Careless Whisper: Rethinking care through ASMR and the Social Contract

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"I'm going to help you relax": A brief introduction into the ASMR experience

I find myself alone in a dimly lit room. Across from me is a dark wooden chair. Behind that chair I can see a fireplace that would have blended with the wall had it not been decorated with a plant, a hand sculpture and a candle on either side, all in nearly perfect symmetry. There is a painting of a serene-looking landscape hung in the middle of the wall. On the edges of the frame, right where my vision stops, are two identical wall lamps. All I can hear is white noise, until that white noise is disrupted by a stumbling sound, followed by the sight of a woman who calmly steps into the frame.

The woman is dressed in soothing earth tones, wearing a simple turtleneck and jeans, and takes the seat across from me. I cannot see her face — not really, as she is only visible from her mouth down to her waist, putting the focus on her hands that trace repetitive patterns in the air in front of me. She has slim hands with long, natural nails, and wears very minimal jewelry. Minimalism seems to be a key word to describe the aesthetics of this frame, which allows my eyes to remain undistracted and exercise a soft focus on the hands of the woman in front of me. The woman starts to click her tongue and synchronizes the sound's rhythm with her hand movements, as if her touch elicits the sound.

After nearly a minute and a half, the woman breaks the silence and greets me. *Hi*. She pauses. *I'm so glad that you're joining me this evening*. I am slightly confused, as it is clearly 11 AM where I am sitting, but I let it slide. Her hands move along as she speaks. There is another pause before she continues. *I have been waiting for you and I have some important things to tell you that I believe will help you tremendously, especially as you enter into a new year.* I am intrigued, and willing to ignore the fact that it is currently late March. Suddenly she freezes. *Oh. Does this room look familiar? You've actually been here before, just not in your present form but subconsciously.*

This is all very confusing, but the slow and steady pace of her whispered speech in combination with her hypnotizing hand movements, the calming colors and dim lights make me feel strangely relaxed. There is nothing intrusive about the scene, neither auditory nor visually, a stark contrast with the obnoxiously loud and vibrant advertisements I had to endure before the start of this video. *Now, before we begin, there's one thing that we need to discuss. Something that is completely necessary for you to reap the full benefits of this session that we are about to do together.*

She pauses once more. I hold my breath. *Trust,* she says. *Now I will need your full and complete trust in order for us to continue. Now, rest assured that right now, in this moment, and tonight while we're together, you are completely safe — free from anything that could potentially harm you or anything that may add to everyday stress. And I'm going to help you relax.*

Unlike a late-bloomer's attempt at erotic fan fiction, this experience is not a sexual one. However, the detailed descriptions of the atmosphere, of the woman, and of my responses to both make up for a very intimate account of the scene, and this sense of intimacy does raise some questions. Why am I comforted by the symmetry of the decor, or soothed by the way the woman is dressed? Why do I notice the way her tongue clicks? And why do I describe her movements as "hypnotizing"? What I can tell is that the experience is relaxing me, and how I appreciate the lack of intrusivity I feel while undergoing it.

The intimacy I am experiencing here is not a sexual one, but rather one that is asexually comforting, like the intimacy I might experience with a (professional) masseur. Throughout the entirety of the encounter, I feel like I am able to unwind, to truly let go of my everyday stresses and anxieties, to unclench my jaw and relax my shoulders (as the doctors say). Perhaps I would even allow myself to fall back asleep at 11 AM on this very fine, somewhat productive morning in March. I feel safe. I feel seen. I feel cared for.

The baffling reality is that these feelings are brought on by someone who is quite literally out of my reach, sitting in front of a camera while I am sat in front of a computer screen, by someone whose touch I cannot feel and who cannot acknowledge my presence in the flesh. The woman's name is Julia, and her channel *itsblitzzz* features a variety of lifestyle content, including videos like these (itsblitzzz, 2019A). Julia often roleplays as various health professionals, but her most popular series are her massage videos, in which Julia caters to her friends (and occasionally to subscribers) with a very personalized massage. These massages relax not only the direct recipient, but also many indirect recipients who view these videos and seem to experience some kind of second-hand relaxation from it (*itsblitzzz*, n.d.).

This experience is part of a phenomenon called ASMR. Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, or ASMR for short, describes the anomalous sensory phenomenon of electrostatic-like and pleasurable tingling sensations that start at the top of the head and spread in waves across the body (depending on the intensity of the response), accompanied by positive emotions as well as a feeling of deep relaxation and a reliable low-grade euphoria, that are elicited by specific interpersonal triggering audio-visual stimuli. In short: specific gentle sounds and visuals trigger in the viewer tingles and/or a general feeling of wellbeing (combined definition from Gallagher, 2016, p. 1; Fest, 2019, p. 1; Poerio, 2016, p. 119; Barratt et al, 2017, p. 1; Smith et al, 2016, p. 361).

Over the years, social media has elevated ASMR from peripheral freakiness to mainstream weird, allowing it to grow into a thriving online video culture. This culture is defended and preserved by a fiercely devoted ASMR community, comprised of ASMRtists, people who produce ASMR content, usually in the form of YouTube videos, and ASMRers, people who view, like, comment on and share content produced by the ASMRtists (Andersen, 2004, p. 688; Gallagher, 2016, p. 1). Smith & Snider (2016) label ASMR as a "technologically-mediated, affective experience" (p. 41), as the phenomenon has taken shape

entirely online through various health forums and American aggregation platform reddit, as well as YouTube (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 44).

The ASMR community prides itself most on ASMR's therapeutic properties, reinforced by an increasing amount of scientific research confirming that ASMR has positive effects on mental and physical health. ASMRtist Maria, *Gentle Whispering* on YouTube, dubbed the community's unofficial spokesperson, told The New Yorker: "A lot of people write to me, like the students, they're always stressed out so they watch these videos to turn off their brain a little bit. I get messages from single moms who've fallen asleep to these videos with their babies. Some of the most touching stories were from veterans who come back and they have huge PTSD and nightmares and night terrors" (*The New Yorker*, 2018).

This thesis will explore ASMR as a form of dis/connectivity, as coined by Pepita Hesselberth (2018). ASMR promises the viewer relief from symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, depression, and burnout. In the span of just a few decades, these have become common struggles for citizens living in late-capitalist society. Many authors have already suggested that these struggles are symptomatic of living in a specific type of dysfunctional society — for instance, Nathoo (2016) states that the rapid increase in individuals with depression, insomnia and burnout reflects a widespread inability to keep up with the pace and demands of modern life (p. 73). The type of society that creates these "depressives and losers" (Han, 2015, pp. 15-16) is run on the basis of a neoliberal discourse that rejects any form of vulnerability or dependency, which means that there is no safety net for citizens to fall back on for healing and support (Carney, 2008, p. 102).

Without such support from the state, the promises made by ASMR, promises of calm and happiness — take, for instance, Julia's promise: "I'm going to help you relax" — appeal greatly to the depressed, the insomniacs, and the burnt out. People have been flocking to ASMR in massive numbers ever since its mainstream debut, around 2012 (Poerio, 2016, p.

123), and the movement is still growing in popularity today. As long as conditions like depression and burnout remain ignored for what they are, namely deeply social and societal issues, and are instead framed as individual burdens, the use of ASMR will only become more mainstream.

This would perhaps not have been as problematic had the ASMR community not largely been ignoring the socio-historical context of their practices. The community instead tries to legitimize itself through hard science, without context, which leaves it oblivious to the fact that it is part of an industry, the self-help industry, which perpetuates neoliberal responsibilization techniques. Ultimately, because it uncritically adopts stereotypical care roles, ASMR plays into the very system that ASMR promises relief from.

The ease with which ASMR is appropriated for capital shows that the movement does not provide any radical alternative to the late-capitalist, neoliberal model. The community shies away from its disruptive potential for fear of being rendered illegitimate, and, in order to establish itself, clings to, and thereby perpetuates, heteronormative notions of care, which in turn perpetuates the existence of feminized (and therefore devalued) care labor. Because ASMR is non-contemplative, it is upholding the very system responsible for the creation of these depressives, insomniacs, and burnt out souls that come to ASMR in the hope for relief. While this relief is only temporary, the crisis persists and becomes chronic. This thesis will describe this paradoxical existence of ASMR as pharmakon, one that is born of social neglect.

Hesselberth (2018) argues that many discourses on dis/connectivity tend to gloss over the fact that individuals are highly dependent upon technology in a world that is increasingly becoming digitalized. Framing the ability to connect and disconnect as a voluntary choice rather than one shaped by a "paradigm of datafication" in which individual agency is complex and ambiguous is de-historicizing dis/connectivity. This renders discourses on

dis/connectivity largely non-contemplative, by which they feed into the same paradigm that individuals wish to withdraw or disconnect from (p. 1997).

This lack of understanding of the socio-historical context of dis/connectivity renders such discourses unable to provide any disruptive insights. Hesselberth argues that disengagement from technology is rarely ever total. For instance, one might opt out of the smartphone but still use a computer, or one could refuse to dabble in Twitter while still maintaining a consistent Instagram feed. Furthermore, the type of disengagement is dependent upon the reason for one to disengage, which can vary from technology fatigue to concerns regarding privacy. Categorizing disengagement as a matter of individual agency ignores these factors (p. 1997).

This thesis hopes to avoid this depoliticization of the issue of dis/connectivity, reducing it to an either/or equation while the reality is ambiguous and complex, by using a mixed methods approach. Chapter one is an exploration of the existing literature on ASMR. Chapter two is a discourse analysis of (bodies in) the neoliberal enclave model. Chapter three is a discursive analysis of care ethics in various forms. The final method of this thesis is that of case study, with different ASMR-related cases sprinkled throughout each chapter.

Julia herself identifies "unsexualized intimacy" as a necessary quality to bring about the ASMR experience. She explains this in one of her very first ASMR videos: "For me, ASMR is quite particular. When I'm watching an ASMR video, there are very specific characteristics that help me feel relaxed and calm, and it's very hard to find those types of videos, even though there are so many ASMR videos on YouTube. Basically, one of the most important things for me is a feeling of unsexualized intimacy. I like the feeling of hospitality or someone taking care of me, and similarly, I like to take care of other people and provide that hospitality" (*itsblitzzz*, 2018A). For Julia, as for myself, ASMR is about caring. But even though the type of care Julia and myself seek out specifically carries, in our minds, a sense of

unsexualized intimacy, the discussion of sex and sexuality is highly relevant to the topic of ASMR.

The vast majority of the ASMR community polices its identity by rejecting any mention of sexuality, let alone ASMR content that is *intentionally* sexual (which is a subgenre of ASMR, though the community at large does not acknowledge it as it is not considered "pure"). This tendency to separate ASMR from sex and sexuality, not only as expressed by Julia or myself, but as present in the community at large, has to do both with the community's heteronormative context in which intimacy is viewed as synonymous with sex, as with a then resulting unwillingness of the community to embrace ASMR's intimacy as nonnormative for fear of being rendered illegitimate by its heteronormative context.

Furthermore, the question of sex brings about important discussions of sex and gender in ASMR, and more specifically of the role of ASMR in perpetuating feminized care labor. ASMR has a gender problem, which itself is part of a larger issue with care in late-capitalist society. Most ASMRtists are female, the default being a conventionally attractive and predominantly white female, though preferably with some kind of foreign characteristic, usually in the form of an accent (foreignness in this sense being non-American). ASMR content is generally set in the domestic sphere, where predominantly female ASMRtists perform meticulous tasks that are considered to be relaxing for the viewer, such as folding towels, and/or give the viewer one-on-one personal attention, for instance with the intimacy of a spa session. When a man takes up this role, the experience turns from being relaxing to evoking feelings of discomfort or even fear.

