uptick in media forms that frame themselves in such terms, from Spotify workout playlists to mindfulness-promoting colouring books. ASMR videos are part of what Kendall (2017), in her work on Napflix (a streaming service catering to insomniacs), characterises as a new wave of ‘ambient media’ (Roquet, 2016), ‘technologies of self-care’ sold to users as means of regulating affects and recuperating from the stresses of contemporary life (12). While new media have made these nascent forms of technological self-governance possible, for Roquet a more important driver is the continued dominance of neoliberalism, and a concomitant shift in how subjects are asked to understand themselves. In policy terms, neoliberalism is identified with the deregulation of financial markets, the retraction of state



welfare provision and the transfer of power from the public to the private sector. Ideologically, it is indebted to classical liberalism's conception of subjects as rational actors who should be free to pursue their interests, though in practice its high-flung rhetoric of personal autonomy and self-reliance has boiled down to a reality of individuals increasingly left to fend for themselves in contexts of intensifying competition, income inequality and economic insecurity. Moreover, 'unlike traditional liberalism, which maintained the functional and normative distinctions between the state and civil society, neoliberalism seeks to construct market-type relations where none previously existed' (Catlaw and Sandberg, 2018: 6). This penetration of market logic into areas of life hitherto considered outside the economic sphere is, critics contend, bringing about a reformulation of subjectivity itself. Roquet's analysis draws on Rose's claim that if, for much of the twentieth century, subjects were asked to identify as 'psychological selves' possessed of an 'interiority governed by unconscious attachments, habitual beliefs and repressed memories' (Roquet, 2016: 10), then neoliberalism has introduced new forms of 'subjectivation', enjoining individuals 'to understand themselves in somatic terms' (Rose, 2007: 254), compatible with emerging scientific understandings of human beings as 'assemblage[s] of diverse, largely preconscious systems' (Roquet, 2016: 10). This reconception of the subject has provided the conceptual underpinnings for new forms of 'management of the body or mind-via-the body conducted through... personal information-technology devices and Web 2.0 interfaces' (Catlaw and Sandberg, 2018: 4). In such a context ambient media like ASMR videos offer means of helping somatised digital subjects to comply with the demands of market-oriented societies, remaining fit, flexible, presentable and resilient – as behoves 'responsibilized' entrepreneurial actors in pursuit of self-actualization.

### **ASMR, Auto/biography and the Human(ities)**

ASMR, then, begs to be understood in the context of a digitally inflected upheaval in our understanding of subjectivity. The implications of this upheaval are particularly resonant for

scholars of life writing. If autobiography is still widely understood as entailing retrospective reflection on the part of psychologically ‘deep’ individuals concerned with providing a narrative account of, and a rationale for, their past actions, theorists of auto/biography and life writing have long worked to unsettle and to historicize these assumptions, ‘rigorously critiqu[ing] the “givens” of autobiography’ and foregrounding its ‘role in shoring up a bourgeois or otherwise normative model of individualist subjectivity’ (Rak and Poletti, 2014: 6; Ni Dhuill, 2012: 280). Looking beyond the realm of ‘retrospective book-length, first-person prose narrative[s]’ by eminent cultural figures (ibid. 281), the field has for decades now sought to draw attention to other kinds of ‘autobiographical acts’ (Bruss, 1976), other media and other lives – particularly those of subjects marginalized for reasons of gender, ethnicity, class or ability. The advent of the internet has seen its remit expand still further to encompass the range of ‘non-narrative online identity practices’ (Rak, 2015: 161) that have proliferated thanks to digital platforms and devices. From Rak’s elaboration of the concept of ‘automedia’ (intended to address ‘how the disruptive features of identity-formation and attempts to normalize these disruptions operate in digital media at the present time’ (ibid.)) to Morrison’s (2014) refunctioning of affordance theory to elucidate the strategies digital platforms use to ‘coax’ identity performance from users, scholars of auto/biography and life writing remain committed to mapping and unpacking discourses and practices of personal identity.