The central thesis of this paper is that, in order to respond to what is defined as the crisis of care, care itself needs to be taken out of the gendered private and into the general public, acknowledged and (re-)valued as indispensable to society. The sentiment of this thesis stems from a desire for protection; namely, the protection of citizens from social neglect.

This text can function as a glimpse into ways of rethinking care and protection, with the case of ASMR functioning as a different lens through which to view the crisis of care.

This desire to rethink the concepts of care and protection has inspired the question: How does the popularity of ASMR urge us to rethink our social contract on the basis of an ethic of care? This main research question is best explored through a set of sub-questions, which conveniently (almost intentionally) match up with the structure of this thesis' chapters.

Chapter one specifically deals with ASMR as a cultural object, and discusses its affective power and technicalities, before diving into the history of ASMR, to better understand its roots and its people. On the basis of the movement's origin story, the identity policing of the ASMR community is explained. The chapter finally asks how and why ASMR is ignorant of its socio-historical context, and why this ignorance renders its existence as paradoxical.

Chapter two places ASMR within its socio-historical context, kicking and screaming, and reframes ASMR as pharmakon. The chapter reveals ASMR's role in perpetuating the crisis of care, through its perpetuation of the outsourcing of care to the gendered private, as well as through its appropriation for capital. Furthermore, this chapter explores the kind of environment created this crisis of care, which in turn created the need for ASMR, and how we got here. Chapter two describes ASMR both as symptomatic of and as playing into the care crisis.

Chapter three tries to explore the ways in which ASMR *can* be disruptive and discusses several alternatives to contractarianism in order to redefine protection and care, wondering whether there is a possibility for resistance in ASMR. It explains why contractarianism is not fit to fulfil a desire for protection, and how ASMR can aid in thinking up alternatives by means of care ethics. What this new system based on an ethic of care

would look like is illustrated by using concepts of loose personhood, technohealing, and ambient citizenship. ASMR's disruptive potential is then best revealed through parody.

Although I firmly agree with the criticisms expressed in this thesis, I follow the ASMR movement with interest, being an avid consumer of ASMR content myself. All of the creators mentioned are people whose content I watch and rewatch regularly. My critique is on the movement as a whole and not on any specific person, as I admire and appreciate these people from a personal standpoint. Some creators embody more traditional caring roles, others negate tradition altogether — personal preference is not the issue. I would simply like to see the movement go from non-contemplative to contemplative; from denying ASMR's disruptive potential to embracing it. I would like for ASMR to play a role in the recontextualization of care and protection on a social level, because I see a lot of potential in it.

Before ASMR can be analyzed within a specific context, this chapter functions to explore the movement as a classifiable phenomenon and focuses on the what, how, who, and why of ASMR. There has been an increase in academic literature on ASMR that aims to quantify the experience in a predominantly physiological context. These texts have provided new insights that have helped distinguish ASMR as a separate response category. However, there have been significantly less publications on ASMR in the humanities than in the fields of psychology and neurology, and the ASMR community uncritically appropriates this research as proof of the movement's legitimacy, for fear of being labeled as weird and fetishistic. With this uncritical appropriation of scientific "evidence" (as in: "*science" says we are legit, so you cannot discredit us*), the ASMR community largely ignores its socio-historical context.

This means that ASMR also remains unaware of its paradoxical online existence: whereas the movement promises users relief, the use of ASMR requires users to engage with predominantly YouTube, which is a platform that capitalizes on users' attention. Because ASMR takes its time, with videos that are often several hours long, and is often watched and rewatched frequently by users, there is plenty of space for advertising. Not to mention that these videos often involve ASMRtists using commodities that have already been consumed for their original purpose as props, thereby re-consuming them in an ASMR context.

Furthermore, that same fear of being rendered illegitimate by outsiders has led the ASMR community to cling to heteronormative culture to a point where it is reinforcing feminized devalued care labor, rather than the movement allowing for its distant intimacy to have a disruptive, nonnormative function. All in all, ASMR, as it exists today, is playing into the same poisonous architecture it claims to offer refuge from.

ASMR as an affective experience

ASMR as a form of mediated communication establishes a form of remote intimacy through the mechanisms of psychological affect (Garro, 2017, p. 2). This thesis often describes ASMR as affective (rather than effective). Affect as a concept emphasizes embodied experience, and is interpreted by Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi (1995) as a physiological reaction to experience that precedes the cognitive coding of the event as an emotion. The ASMR experience is affective in that it is a sensation that has a vast array of aural/visual triggers, that cannot be pinned down to one specific cause or event, which cause in the receiver pleasant feelings of relaxation and calm, with a possibility of tingles.

Critiquing the affective turn, Ruth Leys (2011) suggests however that the split between body and mind created when asserting that affect is divorced from emotion denies the complexity of subjectivity and the context provided by memory that guides the intentionality underlying all of our actions. People watch ASMR videos with the intention of being relaxed, just as the ASMRtist produces said videos with the intention of relaxing others. This intention plays a role in the way that certain experiences manifest as affective: "For children, hands tapping on the back are transformed when they are part of a story about spiders; for ASMRers, a warning about a cavity from a would-be dentist becomes a lullaby when it is welcomed as a paradigm of care within a relaxation exercise" (Andersen, 2014, p. 686).

Within this caring context, the ASMR community, organized around triggering YouTube content, provides a way for those who experience ASMR to consciously access affect. The existence of ASMR videos does not necessarily mean that the watcher or listener will inevitably experience the sensation of ASMR — like the spiders on the back, the experience is reliant on the "right" kind of affective moment (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 43). Affective atmospheres can be built and anticipated, but this affective intentionality can only enhance the atmospheres. It does not necessarily produce the affective experiences stimulated

by those atmospheres. Tingles are not guaranteed — viewers can even experience "tingle immunity" due to a regular consumption of ASMR content (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 47). Instead, the experience relies on past experiences to anticipate future ones, but with the present not entirely within the individual's control (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 47).

On December 21 of that same year, Julia published a follow-up video to the one featured in the introduction. In this 'part two', Julia promptly asks "How long has it been?", referring back to our session back in January (*itsblitzzz*, 2019B). Histories of contact established between creator and viewer have been proven to increase affective value, which results in 'better' ASMR (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 44). This effect is referred to as 'stickiness'. Saying that ASMR videos have a certain 'stickiness' means that viewers return to the same videos repeatedly in order to re-experience the particularities of its affective properties (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 45).

In her ASMR hypnosis videos, Julia explains that she schedules appointments with her clients, which implies that there will be more of these appointments, more sticky content, in the future. This emulates the "real" thing, as the follow-ups allow Julia to act as a care professional checking up on their client: "Since the last time I saw you, can you describe your general mood? How have you been feeling on a day-to-day basis?" Based on my "answer", she then reassures me by saying: "There is no need to feel ashamed or embarrassed, these are all very common things for many people, so you're definitely not alone, and I think you're doing a great job" (*itsblitzzz*, 2019B).

YouTube as the content's host perfectly enables this kind of "realism" to enhance the affective experience. Thanks to YouTube's format, bookmarking and 'favoriting' videos allows these to exist in a persistent state of 'readiness' (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 45). Users can gather these related videos and recontextualize them as appointments in playlists, that can be watched and rewatched at any moment. The content itself emulates past experiences with

caring professionals, but users can now control when and where they are going to engage in these experiences independent from office hours. While this exercised control will elicit the desired affect, in the form of tingles or relaxation, may not be directly up to the user, but the affective atmosphere as here created by Julia certainly does increase the user's chances of experiencing affect.

Most likely, ASMR is a complex emotional blend of both activating and deactivating positive affect (Smith et al, 2016, p. 364; Barratt et al, 2017, p. 3). Complex emotional experiences involve a blending of emotional components traditionally viewed as opposites. "For example, nostalgic experiences involve happiness tinged with sadness and aesthetic chills can elicit both euphoria and sadness" (Poerio et al, 2018, p. 14). Besides relaxation, ASMR is also an arousing (not in the sexual sense) experience, and has been found to simultaneously increase excitement yet decrease heartrate (Poerio et al, 2018, p. 14). Participants generally prefer content that is happy, inviting, relaxed, and lacks danger, suggesting that the objective for watching e.g. trigger videos is to reach a flow-like state. Through ASMR, participants are able to initiate their own experience of flow (Barratt et al, 2017, p. 9).

What is ASMR? Tingles, triggers and atmosphere (*aka*, the technical stuff)

Before we can analyze ASMR as a movement, first the movement's "technical" jargon needs to be explained for further reference. As ASMR is getting more and more academic attention, its community sticks to term definitions as described in various scientific papers. This "scientific backing" serves to affirm ASMR's uniqueness, distinguishing it from other physiological phenomena as something special. Such findings are then used by the movement to legitimize itself, but the uncritical adoption of findings as evidence this legitimacy causes some problems. This segment will first focus on three important aspects of ASMR that will keep recurring throughout this thesis: tingles, triggers and atmosphere.

Tingles

A number of studies aim to distinguish ASMR as a separate response category by differentiating its tingles from other physiological sensations. This segment features studies that set ASMR's tingles apart from phenomena such as frisson, misophonia, synesthesia, and even link the ability to experience ASMR's tingles to the big five personality scale, rendering its experience as somewhat exclusive. ASMR is considered to be unique in that it can elicit a specific set of tingles (aka head orgasms or "shiveries"), which are said to start at the top of the head/scalp and extend out to the rest of the body.

Tingles are usually accompanied by intense feelings of relaxation, comfort, bliss, and even euphoria (Andersen, 2014, p. 684). In 2015, Emma Barratt and Nick Davis were able to chart tingles based on identifiable patterns across reports of their participants. Figure 1 shows their findings as presented visually in a diagram, demonstrating that tingles commonly move downwards from the scalp to the spine and shoulders, and even extend out to the limbs and lower back (p. 8).
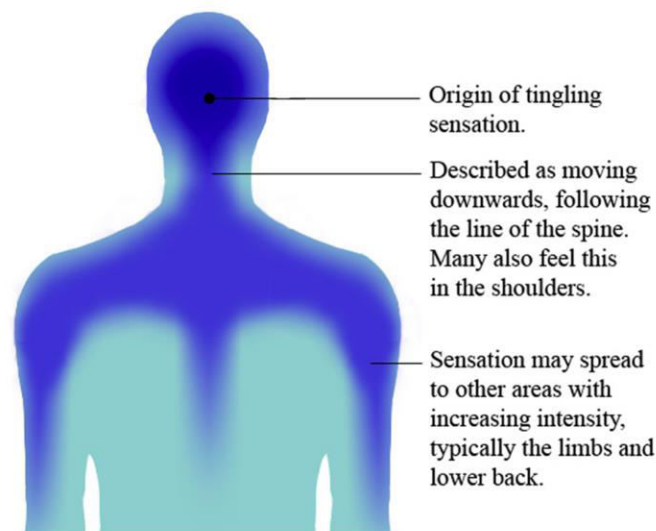
Figure 1 ASMR Map. An illustration of the route of ASMR's tingling sensation. Image shows rear view of the head and upper torso. Capable individuals typically experience the sensation as originating at the back of the head, spreading across the scalp and down the back of the neck. Half of participants reported that this sensation typically spreads to the shoulders and back with increasing intensity. Though this diagram represents the most common areas involved in the tingling sensation, there is a huge amount of individual variation in where tingles spread to with increased intensity, with legs and arms also commonly reported as hotspots in some individuals.

Figure 1. ASMR Map (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 8).

The subjective experience of tingles is reminiscent of music-induced chills (Poerio et al, 2018, p. 1), or *frisson* ('aesthetic chills'). The sensations both tend to occur in a mindful and fully engaged state (complete focus on the triggering stimulus), they both involve affect (eliciting positive emotions) and they are both associated with large individual differences in triggering stimuli. However, whereas frisson tingles tend to be swift as they spread rapidly throughout the body, ASMR tingles can last up to several minutes at a time. Furthermore, unlike frisson, ASMR tingles tend to differ per triggering experience, both in direction of movement and in intensity, and are therefore often described as dynamic. Finally, ASMR tingles' affect is associated with deep relaxation, whereas frisson is more often associated with excitement (Fredborg et al, 2017, p. 2).

ASMR has also been associated with misophonia, which is a seemingly contrasting audio-sensory experience, as misophonia describes (violent) outbursts of anger and disgust triggered by certain sounds like chewing and breathing. The extreme reactions to these sounds are automatic, and they can be severe enough to require psychological intervention. However, many who suffer from misophonia also report to experiencing ASMR. It is therefore likely that ASMR and misophonia represent opposite ends of a spectrum, as being two sides of the same coin, or antonyms rather than synonyms (Barratt et al, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Synesthesia, the experience of otherwise unrelated secondary sensations to specific sensory stimuli, also appears to have some overlap with ASMR. It is possible that ASMR is a more common but as yet undocumented synesthetic experience (Poerio, 2016, p. 125). Sound-touch synesthetes report different sounds triggering tingling or prickling sensations in different body parts; mirror-touch synesthetes report feelings of touch, pain or emotions that mirror another person's experience, reminiscent of hypochondria; touch-emotion synesthetes report certain textures evoking different emotions.

Similarly, ASMR triggers elicit tactile tingles as well as associated feelings of relaxation and positive emotions. Based on these similarities, ASMR could nearly be conceptualized as a form of touch and/or emotion synesthesia (Poerio, 2016, pp. 124-125). But whereas the secondary sensory experiences associated with synesthesia are automatic and controllable, ASMR experiences are autonomous but can be stopped by intentionally choosing to disengage from the triggering stimulus, which is something that people who experience synesthesia are not able to do. This lack of personal control separates synesthesia from ASMR (Fredborg et al, 2017, p. 2; Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 2).

To further affirm ASMR's uniqueness, the ability to experience tingles has even been psychologically linked to the five broad personality domains or 'big five'. Individuals who claim they experience ASMR are said to score significantly higher on Openness-to-Experience and Neuroticism. Openness-to-Experience is associated with curiosity, unconventionality, artistic or aesthetic tendencies, wide interests and fantasy. These people may be prone to vivid fantasies or daydreams, and have a higher tendency to experience frisson. The ability to experience ASMR may be related to this generally increased receptivity and sensitivity to sensation.

The other domain of Neuroticism is associated with anxiety, angry hostility, depression, and self-consciousness. These people may be prone to suffer from moderate to severe depression, and a significant proportion of these individuals reported using ASMR to temporarily relieve symptoms of depression and/or anxiety (Fredborg et al, 2017, pp. 2; 6-7). This connection between ASMR and big five renders the experience of ASMR as somewhat exclusive, as researchers claim that only a specific type of person, who scores higher on certain personality domains, is able to experience ASMR.

Triggers

The experience of ASMR can be triggered, and what is considered triggering for ASMR can be very specific. Triggers or triggering stimuli are generally perceived as both interpersonal and audiovisual — or, rather, as a combination of auditory, visual, tactile (and at times olfactory) stimuli (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1; Fest, 2019, p. 1; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 41; Fredborg et al, 2017, p. 1). In 2015, an inventory of common triggers revealed that most participants reported to respond the most to whispering, indicating the importance of the voice in ASMR. In the interview mentioned in the introduction, Maria explains that "some of the favorite triggers for the majority of people are voices. A lot of people like the sounds of hair being brushed, or clipping of scissors, crinkling sounds, tapping sounds, spraying — there really is an unlimited amount of it" (*The New Yorker*, 2018).

Generally, triggering content relies on the amplification of soft sounds (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42) like whispers, crinkles or tapping (Garro, 2017, p. 1). Diego Garro (2017) argues that ASMRtists are now treating their content like sound designers, investing in expensive setups that focus on microphone sensitivity, low self-noise and stereophonic or binaural capability. The three-dimensional effect of binaural recordings through headphones or earphones creates an immersive experience where it is as if the ASMRtist is whispering directly into your ear (even writing this feels like advertising).

DEEP Ear Relaxation ⍰ ASMR • Inaudible Whispers • Layered by Gentle Whispering ASMR features a layering of sounds of the left and right "ear", as well as a split screen, so that it seems as if Maria's identical twin has joined the session, in a surprisingly un-schizophrenic way, each whispering in one ear, rendering whatever is being said nearly unintelligible. *asmr zeitgeist*'s upload "ASMR DELUXE Ear Treatments [No Talking] High-Intensity Triggers for Relaxation, Sleep & Tingles" (2020A) features special microphones that are shaped like human ears, through which the sound experience comes as close as possible to the real thing. The ears are subjected to a variety of trigger-inducing events, such

as being enveloped in sparkling water, getting bedazzled and then scratched, cleaned, covered in slime, and so on.

This focus on equipment has the imperative to create and share the most affective experience with as many people as possible. Garro deems the microphone the sonic equivalent of a magnifying glass: "*Close up and even closer* is the imperative here" (p. 3, his emphasis). In combination, microphone and camera stand in for the head of the viewer, who is addressed in the second person (p. 1), as to completely eliminate any notion of distance between the ASMRtist and the ASMRer (p. 3).

ASMR content most commonly features trigger videos, involving the performance of meticulous tasks (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1) that produces repetitive and smooth visual stimuli (Garro, 2017, p. 1). One of the most watched ASMR videos on YouTube is a trigger video by *ASMRMagic*, a YouTube channel that belongs to ASMRtist Rhianna. The video, *over three hours long*, features more than fifty different triggers, and has garnered over 83 million views as of June 2020. The video features very common and popular triggers, like the tapping and scratching of various textures, but Rhianna also tries to be a bit more experimental, for instance by using more uncommon props like beeswax wrap and a football (*ASMRMagic*, 2019).

Like most trigger content, the video opens with a preview made up of snippets of the various triggers featured, so that viewers can decide straight away whether or not this is the content for them. Some viewers have expressed that they like these previews, to the point where ASMRtists are now also creating preview compilation videos as a means of recreating triggering content. *ASMRMagic*'s video specifically mentions in the title that there is "(NO TALKING)" involved, but there is a subcategory of trigger content that is centered on oral and/or vocal triggers. These videos usually advertise with "trigger words" or "mouth sounds", which feature ASMRtists repeating certain triggering words or sounds close-up in a

whispered or soft-spoken voice. ASMRtist Caroline (*Caroline ASMR*) has put out a number of videos featuring this type of ASMR, in which she repeats words and sonic utterances that "pop", like "sleepy" or what Caroline defines as "sksk" or "tktk" (*Caroline ASMR*, 2018A).

The other type of content that is most commonly produced is personal attention ASMR, which revolves around one-on-one expressions of care, interest and affirmation (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1). Maria (*Gentle Whispering*) has put out some of the most popular personal attention content. Her video "~Simple Pleasures~ ASMR Soft Spoken Personal Attention", published in 2016, now has over 19 million views. In the video, Maria pampers the user by slowly moving her hands in front of the camera, which represents the user's face, and shifting between the two microphones that represent the user's ears, as she whispers reassuring messages: "You know, our existence as humans is a constant struggle. […] It is a blessing and a curse. We're just here to experience everything, good and bad. We all go through it. You're never alone in this world." In 2019, the video, and ASMR in general, was mocked on The Ellen Show (*TheEllenShow*, 2019) — which has ironically caused Maria's audience to grow both in size and the level of dedication, with commenters stating: "Ellen reminded me how good this video was, so I came back" (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2016).

Videos like this are considered "so good" because the intimacy they convey is akin to the intimacy experienced between two friends, but can also be more on the "professional" side, like the intimacy of a visit to the hairdresser, masseur, or GP (Garro, 2017, p. 1). Maria's video is very informal. She pretends to brush the user's hair while explaining that she wants the user to relax, and emphasizes that this intimate experience bonds her and the user together (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2016). Maria also puts out more "formal" content, which usually includes roleplay. One video offers the user the experience of an appointment at a naturopathic medicine practice, with Maria roleplaying as the naturopath. However, despite this context of (pretend) professionalism, Maria greets the user with a "Hello sweetheart!",

emphasizing once again the close bond she has with her audience (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2018A).

Whereas trigger videos are primarily immersive in the audio-visual realm, role-play videos are triggering as a fictional performance (Bennett, 2016, pp. 130-133) in which a benignly solicitous figure, the ASMRtist as e.g. masseur or dental hygienist (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1), performs empathy through one-on-one personal attention (Bjélic, 2016, p. 101), and the viewer pretends as if these recorded mediated attentions are really directed at them personally and in the present moment (Bennett, 2016, p. 131). The intimacy of the whisper or the soft voice further bridges the distance between the ASMRtist and viewer (Andersen, 2014, pp. 690). There is an implied 1:1 relationship between ASMRtist and listener, an "affective sense experience" that "intimately connects two bodies, that of the whisperer and the spectator, and allows them to impress upon each other", despite the absence of physical contact (Andersen, 2014, p. 691; Iossifidis, 2016, pp. 113-114).

Atmosphere

The type of triggering content varies, and it requires the use of elaborate tools in order to create the right affective atmosphere. A number of things are considered important, such as timing, trigger load, ideal spatial distance, and pitch (Barratt et al, 2017, p. 1). ASMRtists increasingly use more advanced tools to create a more refined atmosphere for their content.

ASMR that wants to bring the doctor's office into the household, creating a solace away from personal troubles and psychological distress (Garro, 2017, p. 4), need to establish an atmosphere that is as "natural" or as "real" as possible, because it is recognizable from real life (Barratt et al, 2017, p. 11). ASMRtists like Sophie (*SophieMichelle ASMR*) emulate the real life experience of, in this case, a hearing test at the audiologist by way of a number of techniques. Sophie uses a green screen to create a background that grants the user the illusion of being in a doctor's office. She puts on medical gloves and uses an otoscope to look into

her patient's ears. Sophie has even gone through the trouble of creating a mock-version of a hearing test, including actual beeps, and lets the user listen to it by way of putting a pair of headphones over the microphones. The audio of the hearing test is dubbed over the now muffled recording of Sophie, who is writing down her patient's responses to the test (*SophieMichelle ASMR*, 2019).

Borrowing from real-life triggering situations, such as a trip to the audiologist or the dental hygienist, whatever floats your boat, ASMR is commonly elicited by one person, in some secluded area of their house, far away from any noise. They use a high quality camera, often filming in close-up, and multiple microphones, that create binaural recordings of sounds that are barely audible. The ASMRtist then performs their ritual of gentle sounds, whispers and hand movements. (Garro, 2017, pp. 1-2).

However, the visual presence of the ASMRtist in a familiar setting is not necessary to create an immersive experience. Affective atmospheres can also be very surreal and experimental, as ASMR content is increasingly becoming more advanced, not only with regard to sound design but also in the visual department, with ASMRtists creating both binaural soundscapes and immersive visuals (Garro, 2017, pp. 1-2; Bennett, 2016, p. 133; Gallagher, 2016, p. 1).

An example of experimental content that does not visually feature the creator is by ASMRtist Erin on her channel *Goodnight Moon*. The familial reference here is not as specific as the audiologist, but rather recalls the more abstract yet still familiar image of planets. The video, called "ASMR Imaginary Planets (Unintelligible Whispers & Layered Sounds)", borrows from a painting technique put forward by artist Thomas Blanchard with his project "Memories of Paintings"[a]. Erin's description box reads that the experimental visuals are "created using combinations of acrylic paint, vegetable oil, milk, water, ink, dish soap,

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[a] Accessible at https://vimeo.com/160978792

honey, and glitter". The experimental visuals are complemented by layered sounds. Erin also stated her intention in the description box: "Sometimes when I'm trying to fall asleep, I like to pretend I'm weightlessly drifting through an imaginary galaxy, mesmerized by all the colors and patterns swirling past me. I hope this captures a similar effect!" (*Goodnight Moon*, 2018).