These efforts have only become more important as technological developments and neuroscientific breakthroughs threaten to render the models of causality, temporality and intentionality that grounded both the humanist subject and the autobiographical tradition entirely obsolete. While one might argue that ‘new media’ simply extend and diversify our means of recording our lives, for Hansen (2015) they cannot ‘support the kinds of reflective experience and memory’ on which autobiography has traditionally drawn (40). Increasingly, such media are designed to capture ‘molecular increments of behaviour’ rather than ‘integrated human “lived experience”’ (ibid.), logging ‘infraindividual fragments of

experience' (Rouvroy 2017) on the basis of which populations' practices, tastes and probable future behaviours can be extrapolated. While Rouvroy rejects the Enlightenment ideal of the fully rational, fully autonomous subject as a pernicious fiction and acknowledges the role of habit and the preconscious in directing human behaviour, she also believes it is necessary to affirm and defend the retrospective and introspective, reflective and deliberative faculties that mark humans out as 'autobiographical animals' (Derrida, 2008: 49-50).

ASMR culture's alignment with these new understandings of subjectivity is signaled by its use of the term 'trigger'. Manon contends that 'in being triggered, or even in having toyed with the idea that triggers exist' we abandon the status of 'humanistic Cartesian subjects' (243); Halberstam (2014), meanwhile, argues that to view media as affective triggers is to replace the familiar metaphor of 'memory as a palimpsest, burying material under layers of inscription' (a metaphor originating in the Romantic life writing of De Quincey (1998[1845]: 139-146) and popularized by psychoanalysis) with that of 'a live wire sitting in the psyche waiting for a spark'. Where Freud 'conceptualiz[ed] the subject as an archaeological terrain of invisible signs, the hidden strata of which have to be revealed by patient linguistic excavation' (Preciado, 2013: 158), here they become a black-boxed node in a cybernetic circuit, a biomechanical signal processor. This reconception poses fundamental questions for the humanities; as Galloway (2014) puts it, 'why plumb the recesses of the human mind when the neurological sciences can determine what people really think? Why try to interpret a painting, when what really matters are the kinds of pre-conscious affective responses it elicits....?' (29). Psychoanalytic critics, in particular, have objected that by attributing the lion's share of human behaviour to preconscious faculties that do not lend themselves to interpretation or narration, 'neurologisation' reduces us to our grey matter, 'invalidat[ing] us as interlocutors' (de Vos, 2016: 2) and foreclosing 'the dimension of translation that permits an opening of the body through language' (Angerer, 2015: 107).

Naturally, one would expect Freudians and Lacanians to balk at the advent of a 'post-

psychoanalytic age... that favours the body and the biological sciences at the expense of any notion of the psychological unconscious' (Leys and Goldman, 2010: 673). Things are more complex for critical theorists of gender, race, sexuality and dis/ability, who have traditionally been suspicious of Cartesian and Freudian discourses of the subject while remaining equally wary of 'biologism' and 'essentialism' (Leys, 2017: 311). Halberstam's piece suggests how the shift towards digital subjectivity can leave such scholars seeming to pine for the very epistemological frameworks we have spent so long deconstructing, interrogating and historicising. Of course, there are also those who had come to consider the humanities' 'reflexive anti-scientism' (Smail, 2008: 11) something of a 'straitjacket' (Leys, 2017: 311). As the growing popularity of affect theory, posthumanism, neuroaesthetics and cognitivism in film, philosophy and literature departments attests, many scholars are keen to explore how scientific discourse might inform critical accounts of culture, history and subjectivity. Rose and Abi-Rached (2013) acknowledge multiple reasons why 'many in the social and human sciences' might be troubled by the extent to which 'brains are becoming central to who we are as human beings', from the sorry history of racist pseudoscience to popular neurodiscourse's complicity with neoliberalism (21, 2). They also contend, however, that serious neuroscience is highly compatible with the humanities' tradition of challenging 'notions of human beings as individualized, discrete, autonomous, coherent subjects, free to choose', while insisting that 'neurobiological conceptions of personhood are *not* effacing other conceptions of who we are as human beings, notably those derived from psychology', but rather 'latch[ing] onto' and 'transform[ing]' them (ibid. 24, 9, emphasis in original).