In order to create this trip through an imaginary galaxy, the many different visuals paired with specific soundscapes are separated as separate planets. There is a pink planet created with pink, red and purple dyes, accompanied by inaudible whispers layered on top of the sound of the popping paint bubbles. This is followed by a blue planet, created with blues and purples, accompanied by tapping and water sounds layered on top of the sound of the paint swirling around. A black planet, created with black paint and streaks of white, features cat purring, and so on. The video is immersive as it continuously cuts between these many different "planets", whereby the viewer gets a sense that they are actually in a different place each time. This has not gone unnoticed by the audience. One comment reads: "I can't get over the sound mixing on this. We've got rain, fire, wildlife noises, wind, chimes, tapping, waves, scratching, unintelligible whispering, music, echo effects, crinkling, running water, fizzing, muffled underwater effect, you name it we got it at the Goodnight Moon Big Soft Sound Warehouse™□" (*Goodnight Moon*, 2018).

Relaxation does not necessarily indicate sleepiness — rather, it is associated with a calm focus that comes with feeling safe, and there is plenty of ASMR that emphasizes focus over relaxation (Barratt et al, 2017, p. 11; Garro, 2017, p. 1). The experience of ASMR requires a special type of focus in general. The whisper, for example, demands more attention of its listener than a normal voice register would. The listener becomes intent on the sounds that they are hearing (Andersen, 2014, pp. 689-690). Yet, rather than focusing on the meaning of speech, the listener's attention can turn more easily to the quality of the voice

itself as a carrier of meaning. The nuances of the voice hold the listener's attention, eliciting a stronger affective response (Andersen, 2014, p. 690). The higher the number of triggers, the more susceptible viewers are to the flow state (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 10).

Flow is associated with optimal performance (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 3), and there is a whole genre of ASMR videos that recognizes that ASMR can help people increase their performance at school. These videos are intended to be consumed while studying. Content can range from "study with me" videos to library ambiences. In "ASMR Studying Together (Inaudible Whisper, Fountain Pen Writing, Typing Sounds)　", the viewer is invited to study "together" with Caroline from *Caroline ASMR*. We see her hands as she is "[q]uietly studying Korean vocabulary" (information that can be retrieved by reading the description box below the video). She is writing with a "scratchy fountain pen", the sound of which has been highly amplified to the point where it feels like she is writing on your brain. We can also hear her softly practicing her pronunciation as she goes back over her writing. Caroline has also added "layered typing sounds for your relaxation ☺". But although this type of content is intended to help you study, in a study-group kind of way, that does not mean that it will be solely used for those purposes. *ASMR Hiking* commented: "Hey look it's just like real-life studying, I [fell] asleep immediately" (*Caroline ASMR*, 2018B).

The ambience portion of study ASMR also comes in different shapes and sizes, but popular ambience content feature library atmospheres. These study sessions take their time, with videos up to eight hours long. A video by *The Guild of Ambience*, a "mere" two hours long, features the animation of an old library. The room is dark, as we can see through the sole visible window that it is raining, and only lit with a few flickering candles and lanterns. In the background we can hear muted noises from the storm outside, the crackling sound of a fireplace, page turning, writing, general stumbling and occasional footsteps (*The Guild of Ambience*, 2018).

Commenters perfectly demonstrate why this faux library content is so popular: "I can't stand studying alone in my empty house with just silence. Also I can't focus effectively on my subject when I listen to music at the same time, my brain [concentrates] on music. These sounds are perfect for me to study!" The 2020 lockdown has granted videos like these even more views, as another comment reads: "All my local libraries are closed due to coronavirus lockdown. Now I can pretend I'm studying in one without leaving the house. Great!" (*The Guild of Ambience*, 2018).

How is ASMR? The birth of a community (in chronological order)

Now that there is a general understanding of ASMR content and its components, ASMR can further be examined as a movement. The ASMR community understands ASMR mainly in terms of its health benefits, backed by "science", while ignoring its own socio-historical context. Before the problems that result from this ignorance can be identified, this segment first explores the history of ASMR, in order to better understand its roots and its members.

The good old tingles

"What is the best way to explain ASMR to someone?" reads the tagline of a rather short but popular Reddit thread (r/asmr, 2017). Reddit is an online messaging board wherein users can submit links and have discussions. User submissions can be up- or downvoted, which is a type of liking and disliking that impacts the visibility of a submission, depending on how well it is received by the overall community. Reddit as a platform has several layers: within Reddit, a subreddit is a forum dedicated to a specific topic, and creating a thread within a subreddit means opening a discussion about that subreddit's specific topic. A subreddit is made up of multiple different threads.

This particular thread was created within the r/ASMR subreddit, the Reddit forum specifically dedicated to all things ASMR. While there are some jokey answers given, many replies suggest taking a trip down memory lane: "Just ask about it: Remember when you

were getting your hair cut and you started to feel really relaxed. Does your scalp tingle a bit sometimes when that happens? What about when the stylist/barber uses an electric razor or hairdryer?" Other answers suggest asking the person in question similar questions: "[Remember] how nice it felt to have the school nurse check you for lice every year?" or "Do you remember [lying] awake at night as kids having a sleepover and talking quietly, or sharing whispered secrets in a sound dampening blanket fort? Did you ever get a goose-bump like sensation from that? Parents "drawing" in your back with fingers?" (r/asmr, 2017).

Collective reminiscing seems to be what first shaped the ever-expanding ASMR community. A 2014 survey showed that the majority of the people who reported to experiencing ASMR also agreed that ASMR was something they had first experienced as a child (Poerio, p. 121). ASMRtist Emma from *WhispersRed* also claims to have had her first ASMR experiences at a young age: "I remember times as a child I used to experience it at school, being read a book by the teacher, having my hair played with, my back tickled, letters drawn on my back […]" (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42).

Likewise, Maria said in an interview with The New Yorker that "I have been feeling [the] ASMR sensation throughout my life, unintentionally. I didn't know [that] that's what it was. Back in 2009, I was looking for some meditation videos and I stumbled upon a title that had the word "whisper" in it, and I clicked on it and I just got this familiar rush of, just, tingles. So that's when I understood that I was not alone, that there were other people; that these *were* my people" (*The New Yorker*, 2018).

Discussion threads on health forums, similar to the Reddit thread, first saw users posing the question whether anyone else was also experiencing this "tingly" feeling. This question often has users referring back to childhood memories. The first account of this was in 2007, when user *okaywhatever51838* started a forum thread called "Weird sensation feels good" at steadyhealth.com (Garro, 2017, p. 2), reminisced about being read to or having a

friend draw on their hand with markers and wondering whether anyone knew the name of the sensation elicited by these experiences (SteadyHealth, 2007).

This post led to other users acknowledging that they understood what weird sensation *okaywhatever51838* was referring to. A response by *bean487* reads "It is like this tingling in my scalp. The only way I can [describe] it is like a silvery sparkle through my head and brain... [A]lmost like a sort of head orgasm, but there is nothing sexual about it." *clawsofguthix68902* chimed in with a "I would appreciate it if anyone who [sees] this tries to give me an explanation or somewhere to go to find more information on this sensation" (SteadyHealth.com, 2007). A year later, user *tingler* was the first in the thread to give the sensation a name, that of Attention Induced Head Orgasm or AIHO. *tingler* furthermore speculated that "I think I get this when someone is paying direct attention to me" (SteadyHealth, 2007).

Happy accidents: Bob Ross as the cradle of unintentional ASMR

This final contribution eventually led to the launch of AIHO.org, as well as the formation of the *Yahoo!* group "Society of Sensationalists" later that same year. This group also discussed experiences of ASMR going back several decades, ranging from listening to lectures given by schoolteachers in the classroom, to the soothing voice of painting show host Bob Ross (Andersen, 2014, pp. 687-688; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42).

In the interview with The New Yorker, Dr. Craig Richard, coordinator of the largest database about ASMR, explains why Bob Ross was such a huge influence on ASMR: "A lot of people watched him and they felt relaxed. Now, they didn't call it ASMR, they just enjoyed it. When I was a kid, I would come home from school — I didn't care about painting, it was his voice, it was him tapping on the canvas, and I would sit on the floor, and half-way through his program I would fall asleep" (*The New Yorker*, YouTube, 2018).

"Unintentional" ASMR (then AIHO) videos made available on YouTube for a non-ASMR audience (such as instructional massage or meditation videos) were quickly recontextualized by the Society of Sensationalists as an accidental archive (Andersen, 2014, pp. 684; 687-688; Gallagher, 2016, p. 1). Role-play and trigger videos have used unintentional ASMR, such as episodes from The Joy of Painting[b], as blueprints (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 2; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42).

There is still a lot of content on YouTube that is specifically labeled unintentional ASMR, already recontextualized for ASMR purposes. "ASMR in Movies & TV (Part 1)" (nearly eight million views) and "ASMR in Movies & TV (Part 2)" (4,5 million views), both videos created by *FunWithGuru*, compile clips of popular films and television shows that feature people whispering, soft sounds, or otherwise identifiable ASMR components. Scenes from *Phantom Thread*, *The Office*, and even otherwise sinister scenes from horrors and thrillers such as *Stalker*, *Split* and *The Witch* are featured. Because of the recontextualization into unintentional ASMR, the original intent of the clips no longer matters — they now make for an affective experience under the label of ASMR (Gallagher, 2016, p. 4).

To this day, ASMRtists pay (indirect) tribute to Bob Ross with painting content. On June 19, 2018, Maria uploaded a video in which the viewer functions as the canvas Maria paints on. It has garnered over 1.5 million views. Maria talks us through her thought process and through every moves she makes. The sounds of brushes on canvas, dry and wet, are amplified. Her audience is perfectly aware of the parallels with Bob Ross and is happy to point it out in the comment section. Many quote Ross's famous phrases: "There's no such thing as mistakes Maria, just happy accidents" (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2018)

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[b] On YouTube, episodes from The Joy of Painting can garner millions of views. Its most popular episode today called "Bob Ross – Island in the Wilderness (Season 29 Episode 1)" has over 26 million views. Accessible at https://youtu.be/lLWEXRAnQd0.

Seeing as Maria likes comments like these (as in, she gave them a "heart", which is what a creator can do to favorite or like comments on their own YouTube content), we can assume that she is aware of the reference as well. The main difference between Ross's and Maria's content seems to indeed be its intent: yes, Maria guides us through her choice of shades and shapes, but she does not do so with the intention of having the viewer repeat what she does. She cannot show us the canvas because we are said canvas, and so the spell cannot be broken by a mirror clearly reflecting back at us a camera instead of our own face. Whereas Ross's goal was always for the people at home to repeat after him and get pleasure from painting[c], Maria's goal is for the people at home not to repeat after her but to sit back, relax, and get pleasure from the tingles she hopes to elicit (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2018).

Baptism: from Head Orgasm to ASMR

In 2009, the first whisper channel *WhisperingLife* was created on YouTube (Garro, 2017, p. 2). 2010 saw the creation of "The Unnamed Feeling blog" by Andrew MacMuiris, who also proposed the term Attention Induced Observant Euphoria or AIOE in favor of AIHO (as Observant Euphoria arguably carried more scientific credibility than Head Orgasm). Later that year, Jennifer Allen, who had previously participated in the first discussion(s) on steadyhealth.com, finally coined the term Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response and founded the Facebook ASMR Group (Garro, 2017, p. 2).