This article is not concerned with arbitrating such critical disputes. Rather, it takes up Rose and Abi-Rached's proposition that we 'turn our gaze away from the great thinkers of our age and... explore the changes in language, technique and judgment that arise in more mundane settings', attending to 'the complex and slippery ways in which we are coming to shuffle the ways we speak of minds, brains, bodies, selves, persons, conscious intentions, unconscious decisions, and so forth' (ibid. 203, 204). Here the pair have in mind public-facing

neuroscientific texts, including the raft of books now situated somewhere between the poles of the auto/biographical and the neurological (e.g. Sacks, 2011[1985]; Hustvedt, 2011; Swaab, 2014). Their call for attention to the ‘mundane settings’ in which questions of subjectivity are being worked through, however, might equally lead us in the direction of ASMR autobiographies, which evocatively illustrate the influence of new technologies – from blogging platforms to brain scanners - on practices of self-expression and conceptions of identity. These texts show ASMR culture to be deeply entangled with emerging discourses of the digital subject, even as they attest to the continuing purchase of concepts inherited from humanism, Romanticism and psychoanalysis. As McNeill (2012) argues, digital technologies ‘complicate[] definitions of the self and its boundaries, both dismantling and sustaining the humanist subject in practices of personal narrative’ (65); ASMR autobiographies exemplify this contradiction, providing ample material for critical analysis.

### **Searching for a Feeling**

As I have argued, ASMR autobiographies often characterize the digital subject as a searcher. This is certainly true of the posts that make up *The Unnamed Feeling*, written by South African blogger Andrew MacMuiris between February 2010 and September 2013. One of the participants in the steadyhealth.com forum thread ‘WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD’ (the discussion that inspired Jennifer Allen to start a Facebook group under the heading ‘autonomous sensory meridian response’, heralding ‘the birth... of the ASMR community’ as we now know it (Richard, 2015)), MacMuiris has remained active in ASMR circles, contributing to sites like ASMR Research and ASAMR University while pushing for more research (especially neuroscientific research) into the phenomenon. While I will, in the latter part of this article, be turning my attention to the *contents* of MacMuiris’ blog, for the moment I want to focus on its ‘paratexts’ (Rettberg, 2008: 17), which implicate author and reader alike in processes and narratives of truth-seeking and discovery. These paratexts include timestamps, titles, tick boxes, buttons for sharing, subscribing and forwarding, advertisements, archived posts and links to other sites. At the very bottom of the blog there is

a list of tags. The most frequently used, with 179 entries, is ASMR – as we might expect from an ASMR blog. But, as its title suggests, this was not always an *ASMR* blog per se; in his first post, MacMuiris (2010a) defines it as ‘a destination for a sensation that is seemingly unnamed’, a place to participate in a wider attempt to define and understand what he refers to as a ‘tingling sensation in your head’. Further down the tag list are other acronyms that were ultimately rejected in favour of ASMR: AIE (Attention-Induced Euphoria) has eighteen entries, AIHO (Attention-Induced Head Orgasm) two, AIOEU (Attention-Induced Observant Euphoria) just one. The list functions like a discursive fossil record, charting the development of a shared vocabulary by a networked community trying to describe a strange sensation and suggesting other lines along which the language of ASMR might have developed. It also highlights the terms on which embodied human experiences become apprehensible to the software responsible for finding answers to search queries – software that enabled the term ‘ASMR’ to build momentum as it learned to associate this four character string with certain kinds of content.

Blogs are founded on ‘networked practices of storing and linking... kin to threads, tags, links and search engines’ (Dean, 2010: 41). MacMuiris’ posts show how contemporary definitions of life-writing must encompass the generation of metadata via practices like tagging and titling - forms of writing addressed as much to search algorithms as they are human readers. Other ASMR autobiographies suggest how authoring a search query, forwarding a link or posting a request on a forum can become a form of life-writing; one might, for example, visit a site like *Is It Normal* to anonymously announce ‘When I watch people I get a tingly sensation in my head?!?’, file this statement under ‘feelings’ and ask strangers to vote on whether or not this behaviour is ‘normal’ (Isitnormal, 2010). Or, one might relate the story of ‘typ[ing] into my google box nice feeling in head’ and finding the *Is It Normal* poll while expressing surprise that you’re not the ‘only person on the entire planet that ha[s] this’ (ithoughtiwastheonly1-amazing, 2010). In such stories everyday interactions with Google can begin to resemble epic quest narratives. Jennifer Allen, for instance, describes periodically

‘search[ing] the internet... for any indication of what the experience was or who else might share it, but f[inding] nothing for over a decade... until I stumbled on the steadyhealth.com forum thread... Once I read the accounts of others, I realized what I was experiencing was similar and decided to pursue answers’ (Richard, 2016).

Such tales of discovery follow the pattern of the auto/biographer singling out a ‘turning point’ that gives their life a shape and a meaning (Sheringham, 2013: 233-4). Riley (2004) argues that this structure originates in religious conversion narratives before being repurposed by texts that focus instead ‘on aesthetic and intellectual vocation, sexual interests, psychological revelation, and the problem of writing’ (20) – a list to which we might add dis/ability and diagnosis, given the growing cultural prominence of illness narratives (Frank, 2013). But while they are rooted in these traditions, ASMR autobiographies also point to the growing importance of the internet in pushing us to identify as searchers (Hillis, Petit and Jarrett, 2012: 5). In their account of the ‘culture of search’ inaugurated by Google’s paradigm-shifting PageRank algorithm, Hillis, Petit and Jarrett argue that search engines propagate a brand of ‘metaphysical thinking’ encapsulated in the scriptural guarantee ‘seek and ye shall find’ (ibid. 193-4). Google has fostered the idea that everything we could possibly want is already online, if only we knew where to find it; a promise that happens to dovetail very neatly with neoliberalism’s call for individuals to pursue self-actualization through consumption (ibid. 76). But if web browsers have made searchers of us all, it is still the case that ‘those searching on the internet might not know what they want. They might call it one thing but mean another. They might not know what they mean, not be able to put their desire into words’ (Dean, 2010: 42). This, for Dean, is where ‘search engines and blogs’ step in to ‘occupy a place for the knower of our secrets, our desires, a place for one who would know what we want when we didn’t really know ourselves’ (ibid.).

As this hints, while ASMR autobiographies tend to concern individual(ized) searchers seeking fulfillment, they also show how searching can foster strange forms of

intersubjectivity, foregrounding unexpected experiential commonalities and coaxing web users into second-guessing their fellows. Such experiences come to the fore in novelist Andrea Seigel's ASMR autobiography, recorded for *This American Life*. Seigel's story charts her development from an 'anxious kid' who discovers that TV shows like Bob Ross' *The Joy of Painting* are capable of inducing a relaxing sensation she likens to 'warm, glittering water rushing under your scalp' into a 'still anxious' adult who begins 'stay[ing] up until 4:00 AM watching home shopping network[s]' in search of 'soft-spoken women talk[ing] about... jewellery in very detailed, intricate, precious ways'. When online video streaming arrives, Seigel begins 'seeking out this stuff on YouTube'. The evolution of her increasingly refined taste in triggers reflects the transition from 'old' broadcast media to a 'new', networked mediasphere where individual are expected to seek out content tailored to their individual preferences – in Seigel's case, a preference for videos featuring 'someone speaking in lightly accented English... talking to me about jewelry, slowly and deliberately. And preferably, it's tacky or cheap jewelry that isn't being treated as if it's tacky and cheap'. Seigel's discovery of ASMR culture comes at a moment when she has run out of videos that meet these exacting criteria. Finding that YouTube can offer 'nothing I hadn't seen already', she devises a solution that entails both thinking like a search engine and imagining how the producers of the sort of content she wants might title and tag that content: having 'noticed a number of [video creators] who had accented English had trouble with the spelling of jewelry' she tries a different spelling.[1]. Her search leads her to a video by ASMRtist Thewaterwhispers Ilse. At first, Seigel imagines that ASMR must be 'a medical condition. I instantly assumed that "M" stood for mute, and that Ilse was some kind of partial mute who could only whisper'. Google quickly disabuses her of this misconception, however, revealing that what Seigel had always assumed was a strange and slightly shameful personal quirk (a quirk she describes, using a cybernetic metaphor, in terms of being 'miswired') is in fact an 'amazing sensitivit[y]' she shares with a sizeable online community.



Like many ASMR autobiographies, Seigel's narrative hinges on the discovery that she is 'not alone'. It sparked similar responses in listeners like John Kersey, who writes

Now I recall the scene and the triggers pop... the chunky rings, her fingernails tapping on the tabletop.... As far as I knew, my experiences with ASMR had never involved jewelry. But since Andrea Seigel's reportage... I have realized that jewelry has often been there.