After launching this pseudo-scientific term, Allen did open the scientific debate with her ASMR Research & Support website asmr-research.org, and a year later lobbied with Wikipedia for them to keep their first ASMR entry. From 2012 onwards, the ASMR community has increasingly gained attention through the featuring of ASMR in neuroscience

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[c] Retrieved from https://www.museummore.nl/bob-ross-exhibition/, where Bob Ross is also dubbed "the King of Chill for ASMR YouTubers who rock their watchers to sleep with their whisperings and gentle sounds. Bob offers a refuge in turbulent times."

blog posts, documentaries, full-length feature films, peer-reviewed research publications, book publications, and so on[d].

With increasing public recognition comes a bigger audience: within the span of roughly ten year, the ASMR community has grown into a vast grassroots network of participation (Bjélic, 2016, p. 101). As of 2019, the community exists of over a million creators and millions of viewers (Fest, 2019, p. 1). It is organized entirely around watching, creating, but most importantly *sharing* ASMR content that involves an astounding diversity of triggers that seems to accommodate to every need (Fest, 2019, p. 1; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 41).

The Digital Paradox: YouTube as parasitic host

As we have seen, the existence of ASMR is deeply intertwined with the existence of digital platforms, especially YouTube. The movement takes place entirely online, which leaves it entirely indebted to and dependent upon the internet, whereas the platforms that host ASMR are in turn deeply influenced by ASMR's existence. This thesis argues that ASMR's online existence is paradoxical, and this segment focuses on YouTube specifically. YouTube is at once ASMR's perfect host and its parasite, enabling ASMR's existence while feeding off of its popularity. The community's uncritical dependency on YouTube allows for this paradox to persist.

YouTube the gallant host

The ASMR community has always harnessed the power of social media in order to establish itself. Now, millions of people around the world watch and listen to ASMR content "like an audience at a concert of a lifetime." The shared experience of ASMR is what brings actor and audience together; it is this shared experience that lies at the heart of the ASMR community

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[d] On ASMR University, the Wikipedia for ASMR, this "History of ASMR" is neatly compiled in a timeline. Accessible at http://www.asmruniversity.com/history-of-asmr.

(Garro, 2017, p. 2). The community dedicates itself to create, collect and exchange ASMR content, shaped by interaction through YouTube.

The search for affective experience is inextricably linked with a desire to share this experience online. This public sharing, primarily enabled by YouTube, has allowed the ASMR community to become a public rather than a niche phenomenon. According to Andersen, "millions of views on YouTube carry the weight of legitimacy more than pseudo-scientific claims. The community practically owes its existence to YouTube" (2014, p. 687). The video-sharing platform functions both as an archive and as a site of creative exchange, offering the community the "context of publicness" where it can "count in a public way."

Uploading a video to YouTube is so easy that literally anyone can do it, which has made affect far more accessible. Ever since the first whisper video, ASMR content often resembles the "bedroom confessional genre of vloggers" or video bloggers who document everyday life as is encouraged by YouTube (Andersen, 2014, p. 688). ASMR content that resembles this style today is already referred to as old-school or lo-fi, as ASMR keeps evolving in both quality and style. Through new experimental content, the concept of ASMR is constantly being refined (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42).

As far as variety is concerned, YouTube seems to be a perfect fit: the ability to search and stream related videos at the click of a button makes for ASMR content that is accommodating to as many people as possible, utilizing a giant archive of different triggers (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42; Andersen, 2014, p. 688). YouTube's interface juxtaposes clips regardless of genre, provenance or context, creating new ways of sorting and seeing, inspiring a new approach to video production. The platform is a reservoir of effects, style and tactics that give birth to new aesthetic paradigms (Gallagher, 2016, pp. 4-5). It does so by de- and re-contextualizing different works by placing them side by side: ASMR videos are

judged by their ability to elicit affect, rather than its specific content or aesthetic (Gallagher, 2016, p. 5).

The comment section also lets viewers provide feedback to the ASMRtists about which triggers do and do not 'work' for them, thereby providing ASMRtists with new ideas for popular content (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42). This allows ASMRtists to tune their aesthetics to what is most likely to produce the desired affect (Gallagher, 2016, p. 5). YouTube has also allowed for "silent" members of the community: users who neither share nor comment but who just watch the videos. YouTube further materializes the community by documenting the amount of views per video — not only allowing for the community to grow in size, but also garnering mainstream media attention whenever views reach the millions (which first occurred in 2012). All that coverage functions to reinforce ASMR and its community as legitimate. YouTube is *the* reason why ASMR could evolve from niche freakiness to the closest thing to mainstream (Andersen, 2014, p. 688).

YouTube the ~~bloodsucking~~ parasite

Bjélic rightly points out that the idea of ASMR as digital care relies on an optimistic view of the digital social relationship, while in fact ASMR's personal, one-on-one type of care just adds to the pile of the multiple other kinds of care that are being outsourced and unmet every day (2016, p. 102). Bjélic refers to Franco Berardi's work *After The Future* (2011), in which he states that the fragmentation of bodies due to technological advancement, the deregulated market, the rise of "info-labor" rather than material labor, and so on, leaves post-industrial workers fragmented in time and space. The workday never ends, you are always "on" (Berardi, 2011, p. 26). This "relationship" between people and technology in late capitalism seems anything but caring (Bjélic, 2016, p. 102).

YouTube is specifically designed to host others' content and to exploit the ability of enterprising amateur video makers to hold and grow larger follower bases, drive advertising

revenues and foster community engagement. This strategy is manifested in YouTube's Partner Program, which allows video producers to monetize their content. ASMR's promises to help stressed, sleep-deprived viewers to relax actually enlists them in forms of cultural/affective labor that benefits companies like Google, by shaping and revealing trends, tastes and consumer norms (Gallagher, 2016, p. 6). It is designed to be as easy and as accessible as possible: in theory, anyone (with an internet connection) can make ASMR and anyone (with an internet connection) can engage.

This enables YouTube to easily exploit especially the ASMR audience; tracking, collecting, sharing and selling data about viewer's habits to advertisers, commodifying attention itself (Fest, 2019, pp. 2-3). Andersen (2014) claims that content variety functions as a stand-in for interactivity, preserving distance, just looking for different triggers rather than directly interacting with preferred ASMRtists (p. 696). Bjélic (2016) contests this view, clearly stating that "subscribers can meet their individual needs by requesting the production of particular trigger videos from ASMRtists. In this way, the production and consumption of relief in ASMR videos occurs through a grassroots network of participation" (p. 101).

If anything, rather than caring, ASMR *adds to* the perpetual workday by requiring its audience to perform the digital labor of paying attention, paying with data, and paying for internet use. ASMR promises to fulfil the human needs and desires (for care, calm, connection, and so on) that are currently under pressure, while ensuring that viewers remain glued to, *dependent on* their screens.

Sarah Sharma argues that the gig economy — which includes independent online platform workers like ASMRtists who produce short-term commitment content — accelerates the breakdown of care networks by turning over social reproduction to the market. Technology makes this process go much smoother than before: "You can't ask somebody to pick you up or drop you off. People don't want to do this for each other

anymore, because for five dollars somebody will come and do anything you want them to do. The technology that's greasing that transaction makes it easier, and breaks down these networks of care" (2016).

The economy keeps expanding the sphere of care, keeps adding more things to the list that now count as caring, and it will continue to reproduce it without any determinants of the kind of care we really need, and especially *who* is doing the caring. Sharma even expresses her fear that "we're losing this chance to be in relationship to one another" (2016).

YouTube, the technology that "greases the transaction" of ASMR, is incredibly supportive of this loss, as it popularizes "increased flexibility, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and […] bringing supplementary work home" during the never-ending workday (Terranova, 2000, p. 34). Terranova argues that the nature of labor in late capitalist societies is free labor, and that online platforms mirror this perfectly. Within the digital economy, free labor is "voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited" (p. 33). She describes this digital economy as a network of digital artisans with components of liberatory gift economies (p. 36), as well as a coordinated system of collective intelligence that fosters fulfillment through work (p. 43).

Immaterial labor encompasses "the work of writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/Web sites/chatlines" (p. 42). The internet extracts value out of "continuous, updateable work" which is "extremely labor intensive" (p. 48). ASMR does not work around the neoliberal limitations to healthcare access; rather, it adds the dimension that the viewer has to have access to electricity, an internet-ready device and an internet connection, not to mention the time and energy (attention) it takes to binge ASMR content.

Because ASMRtists are dependent on sponsorships and PayPal or Patreon transactions for income, viewers are furthermore invited to support the work of their favorite content providers with donations. On top of that, the element of sponsorships means that

ASMRtists promote products in their videos, which the viewer is then also subjected to (Fest, 2019, p. 2). And unless you have an Adblocker, you will have to sit through a few advertisements as well, which continuously interrupt the ASMR experience if the ASMRtist chooses to sprinkle the ads throughout.

Viewers pay both in capital and attention by watching and rewatching online ASMR content, as YouTube tracks, collects and shares or sells data about viewers' habits to advertisers, commodifying their attention and thereby exploiting what is known as digital audience labor. Such processes allow YouTube to monetize content and to ensure that monetization influences said content (Fest, 2019, pp. 2-3).

Fest phrases it best when she says: "ASMR media promise viewers a reprieve from contemporary life's many stresses by enlisting them in the brand of spectatorial labor upon which the economy of attention depends. ASMRtists commoditize care and intimacy via these platforms that circulate discourses of self-preservation" (2019, p. 1).

Border patrol: A comparison of identity policing between two online communities

ASMR is part of a larger infrastructure of neglect, so why is it important to dive into ASMR specifically and not any other symptomatic movement? This segment explores the unique relevance of ASMR by comparing its community and culture to that of the pro-ana movement. The logic behind this specific comparison is that ASMR and pro-ana are both online movements that are symptomatic of social neglect. Both are non-contemplative, both have a gender problem — hence, both feed into the system they try to disrupt.

The Internet facilitates the coming together of once isolated and marginalized individuals by providing them with the safety of physical distance and anonymity (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, p. 34; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 43). The Internet has allowed for ASMR to be named, defined and circulated as an intentional affective experience constructed through sound. This process of naming and describing ASMR forms a key component of the

boundary work that shapes how the relationships between intimacy, sound and physical 'tingling' are understood (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 41). Naming ASMR defines it as an affective object, but also functions as a way to create and reinforce boundaries within the community (p. 45).

But whereas ASMR has steadily been going mainstream, other groups have purposely gone 'underground'. To avoid being taken down, pro-ana communities for instance have avoided media attention. These communities have become more interactive as discussions have become more personal and less focused on the technical (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, p. 28). The ASMR community's primary purpose is to make triggers visible and accessible, in order to produce an affective response. The focus is on sharing, not on discussing or dissecting, media that induces an ASMR response (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 43). This lack of critical scrutiny is something ASMR and pro-ana have in common.

The formation of both ASMR and pro-ana can be considered symptomatic of a social care depravity, but there are some crucial differences between the two. Whereas ASMR is bringing the hospital or the clinic into the home, those with eating disorders actually use the pro-ana community to congregate outside of hospitals and clinics. While ASMR prides itself on its positive effects on mental health, pro-ana communities are non-recovery oriented, never showing a negative attitude towards eating disorders and instead offering weight-loss tips and generating support for those who lose weight. But, much like the ASMR community, or any other online community for that matter, they provide ways for people to find each other, to develop a common language and set of symbols, to provide and receive support, and to create a specific lifestyle (in this case, the pro-ana lifestyle).

Instead of tingles, members look for 'thinspo', materialized as photographs of thin women that function as inspiration (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, pp. 28-29). Participants also post these pictures of themselves to prove to others that they are actually thin (p. 43), they engage

in check-ins e.g. when asked for their BMI (p. 44), and they partake in offline group activities like fasts. These processes or group rituals all function to establish authentication, making the body present online, policing community boundaries and maintaining or defending the community (p. 45).

Online embodiment is a relational project. Members of both the ASMR and the pro-ana community seek out spaces where they will not be shamed, where they can be overt about their interests, and build rapport with others who feel the same way. But the main difference between the two communities is that the pro-ana community is built on aggressive policing, while the ASMR community is mainly built on sharing.

The identity of a pro-ana anorexic is not only relational but also defensive. Community members defend themselves from those who see the community as dangerous or unhealthy, much like how the ASMR community defends itself from out-group ridicule, disapproval or labels of eroticism. But the pro-ana community also needs to defend itself from the wannarexics, whose presence then paradoxically reinforces the sense of community. Calling someone a wannarexic implies that a person does not belong, causing members to continuously engage in boundary work that defines who is and who is not a "true" member (p. 39).

While the ASMR community has welcomed all kinds of members, even the "quiet" ones, the "silent" members of the community who never really engage (either through commenting or posting) but only watch ASMR, pro-ana posters are perceived as more committed, more dedicated, more "true" than dieters who may show signs of inconsistency or whose goals are not extreme enough (pp. 39-40). The ASMR community is eager to grow and claim mainstream status, whereas pro-ana communities actively try to limit the number of new members so as to create more "elite" and "authentic" group and individual identities,

and to stay away from the spotlight (pp. 42; 50). Through their rituals, members lay claim to a pro-ana identity while depriving others of it, usually through labelling them a 'wannarexic.'

Policing sex and sexuality

The only real policing the ASMR community seems to do is when it comes to the promotion of sexual or in other ways undesired intimacy. In 2011, the ASMR subreddit (r/asmr) was created, which is still going strong as an essential platform used by the ASMR community today. This subreddit is devoted to sharing ASMR videos, defining them as "sounds that feel good" (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 42). r/asmr ranks videos on the basis of their success in eliciting tingles as reported by users (Garro, 2017, p. 4). The subreddit boasted 86,000 subscribers worldwide in 2015 (Barratt & Davis, p. 2). As of 2020, the sub-count is on 206,000 (reddit.com).

Members of r/asmr are expected to follow certain community rules and guidelines. There are three guidelines that reveal the kind of atmosphere the community aims to create. One, be respectful. "This should be a nice, peaceful and relaxing community. Hateful, demeaning or inappropriate comments will not be tolerated." Two, no discussion of ASMRtist's personal lives. "What they do with their own time doesn't concern us. Anybody found giving out personal information will be banned." And three, do not downvote video submissions, "unless they are breaking the rules or [are] spam" (r/asmr, 2020A).

The subreddit has further set up ten rules in order to maintain this "nice, peaceful and relaxing community":

1. The community does not allow for inappropriate discussions of ASMRtists

2. There can be no adult/sexualized content

3. Users must use the tagging system

4. Users cannot post images

5. Nor can they create [Meta] posts unrelated to the subreddit

6. Users cannot post music or music videos

7. Each thread's title needs to be descriptive

8. Original content abuse and spam leads to a ban

9. Posts need to feature direct links to content

10. Deleted content cannot be requested or rehosted

Some rules are generally more descriptive, such as promoting the use of the tagging system guide (3), not allowing the random posting of images (4), [meta] posts (5), music or music videos (6) to limit content to ASMR only, indicating that a title should reflect the content of a post (7), limiting spam (8), and the use of direct links for easy access (9) (r/asmr, 2020B).

Notably, it appears that the community is especially respectful towards ASMRtists, making sure that members respect the privacy of content creators (1) and that content creators are not denied their right to remove their work from the internet by members downloading or rehosting their work (10). Furthermore, the community is very specific in that it removes any adult content (2), and instead refers to a different thread called r/nsfwasmr ('Not Safe For Work' ASMR) which is based around the sharing of sexualized ASMR content. Members must be 18+ in order to gain access to this subreddit (r/nsfwasmr, 2020).

The community does recognize this type of content as ASMR, yet separates it from the "main" genre. Maria also acknowledges the existence of "other" ASMR, but she does interpret this as a part of the community: "There is a darker community-part too. Not everybody likes everything bubbly, and butterflies and unicorns, some people like something raw" (*The New Yorker*, YouTube, 2018). The press has often interpreted ASMR as erotic, writing off the phenomenon as nothing more than an Internet meme, or some kind of consensual hallucination/sexual fetish (Gallagher, 2016, p. 1).

Ever since ASMR began to receive public attention, the focus has generally been on the "weird" aspects of ASMR culture, often viewed as another form of distant sexual

intimacy (Fredborg et al, 2017, p. 1; Garro, 2017, p. 3; Andersen, 2014, p. 695). According to the community, this is a misconception due to ASMR's interpersonal and intimate nature. Andersen (2014) states that because of its affective charge, ASMR carries intimate, emotional connotations. Heteronormative culture regards this public intimacy as something that ought to remain exclusively private. Andersen claims that ASMR's intimacy refuses these private norms, and therefore situates itself as reluctant. However, the ASMR community fiercely denies any disruptive aspect of ASMR and is quick to refer back to scientific evidence to prove that ASMR is a "pure" (aka publicly acceptable) form of intimacy (Andersen, 2014, p. 692).

The aforementioned Reddit thread "What is the best way to explain ASMR to someone?" also has users taking extra precautions with regard to what *not* to say when trying to introduce other's to ASMR: "Stay away from breathy whispers and ample cleavage, as even if it's innocent in presentation, it's super easy for people to react as if it were straight up porn or equivalent to phone sex." Smith & Snider (2018) suspect that this active desire of the community to distance itself from anything sexual has ties to the stigma surrounding sex work. The community prioritizes the etiology of the sensation over the cultural practices that ASMR has developed for fear of being deemed illegitimate by the outside world (pp. 41; 46; Fest, 2019, p. 1).

In an interview with Insider, ASMRtist Brian (*NYC ASMR*) said: "I've even seen things where ASMR has been labeled like a fetish. This content is definitely not intended to be sexual in nature, and I actually think it's unfortunate that those connotations exist because that can contribute to a lot of […] shame and the kind of underground aspects of the ASMR culture." In the same interview, ASMRtist Taylor (*ASMR Darling* on YouTube) shared her own personal experience with this shaming: "People that I went to high school with, that I

was friends with, started making fun of me online because I was doing something that I loved" (*Insider*, 2017).

So, in order to be taken seriously as a movement and to not be shamed for their interest in ASMR, the community polices itself by drawing a strict border between sex and pleasure. A way for the community to emphasize their legitimacy is by highlighting ASMR's health benefits, and referring back to biomedical research (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 46). Paradoxically, this defensive process reinforces the self-definitional work done by the community, and so the community's identity actually depends on people "not getting it". Whenever news outlets refer to ASMR as e.g. "bizarre" or "whisper porn", it gives the ASMR community an opportunity to re-establish and strengthen its own identity (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 46).

Why is ASMR, according to ASMR? (Spoiler: care has a gender problem)

The ASMR identity, in rejecting sex and sexuality, ignores its gendered roots, selectively and uncritically adopting specific scientific insights in order to strengthen a desired image. Both pro-ana and ASMR communities reflect a form of social neglect, yes, but this neglect is incredibly gendered. The overwhelming majority of both communities are women, who find themselves stuck in and/or clinging to heteronormative patterns of femininity, whether that be related to size or sexuality. Plus, being oblivious to the rigidity of their own identities, these support networks are easily appropriated for other (capitalist) ends (Atkinson & Ayers, 2010, p. 78).

The ASMR community seems to mend attachment-impoverished (Han, 2010, p. 17) individuals by engaging on forums and in the comments section. However, none of these practices fundamentally challenge the status quo and they do not provide a radical alternative to the healthcare sector as shaped by late capitalist, neoliberal reforms (Atkinson & Ayers, 2010, p. 79). In fact, such forums correspond with the discourse in which patients are

customers, health services are commodities and care is an economic transaction (p. 80). Inherently, ASMR plays into the idea that the individual better return to their "original shape" (Bracke, 2016, p. 54), to a prior, more "noble" state (Purser, 2019, p. 48).

The ASMR community arguably prides itself most on ASMR's therapeutic properties, reinforced by all of the scientific research that confirms that ASMR has positive effects on mental and physical health. Maria told The New Yorker: "A lot of people write to me, like the students, they're always stressed out so they watch these videos to turn off their brain a little bit. I get messages from single moms who've fallen asleep to these videos with their babies. Some of the most touching stories were from veterans who come back and they have huge PTSD and nightmares and night terrors" (*The New Yorker*, 2018).

She furthermore stated her theory that ASMR "is an evolutionary sensation, […] very similar to the social bonding of animals of some kind." In the same interview, Dr. Craig Richard, professor of Biopharmaceutical Sciences at Shenandoah University and founder of asmruniversity.com, attempts to back this view by science: "No one's been able to unravel the biochemistry or the exact physiological experience that people are having. The neurotransmitters, probably things like oxytocin, it's sometimes called the "love hormone" or the "bonding hormone" because it's associated with people that are really close to each other" (*The New Yorker*, 2018).

The gender problem

In her talk on Sexit, Sharma (2016) explains how care itself, and by extension the ability to exit or withdraw from a careless system, has a gender problem. The gig economy not only outsources care, but, in doing so, expands "the category of reproductive labor", distributing that labor to precarious bodies. Sharma calls the gig or sharing economy "generalized exit." Oriented around the house, the gig economy consists mainly of tasks done by others, which Sharma deems to be "the dolling up of mother into different figures and different gigs",

engaging even more people other than the traditional "mother" in maintaining the home. The gig economy congratulates itself on providing labor for precarious people, but all it is doing is extending the home into the lives of these already precarious people.

Sharma views the gig economy as an impediment to a post-gender world. Not only does it further condemn precarious people to domesticity; it makes a distinction between what counts as meaningful work and what is considered meaningless work, further devaluing these caring "tasks" just as feminized care labor has always been devalued. While the rest of the population is told not to waste their human capacity, the gig economy specifically *produces* people who *must* waste their human capacity, who are seen "fit" for the meaningless tasks that the rest of society cannot be bothered with anymore (2016).

This puts care on the shoulders of not just "mother", but of every precarious body in need of a job, expanding the definition of "mother" to include even more people rather than abolishing the concept altogether. Sharma is in favor of this abolishing of mother, as it makes care mandatory, taking it out of the home and into society. This alternative of "radical kinship" is however undermined by the gig economy's inherent structure that outsources care (2016).

Even though it promotes gendered care-work, the ASMR community recodes its practices as representing a grooming that is biologically essential (Fest, 2019, p. 5), frequently referring to scientific research that seems to support this hypothesis. Poerio et al suggest that ASMR could simulate a form of social grooming, of being calmed and soothed by another through the tactile tingling sensations induced by ASMR triggers, which benefits well-being and social bonding, by reductions in heart rate and release of endorphins (2018, p. 14).

In her video "ASMR | Get Your Groom On | Brushing | Soft Spoken" (2017), Maria from *Gentle Whispering ASMR* explains why she believes that ASMR represents something

that is biologically essential. She views the exchange of capital and attention YouTube brokers between artists, viewers, and corporations as a form of loving intimacy, of social bonding. She believes that grooming bonds individuals together into more harmonious collectives that ensure the survival of the species. Maria believes that ASMR's distant intimacy is a product of evolution, a type of grooming and bonding that does not require physical proximity. "I groom you, you groom me. Like a real family" (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2017).