As Hustvedt (2011) observes, 'many people experience relief when they discover that a trait that has always been with them has a name, belongs to a legitimate scientific category, is part of a greater taxonomy of illnesses and syndromes' (120). While Kersey and Seigel foreground just such feelings of relief, they also hint at how the revelation one is "'not alone'" can 'challenge... a cherished view of [oneself] as special and unique' (Wyke and Ziebland, 2012: 232). ASMR autobiographies portray the internet as a vehicle for self-expression, connection and community (Kersey, with half-joking magniloquence, refers to ASMR as 'evidence of a congenital evolutionary trend toward group-consciousness') even as they suggest how eerily depersonalizing the culture of search can be, flattening individuals into demographic types via mechanisms of classification and categorization. If they are often refreshingly ready to look beyond the humanistic individualism of orthodox life writing, the difficulty of integrating ASMR into an individual life story can also sponsor worryingly reductive and essentializing accounts of embodied experience. Here another striking elements of ASMR culture becomes relevant: its resistance (a minority of 'nsfwASMR'[2] enthusiasts notwithstanding) to casting the sensations on which it is founded in sexual terms.

### **Unsexing Subjectivity**

Seigel's narrative is typical in describing ASMR primarily as an escape from discomfort, insomnia, anxiety or self-consciousness rather than a pleasure in its own right. ASMR culture's roots in e-health forums remind us that if the contemporary web is a place to

connect, express, share and generally ‘Broadcast Yourself’ (as YouTube’s motto once had it), it has also become a place to diagnose and perhaps even *cure* yourself. The ASMR community often represents itself in ‘biosocial’ terms, inviting comparison with other online constituencies united by their common experience of ‘physical or biochemical markers... illnesses and syndromes’ whose definitions and diagnoses remain under ‘negotiation’ (Banner 2014: 199). ASMRtists like WhispersRed frame trigger videos as a means of ‘healing’ (Gallagher, 2015), while on sites like ASMR University users undertake, discuss and lobby for research into the tingles, drawing on the language of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology. Associating ASMR with medicine, mindfulness and wellbeing, such rhetoric is, in part, a means of deflecting sexual readings of the phenomenon. Indeed, the term Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response was coined in the first place as a more ‘clinical’ alternative to terms like ‘head orgasm’ or ‘braingasm’, which Allen saw as misleadingly evocative of ‘sexual or taboo activity’, rendering the tingles ‘difficult to describe and... sensitive for people to open up about’ (Richard 2016).

And yet sexuality continues to crop up not just in outsiders’ accounts of ASMR, but in ASMR autobiographies - even if only by way of similes and disavowals. Having pre-emptively conceded of her trigger video habit ‘I know this is all starting to sound like porn and someone’s obsession with porn’ Seigel goes on to insist that ASMR videos are ‘not porn’ – but then lists numerous parallels (‘all the searching for videos, trying to find exactly the right moment or performer, developing very specific tastes and preferences... and just like porn, the effect wears off after a while’). Fagan (2012) concedes that ASMR videos must look to outsiders like products of ‘the world’s strangest fetish’, even as she insists that they’re not ‘even remotely sexual’. WhispersRed, meanwhile, grounds her case against sexual interpretations of ASMR in a rather Victorian construction of childhood as a time of pre-sexual innocence (‘how can so many millions and millions of four year-olds get it and it be sexual? It just isn’t’ (Gallagher, 2015)). It’s perhaps no surprise, then, that outsiders remain skeptical. Casting psychoanalysis in the all-too familiar role of recovering the repressed

sexual core of putatively chaste behaviours, de Vos (2016) reads ASMR culture as a means of ‘eroticis[ing]’ the brain itself (135). Waldron (2017) and Andersen (2015), take a different tack, see ASMRtists’ desire to align trigger videos with therapy and medicine rather than pornography or cybersex in the context of heteronormative culture’s unduly narrow conception of sexuality and its stigmatization of minority sexual practices. Invoking Berlant and Warner’s (1998) work on ‘nonstandard intimac[ies]’, Andersen (2015) holds that whether or not ASMR videos are strictly *sexual*, they are certainly *queer*, ‘transgressing’ normative understandings of intimacy (understandings which take what goes on in the privacy of the heterosexual couple’s conjugal bedroom as their gold standard) by digitally ‘connect[ing] two bodies, that of the whisperer and the spectator, and allow[ing] them to impress upon each other’ (691); Waldron (2017) is more forthright, insisting that once we ‘approach sex itself as an array of embodied practices defined by pleasure, intimacy, and care’ it becomes clear ‘that the consumption of ASMR videos constitutes a sexual practice, and that the connection between the ASMRtist, viewer-listener, and technological assemblage is a sexual relation’.