Fest (2019) analyzes how Maria "juggles the fantasy of [the] individualized intimacy she mimics with the reality of the mass audience she reaches." Fest argues that Maria legitimizes her relationship with her viewers in two ways. First, she links grooming back to our primate ancestors, and claims grooming has evolved to include watching, funding and sponsoring, rendering "a relationship dependent upon corporate algorithms and policies" as natural reciprocity. Second, Maria considers herself and her viewers as a family, equating distant intimacy to older intimate forms of love and support, which is then framed as authentic and absolute. Even though distant intimacy has nonnormative properties and possibilities (which will be unpacked in the next chapter), this appropriation of evolutionary discourse and biological essentialism once again naturalizes ASMR's political economy (p. 5).

"This is not an exit": Confronting ASMR with its past (and present)

The previous chapter zeroed in on the inner workings of the ASMR movement, its community and their practices, and introduced some of the general issues the movement has. This chapter functions to expand on these issues by placing ASMR within its socio-historical context — something the community itself fails to do, which, as this chapter will show, only perpetuates its problems.

These problems are symptomatic of larger societal issues with care, of which ASMR is but one manifestation. Rachel Fest (2019) points out that the rise of ASMR around 2007/2008 coincided both with the global financial crisis that further internalized the chronic crisis narrative and with the innovation of mobile technology that kickstarted "a global economy of attention" (p. 1). This chapter explores both of these connections, first the economy of attention and then the chronic care crisis that this economy plays into, in order to recontextualize ASMR as pharmakon.

ASMR as pharmakon: Playing into the economy of attention

ASMR can be understood as a form of affective labor that attempts to compensate for and soothe anxieties induced by the economy of attention while still operating from within (and therefore reinforcing) this same economy (p. 1). ASMR's mode of care is complacent, discouraging critical scrutiny, and instead offering "a way for our devices to seem to love us back, to appear to gaze back at us, with affection, just as we gaze upon them" (Fest, 2019, p. 7). Tasha Bjélic (2016) refers to ASMR as a pharmakon, stating that, on the one hand, ASMR is a soothing remedy, while on the other, it is "part of the poisonous architecture" that produces the very symptoms that ASMR promises to soothe (p. 103).

Bjélic hereby adopts Bernard Stiegler's (2011) use of the term pharmakon, which directly addresses the late-capitalist economy of attention. Stiegler explains that, much like

the industrial economy relies on the use of fossil fuels, contemporary capitalism relies on a constant consumption of attention in order to function. "Pharmakon is at once what enables care to be taken and that of which care must be taken – in the sense that it is necessary to pay attention: its power is curative to the immeasurable extent" (p. 4).

Stiegler connects the destruction of attention and care in modern capitalism to the creation of a drive-based economy (p. 55), in which the emphasis on consumption leads libidinal energy to become self-destructive (p. 63). Desire both enables and disables us: it allows us to be innovative and to create, but when libidinal drives are used primarily as a source of energy that deprives us of our attention, we become "incapable of taking care of [our] world" (p. 91). The reliance on the consumption of attention leads to a degradation of our ability to individuate ourselves, both as individuals and as collectives, as all of our attention is directed towards short-term, profit driven contemporary capitalist society (p. 33). In short, the attention economy is destroying the very libido it needs to exist (p. 91).

Despite the ASMR community's good intentions, the need for affect renders us numb for critical inquiry, and so the use of ASMR is exactly as Stiegler's pharmakon: promising to heal and yet being just as poisonous (2011, p. 4), part of the same dysfunctional system that created the need for ASMR in the first place (Bjélic, 2016, p. 103). The economy of attention accumulates capital by capturing your attention, and it does so by increasing screen-time to a maximum. This new reality of being surrounded by screens, all equally demanding for attention, has contributed to the emergence of perpetual precarity and anxiety as the new "dominant structures of feeling" (p. 1). We can identify two elements of the economy of attention that connect to ASMR: hypersensuality and commodity fetishism.

Hypersensuality

ASMR fits perfectly into an economy where markets are increasingly governed by sensual logic. David Howes (2005) calls this a regime of hyperaesthesia, or hypersensuality, in which

we engage with commodities not in commercial but in aesthetic ways. To demonstrate that the senses have long been appropriated by marketers as a crucial medium of persuasion, Howes quotes the 1930s book *Consumer Engineering*, in which business professors Sheldon and Arens write: "Manufacturing an object that delights this [tactile] sense is something that you do but don't talk about. Almost everything which is bought is handled. After the eye, the hand is the first censor to pass on acceptance, and if the hand's judgment is unfavorable, the most attractive object will not gain the popularity it deserves. On the other hand, merchandise designed to be pleasing to the hand wins an approval that may never register in the mind, but which will determine additional purchases... Make it snuggle in the palm" (p. 286).

Through such quotes, Howes demonstrates that designers were suddenly preoccupied with generating affectivity, based on an aesthetically charged understanding of the ways in which sensory qualities, color or form, affect feelings about and therefore evaluations of products. The desired response is to get the consumer to say "I like that" (pp. 286-287). This development led to a breakdown in the consumer's defenses, as physical contact between server and shopper renders the degree of emotional involvement in the sales experience, enhanced by a likeable salesperson, of utmost importance.

Howes refers to this as the "sensual logic of late capitalism" (p. 287), which designs everything so that it creates a state of hyperaesthesia in the shopper, multiplying sensory channels in order to "colonize by canalizing the 'mind-space' of the consumer" (pp. 288). The hypersensuality of the contemporary marketplace does not so much produce goods as it creates "experiences" — and the more senses are engaged, the more memorable the experience is (p. 290).

ASMR appropriates and repurposes commodities for this hyperaestheticism (Gallagher, 2016, p. 5), and customer service roleplays seem to invoke exactly that emotional involvement in shopping that Howes describes. Julia herself has a video called "ASMR

Relaxing customer service roleplay | hand movements, layered sounds, massage (soft spoken) ⬚" (*itsblitzzz*, 2020) , where she pretends to be a personal shopper for recyclable and/or reusable products. Julia explains: "As you know, with the way our society is structured, there is an abundance of waste and materials that never fully biodegrade in landfills. So, the objective is to decrease that and continue to spread the word and encourage others to do the same, because this is a really big problem. So I want to commend you for all of the steps you have taken and I think you're doing a great job" (*itsblitzzz*, 2020).

Despite this noble intention of caring for the environment and spreading awareness, Julia's sentiment here does seem to reinforce the neoliberal idea of individual responsibility for social change. And even though she clearly states that "[t]here is no obligation to purchase anything, so there's absolutely no pressure" (*itsblitzzz*, 2020), the video still encourages consumption, albeit the consumption of items that should stick around for the long-term, and more importantly the video hypersensualizes products.

"Hopefully this will increase your knowledge and educate you further on the simple ways that we can all make a difference on a daily basis" she says, before she begins stroking and tapping the products and their labels/packaging, describing their use, as well as how they feel. She advises me on where to use certain items, "I think this is a really, really great item to keep in your kitchen." She asks "Do you want to feel them?" and holds the product right in front of "me" (the camera), as she strokes the un-paper towels and describes how they feel: "They're very soft. There you go," and gives them to "me", placing them out of frame (*itsblitzzz*, 2020).

Much like the haul genre (Fest, 2019, p. 3), the items featured in the video are listed in the description box, along with clickable links that will direct you to a webshop where you can purchase the item. "Would you like to test this out?" Julia asks, holding a recyclable/reusable bottle of aftershave tonic. She applies the tonic to "my face", using

reusable cotton pads. "So just close your eyes and feel the effects of these amazing products on your skin. It should feel nice and cooling." When she is done, she asks: "How does that feel?" She pauses for a moment, waiting for "me" to "reply", then smiles. "Yes, it's so nice. I'm really glad you like it" (*itsblitzzz*, 2020).

Against the backdrop of late capitalism, Julia's video almost feels like a mixture between a visit to the mall — where much-too-eager salespeople will have you feign your consent for fear of being rude and who will therefore feel free to hold you down as they waterboard you with the latest perfumes and creams — and a training in green citizenship — where you are shamed into buying sustainable products, completely oblivious to the fact that purchasing even more stuff goes against the whole "green" philosophy, that is until you and your heavy bags arrive home to an already overstuffed cabinet.

Julia's intentions are not the problem; it is the fact that her content is so easily appropriated by the neoliberal agenda, so fit for commercialization, that makes that they do not prove to be very effective. These hyperaesthetic practices adhere to the neoliberal agenda as the individual is expected to educate themselves and to purchase items that will help them be more responsible in, for example, the eco-department. This colonization of the imagination persists, even with the best of intentions; even while or perhaps *because* Julia is here found "praising an exfoliating sponge" (Fest, 2019, p. 3).

Commodity fetishism

Even without sponsorships, ASMRtists still engage in marketing through commodity fetishism. ASMR has thus far proven to be a perfect fit for commercialization, as it succeeds in turning "apparent dross into gold". Its community acts as a cultural relay, boosting the visibility and profitability of content (Gallagher, 2016, p. 6), regardless of novelty (as explained in the previous chapter, repeatability or stickiness is quite an important aspect to the consumption of ASMR). Rachel Fest puts it most promptly: "They join us more

intimately than ever before with our commodities, which have become, for ASMR media, our very bodies — what we touch and what touches us" (2019, p. 3).

Products that have technically already been consumed by the ASMRtist gain a second life through unboxing, stroking, and caressing. ASMR aligns with the objectives of the attention economy in that it renders consumerism *itself* consumable (p. 3). While Julia's video already demonstrates a good degree of commodity fetishism, with her praising products not only for their intended use but also for their affectivity as ASMR props, the concept really shines when it comes to big business appropriating ASMR for advertising.

In August 2017, IKEA published a series of adverts called "Oddly IKEA". These ads are perfectly designed to fit the ASMR format. The theme of the series is "Back to College" and features a girl using a soft-spoken voice-over to fawn over IKEA's range of dorm room décor as she makes a bed, organizes a closet and desk, and caresses an area rug. She praises the products' quality and fit, based mainly on what they feel and sound like. We never see her face, only her hands as she handles various products, as well as different shots of the display room itself (*IKEA USA*, 2017).

It is as if the girl is reading directly from the IKEA brochure (which she probably is): "And look at this beautiful, light blue organizer. This is a SKUBB closet organizer, which costs six dollars and ninety-nine cents at your local IKEA. This is perfect for those of you who need additional shelf space, as you can put anything you want in here: pants, shirts, shoes, and even smaller SKUBB inserts for jewelry, sunglasses and other small items. It comes in three colors: black, white, and the light blue you see here. The hook-and-loop fastener on the top makes it easy to hang up and move to wherever you want to put it. The fabric is 100% polyester, while the shelf inserts are made of reinforced polypropylene. And let's listen to that material" (*IKEA USA*, 2017).

While she is speaking, she is tracing the organizer with her nails and palm, and continues to do so as she takes some extra time to let us enjoy the sounds. This ability to reconsume the product through sound is seen as an addition to its value. The girl continues: "Such a wonderful light sound. The material has a shiny quality to it, which helps stand out against your clothes. The open-faced shelves are a great solution to have in your closet, because you can see where everything is. It really helps you to get ready in the morning, because you can just grab and go. These shelves are equal in height, which is great, because it gives you plenty of flexibility as to what you put in there. You can stack clothes high, you can put in hats, or you can add bins — either way, it's incredibly customizable." And what seems to be the longest ad in history is not done yet: "Let's take a look at some clothes. Some top-shelf shirts going on the top-shelf here. Look at how much support this shelf has" (*IKEA USA*, 2017).