While I am sympathetic to the way that these readings use ASMR to challenge normative prejudices, I also think that there is another way of viewing ASMR’s rejection of sex: as a sign that ‘sexuality has lost its status as the benchmark for the modern subject’ (Angerer, 2015: xv). In refusing to recognise the tingles as sexual, ASMR culture is also refusing the model of selfhood that emerged from what Foucault called the ‘*dispositif* of sex’: ‘a discursive structure within which power, law, and truth are intertwined in such a way as to be articulated in both institutional practices and the desire of individual subjects’ (ibid.). Taking shape during the nineteenth century, and encompassing medical treatises, penal codes and sexological research, the autobiographical writing of figures like Andre Gide and, cardinally, the work of Freud, it was thanks to this discursive matrix that sexuality came to be seen as ‘the truth of the subject... the secret truth of his or her identity’ (De Villiers, 2012: 118). Concomitant with this notion was the idea that many (if not all) notionally non-sexual

activities could be understood in terms of the unconscious sublimation and displacement of carnal drives – an idea that underwrites the conviction that ASMR must ‘really’ be sexual.

For Angerer (2015), however, the current ‘struggle over definitions of the unconscious’ incited by emerging ‘neurobiolog[ical] and posthuman models’ of subjectivity has seen ‘the replacement of the *dispositif* of sex by that of affect’ (90, 115). She argues that digital media have driven an epistemological shift away from old models of ‘knowledge and truth’ towards forms of ‘data and evidence generated by digital recording and computing systems’, catalyzing a newfound tendency ‘within media, art and cultural studies’ to bracket questions of interpretation in favour of addressing ‘audiovisual signals and physical reactions[,] which images and sounds allegedly trigger which reactions’ (ibid. 104, 88). ASMR autobiographies can also be seen as artefacts of this transition, working through the same issues that underlie academic arguments about the virtues (or otherwise) of affect theory and the possibility of reconciling critical theory with neuroscience. This reading explains the fact that while ASMR autobiographies owe a debt to biographical forms that put sexuality at the heart of identity (Freudian case studies, coming out narratives) they also manifest a distinct impatience with the idea of a subject whose pleasures, preferences and proclivities (which, according to the *dispositif* of sex, could all, at root, be seen as symptoms of sexuality) provide clues to ‘deeper’ biographical or psychological truths.

The waning of this model of surface-level symptoms pointing to deeper truths helps to explain why ASMR autobiographies often struggle to determine what it might *mean* to experience ASMR. We see this in the last section of Seigel’s piece, a dialogue with her boyfriend Brent. Despite having ‘told him some really horrible, embarrassing things about myself’ Seigel initially avoids discussing her ASMR with Brent. Once she discovers the acronym, however, she feels capable of ‘c[oming] out’ to him. Like Fagan (who also talks of ‘coming out’ having been ‘in the closet’), Seigel gestures here towards the normative pattern for narrating LGBT+ identities in contemporary culture, whereby individuals understood to

be ‘born this way’ are responsible for ‘scaling the ladders out of their foggy, suppressed subconscious and opening their closet doors’ to embrace facets of themselves they had hitherto hidden or denied, ideally receiving the acceptance and affirmation of their loved ones (Gray, 2009: 92). Here, however, Seigel’s ‘coming out’ is met with derision and dismissal. Not only does Brent find ASMR culture absurd, he views Seigel’s ‘zombie-ish’ consumption of trigger videos to be a baffling waste of time. There is no revelatory moment where the truth of the subject is grasped and made shareable here. The status of ASMR remains in doubt, and the question of what a susceptibility to the tingles might mean, let alone how one might build an identity around it, remains open. This is much as Rabinow predicted in his account of biosocial identity: ‘Fate it will be. It will carry no depth. It makes absolutely no sense to seek the meaning of the lack of a guanine base because it has no meaning. One’s relation to one’s father or mother is not shrouded in the depths of discourse here; the relationship is material’ (102-3). De Villiers’ work (2012) suggests that this would have been a utopian prospect for queer life writers like Roland Barthes, who passionately opposed the assumption that our pleasures say something definitive about who we ‘truly’ are (63-66). But neuroscience’s literalist epistemology (whereby ‘if something “shows up” then “its “reality” is confirmed’ (Hustvedt, 2011:33)) can also be unsatisfactory; while ASMR culture has always been keen to have the tingles ‘put under the microscope – or MRI at least’ (MacMuiris, 2013), it is hard to know exactly what kind of insights this would yield; as Hustvedt insists, the discovery of ‘neuroanatomical correlates’ can’t ‘explain’ why and how something happens, nor why it matters (34).

A similar sense of impasse characterises Kersey’s essay. Kersey is interested in ‘reflect[ing] on... ASMR experiences analytically’, probing his susceptibility to certain accents, scenarios and objects. But his attempts to follow the classic hermeneutic route from surface level clues to the revelation of ‘deeper’ truths about himself and/or society seems doomed to failure, as his analysis of a particular ASMRtist’s voice demonstrates:

Her persuasiveness, as she coaxes me in her velveteen Russian accent into blissful non-activity, satisfies certain cold-war fantasies of the feline Soviet-spy who uses feminine wiles to lull the operative/citizen into a state of submission conducive to mind-control programming. And even if we dispense with the red-scare kitsch, isn't there something inherently Oedipal about most ASMR performances?

Kersey flirts with a cultural reading here, associating the allure of the ASMRtist's voice with the comforting familiarity of pre-perestroika stereotypes for Americans of a certain age. He seems dissatisfied with this interpretation, however. Moving instead to posit an 'inherently oedipal' source for his feelings, he goes on to compare ASMR videos to the fatally addictive videotape in the novel *Infinite Jest* (Wallace, 1996), which returns viewers to the condition of a coddled newborn. In lulling assonantal prose ('the components form a perfect OHM, oceanic, uteran, sublime') Kersey evokes a putatively universal desire for plenitude and security – which, insofar as it is universal, tells us nothing about him or his culture in particular. He likewise observes that where he would once have accounted for the popularity of Bob Ross' painting tutorials in terms of their 'post-Rockwellian kitsch aesthetic' he now credits Ross' inadvertent 'mastery' of a range of trigger techniques. ASMR, he is forced to conclude, is less about signs and symbols than primitive stimulus/response mechanisms - 'serotonin or oxytocin... the nerves around the roots of your hair'.

### **Infant Bliss**

With this conclusion Kersey's ASMR autobiography performs its own 'affective turn', discounting cultural history and politics, individual biography and psychology, to offer an account of digital subjectivity that privileges 'affective processes' understood to 'occur independently of intention or meaning... cognition or beliefs', rooted in 'rapid, phylogenetically old, automatic responses of the organism that have evolved for survival' (Leys, 2017: 310). Key here is his association of ASMR with childhood, infancy and prenatal

experience, an association frequently found in ASMR discourse. In accounting for the ‘tappings, crinkles, and other curious sounds’ that abound in trigger videos, for example, ASMR University founder Craig Richard (2014) reasons that ‘as an infant you probably were not held by a parent for every minute, but certain soft and repetitive sounds around you meant that a parent or other protective individual was near’. A biopharmaceutical scientist, Richard pitches his hypothesis in terms of evolutionary biology, endorphins and endocrinology. Commenters on Richard’s theory, however, recast his ideas in more humanistic form, asserting that ASMR is ‘triggered by infant memory of the sights and sounds of being in the total love and care of their mother’ (Teed, 2016). In a similar vein, ASMRtist Lauren Ostrowski Fenton (2013) writes that her first memories of ASMR involve her mother ‘h[olding] up hand-crafted reading cards teaching me both English and Polish... she would look deeply into my eyes with love, patience, and care... and [I] would sit almost transfixed with a feeling of meditative bliss’, while Fagan asserts that ASMR ‘makes you feel like a child. There is something akin to being a very young child and having a parent rock you back and forth, “shh” in your ear, or rub your scalp’. Connor (2013), meanwhile, draws on affect theorist Brian Massumi and developmental psychologist Daniel Stern to speculate that ASMR might constitute ‘a renewed experience of the sensory links that we forge in infancy’.

Whether invoking affect theory, neurophysiology and/or essentialist fantasies of unconditional maternal devotion, these texts appeal to a realm before or beyond identity, subjectivity, culture and language to account for experiences that are hard to reconcile with familiar understandings of the biographical subject as a ‘deep’ individual shaped by her personal experiences. We slip from the timescale of individual biography into that of evolutionary biology, from the ontogenetic to the phylogenetic plane. If there are glimpses, here, of what a posthuman(ist) practice of life-writing might look like, there are also troubling indications of how the tendency to look for evolutionary explanations can obscure questions of culture, history, technology, gender, ethnicity, language and labour. In one of his early *Unnamed Feeling* posts MacMuiris (2010b) relates an anecdote about

an aged African, Xhosa speaking man...who came around to do the gardening on Saturdays. There was a tragic tale behind this man: he'd lost all of his fingers on one hand in an accident years before involving a large industrial fan or something...

These were the last dying days of apartheid, and the beginning of democracy in South Africa, and before I even knew what racism was. He was a good friend of mine. Young, and naive – those were good days...

I remember one particular activity, and that was when he would trim the hedges around the pool, and he would also whistle while he did it... sitting in the sun, listening to the trimming noises of the hedge clippers and the soft whistles made for some of the most intense AIE experiences I can remember...

MacMuiris identifies ASMR with some kind of biological (and thus notionally pre-cultural and apolitical) substrate here, a common human inheritance that the idle, adorably naïve child shares with the 'tragic' figure employed to maintain his parents' garden. In practice, though, his sentimental vignette is not an illustration of how ASMR transcends cultural differences, but of how politics and privilege, labour, desire and difference factor into the tingles. MacMuiris' elision of these issues is a reminder of what we stand to lose when sociocultural context is discounted and 'attention to ideology or belief is replaced by a focus on bodily affects that are understood to be the outcome of subliminal, autonomic corporeal processes' (Leys, 2017: 343). Faced with such a prospect, it becomes even more important to resist the 'inexorable presentism' and context blindness to which disciplines like evolutionary psychology are prone (Smail, 2008: 8), building on critical accounts that elaborate ASMR culture's basis in the here and now of networked neoliberalism. Bound up with a service industry dependent on gendered and racialized forms of affective labour and carework (Tolan, 2015), dependent on algorithmic systems designed to facilitate the valorization of our bodily



capacities and lived experiences, ASMR as a cultural phenomenon can only be adequately understood in relation to the conditions of digital subjectivity.

## **Conclusion**

As McNeill (2012) observes, ‘life narrative... is both heavily invested in the humanist subject and often employed to explore, push and reject [its] limitations’ (66). This duality is foregrounded in the texts I’ve considered here. ASMR autobiographies are contradictory: the desire to be special vies with the desire to belong; viewers of videos seek intimate experiences of connection that require neither actual co-presence nor lasting commitment; the wish for the tingles to be meaningful is undercut by frustration at the difficulty of determining the terms on which they are discussed or understood; attempts to elaborate psychological, biographical or cultural ‘readings’ of the phenomenon vie with more pragmatic, impersonal or empirical perspectives. While ASMR autobiographies demonstrate a continuing desire to narrate the self according to familiar templates, they also centre on media and experiences that don’t seem to *mean* anything – at least not in the way that sexualities, spiritualities, cultural tastes and subcultural affiliations have traditionally been understood to mean something. At their core lie sensations strangely resistant to being interpreted or integrated into a coherent individual identity. In certain respects this is exciting, a sign that the models of subjecthood theorists of life writing have long critiqued may be unraveling. Troublingly, though, ASMR autobiographies are often pervaded instead by an a(nti)historical biologism, evincing understandings of digital subjectivity in which ideas familiar from the bad old days of behaviourism and eugenics are given a high-tech, pseudo-neuroscientific makeover. While the fate of the humanities in the posthuman era remains in doubt, it is clear that we must continue to pay close attention to the kinds of quotidian specifics and contextual nuances that life writing has traditionally been so good at capturing, keeping sight of how history is lived and lives are recorded.

## **Notes**

1. Seigel has presumably been using the standard US spelling ‘jewelry’, not the UK spelling ‘jewellery’.
2. The acronym ‘not safe for work’ is used to tag nudity and sexual content.

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