The girl places a stack of what are now apparently called top-shelf shirts onto the top shelf (how convenient), praising the organizer as she strokes it lovingly. The word I would use to describe this treatment is perverse. "This is so easy to take and move as it compresses and folds to become completely flat. Here we see a SKUBB tray in the same color and the same material. You can put a lot of little items in there: sunglasses, scrunchies, or anything small. It is a great tool to organize all of your little things that you may not have a place for. This simple item will make any closet look perfectly organized, so when you wake up late for class, you'll know exactly where everything is. And that's exactly what IKEA closet solutions are designed to do: help you feel calm and relaxed and happy" (*IKEA USA*, 2017).

And there it is. If we use Sarah Sharma's description of technology "greasing the transaction" in the gig economy (2016), then ASMR is here the technology that greases the transaction in IKEA's clever business model. IKEA appropriates not only ASMR's format, but especially uses its happy affects in order to make consumers feel cared for *by* buying

IKEA products. This sentence alone, "And that's exactly what IKEA closet solutions are designed to do: help you feel calm and relaxed and happy," shows that IKEA is *highly aware* of what it means to use the ASMR format. It means that they can sell products disguised as care, telling students: *I know how stressed you are, let me make it easier for you. All you need to do is buy this organizer that I have made especially for you, and then you will be happier.* IKEA is selling happiness for only six dollars and ninety-nine cents — a bargain!

The comment section to this ad indicates that most people know exactly what is going on, but continue to consume the content anyway. *Gianni Wasserman*'s witty comment reads: "I love relaxing to the sweet sounds of capitalism", but others actually unironically praise IKEA for their new marketing strategy. *FangsOfTheNidhogg* comments: "Give the marketing department a raise. They just devised a way to make people willing listen to a 25 minute ad. Absolute genius", while *Lalo* happily confesses: "I'm not gonna lie, I actually went to IKEA, bought some stuff, and now my whole apartment is so organized. Effective marketing done right" (*IKEA USA*, 2017).

In reality, this is just another intrusive, demanding ad in a seductive ASMR wrapper. The use of ASMR here seems to soften the blow of advertising, making it more easy to digest. "World's first ad that's 25 minutes long and doesn't annoy people," reads another comment. Because the pleasing, calming effect of ASMR is considered a stark contrast to the intrusivity of loud, obnoxious advertising, this move of IKEA to sell you their products in a gentile way is applauded, as if IKEA is giving its customers a break from all the noise — as if IKEA *cares*.

Mastery & Risk: The ruthless narrative of late capitalism

This corporate cash grab behavior is nothing new — only that the adoption of the ASMR format makes it easier for corporations like IKEA to mask their cash grabbing as caring. This mask is especially tasteless considering that the late capitalist system, driven by neoliberal

ideology, that allows such corporations to thrive is itself responsible for the very care crisis from which ASMR was born. This segment dives into the crisis of care to uncover a society that denies vulnerability, disidentifies with dependency and need, and thereby neglects its citizens (Bracke, 2016, p. 59).

The need for ASMR originates from this space of neglect. Those who take refuge in ASMR often suffer from depression, burnout and insomnia. These conditions are going mainstream at an alarming rate, and are considered symptomatic of tense, overactive minds and bodies "unable to keep up with the pace and demands of modern living" (Nathoo, 2016, p. 73). These people cannot find the help they need in a society that blatantly ignores social determinants of health (such as poverty, inequality, a poor built environment, social exclusion, and poor public policies and services) and blames the individual for struggling with this abandonment (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017, p. 3).

Life in the risk society

The dominant philosophy of the economic practice of late capitalism is neoliberalism, which is based on "faith in free markets, deregulation, and small government" (Fahnbulleh, 2020, p. 38). Neoliberal reforms have had enormous consequences for healthcare systems around the world. The reforms emphasize the free market rather than the right to healthcare (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017, p. 1), privileging individual autonomy over most other values (Carney, 2008, p. 102). With the state stepping down, the responsibility for risk shifts from government to non-government spheres, to the individual and their direct support system (the individual is expected to have one) (Carney, 2008, p. 102).

Sociologists have framed this system the "risk society". "It notoriously condemns its inhabitants to live in uncertainty" says Sarah Bracke in her text on neoliberal responsibilization (2016, p. 57). The risk society, she says, has accepted a context of chronic crisis, which manifests itself as the insecurity of part-time jobs, facing retirement without a

pension, but it also involves "risks" such as climate change, the War on Terror or a global economic meltdown (pp. 58-59; 62).

Bracke identifies the "resilient" self as a product of this risk society, that emphasizes neoliberal citizens' ability for what she deems "shock absorption": "the ability of a subject to bounce back, to return to its 'original shape' after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, or bent" (p. 54). The ideal (Western) neoliberal subject is self-sufficient (Bracke, 2016, p. 62), self-reliant (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017, p 5), responsible (Trnka & Trundle, 2014, p. 138), independent (Atkinson & Ayers, 2010, p. 75), and, perhaps most importantly, employable. These characteristics are all common buzzwords for the adoption and internalization of neoliberal governance, resulting from an (over-)emphasis on personal choice and freedom (Trnka & Trundle, 2014, pp. 137-138).

The risk society outsources care by way of this responsibilization. Within this framework, neoliberalism distinguishes between "caring for", denoting proximity and individual responsibility, and "caring about", denoting distance and societal responsibility. The latter is only acknowledged where the market fails to meet basic needs, only allowing for caring practices to enact outside of the competitive capitalist system as the individual is expected to be self-reliant when it comes to everyday care, or at most reliant on those emotionally related to them (Atkinson & Ayers, 2010, p. 76).

Responsibility becomes a means to design one's individual life in such a way that mitigates harm and risk, requiring constant moral evaluation of actions — not just by the individual but also by others. Personal responsibility is under constant surveillance (p. 139), as there is what Bracke calls "an ethical imperative at work": the resilient subject's ability to overcome, to bounce back, is perceived as a moral good (p. 62).

What this directly implies is that individuals who do not succeed in achieving this permanent state of resilience are *morally flawed*. Good subjects can survive and even thrive

in any situation; they can absorb the impact of austerity measures and remain productive.

Those who fall behind have only themselves to blame. This framing allows the State to get

away with social neglect by shifting responsibility away from the State, as individuals

internalize the burden of the risk society.

Citizens in training

This internalization does not just happen overnight. Bracke says that neoliberal citizenship is

not so much something you are as it is something you can become. She classifies this process

as a training. Neoliberal governance denies (vulnerable) people the access to healthcare,

resulting in a loss of "voice" by the ill (Carney, 2008, p. 107). The ill do not need help, they

need to *try harder*. If anything, they can help themselves. The self-help industry provides

training methods that are readily available, and so the individual could just as well graze the

self-help isle or make an appointment with a life coach (Bracke, 2016, pp. 62-63).

Anyone who still cannot make it on their own is unnecessarily needy, dependent, and

unproductive — the latter perhaps being their gravest sin. Sakellariou & Rotarou (2017) dub

this internalized responsibilization "neoliberal disability" (p. 3) and note that people with

disabilities are disproportionately disadvantaged by neoliberal reforms, as they gain lower

socioeconomic status while their need for healthcare increases (p. 1).

By ignoring the social determinants of health, health inequalities are perpetuated and

the access to and utilization of healthcare is compromised. Disabled people are "viewed as

costly bodies who use up limited healthcare resources or as potentially financially

burdensome" (p. 3). After all, this shift in policy "had hardly anything at all to do with the

mentally ill or the practitioners who treated them. It was designed to lower taxes and shift

responsibility away from the federal government" (Carney, 2010, p. 111).

This denial of vulnerability, this disidentification with dependency and need (Bracke,

2016, p. 59), circles back to the surveillance of personal responsibility, where people who fall

off the bandwagon have to carry a lot of shame for the fact that they cannot keep up. This vicious cycle plays a key role in how Han (2015) understands society to create "depressives and losers" (pp. 15-16). He throws another concept into the mix to describe contemporary reality: the "achievement society" (p. 15). This is characterized by the process of discarding negativity. Productivity is heightened by the positive affirmation that we *Can* achieve the good life if we really want to, if we have enough discipline that is (pp. 15-16).

This what Han calls "the new *commandment* of late-modern labor society" (p. 18, his emphasis), this pressure to achieve in a context of increasing fragmentation and atomization of life in society is exactly what causes people to fall off the neoliberal bandwagon (pp. 17-18). Here, Han quotes French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg: "The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself" (p. 17). In Han's own words, only a society that claims that "Nothing is impossible" could create a subject for whom "Nothing is possible"; a subject who is *no longer able to be able*. "Depression is the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity" (pp. 18-19).

This nonsensical myth is internalized through the (phallic) phantasy of mastery put forth by the notion of the resilient self (pp. 58-59).The tragedy here is that the threats, the systemic "risks" that drive contemporary biopolitics (terrorism, natural disasters, health pandemics, or any other disruptive force) are created by modernization itself (Bracke, 2016, p. 56; 57). Risk society and its resilient subject seek to find security in a loophole, paradoxically trying to reverse the damage done by preserving that which is doing the damage. Strength is now understood as a perpetual preparedness to face all challenges (pp. 56-57).

Resilience's existence depends on disaster or threat to persist, they are dialectically bound: calling into being the resilient subject means calling into being a threat that is permanent. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, as threat itself proves to be resilient,

bouncing back, stronger than before, then resilience itself is at risk, through which the distinction between threat and resilience collapses (p. 59).

False promises of paradise: ASMR, mindfulness and the self-help industry

Citizens are stuck in an endless feedback loop of risk and resilience. This is also reflected in the feedback loop of the self-help industry. ASMR too suffers from this loop of neglect, distress, relief, repeat. It has this in common with mindfulness. These movements themselves cannot fix societal issues, as they play directly into an industry that has grown particularly lucrative under late capitalism (that system responsible for the crisis of care). This segment characterizes ASMR as part of the self-help industry and likens it to mindfulness, both of which have a gender problem.

Banking off of resilience

"That ASMR culture has arisen in this climate is no surprise," says Rob Gallagher. "ASMR is best understood as an attempt to ameliorate anxiety, depression, insomnia and other such chronic contemporary ills characteristic of life under late capitalism" (Gallagher, 2016, p. 6). ASMR promises stress relief and calm as well as the ability to forge connections (Fest, 2019, p. 1). It asks us to slow down, to step out of the perpetual rat race, adhering to "the need for quiet in an age of smart-phones and mobile listening" (Garro, 2017, p. 4) and information overload (Gallagher, 2016, p. 8).

The viewer feels seen by the ASMRtist, who acknowledges their suffering and offers them compassion. This one-on-one format renders the viewer's presence as special rather than disposable or easily replaceable. ASMR furthermore liberates the viewer from shame, from the accusations of neediness (Bjélic, 2016, p. 102), as the depersonalized interface of the internet provides for a caring space that is experienced as non-judgmental (Atkinson & Ayers, 2010, p. 80). These positive qualities of ASMR are overvalued by its community at the expense of critical awareness and context.

Menna Laura Meijer's documentary *Nu verandert er langzaam iets* (2019) offers an intimate account of contemporary coaching and training in the self-help industry. Meijer shows a variety of self-help practices, ranging from meditation groups to ASMR, without any added commentary. We just get a glimpse into each practice, with the camera quietly observing sessions through a wide frame. In an interview with Dutch television presenter Ersin Kiris, Meijer explains that she makes use of this framing because she wants to keep her influence on the viewing experience to a minimum.

While acknowledging that she cannot create something without making decisions, she does state: "Ik wilde eigenlijk dat je opnieuw nadenkt, dat als het shot open gaat dat je zelf moet kijken wat daar gebeurt. En dat je je daarmee realiseert dat ieder moment dat een camera eigenlijk inzoomt, iemand anders voor jou de keuze maakt wat je ziet." This approach stands in stark contrast to what she thinks the object of her documentary, the self-help industry, is doing, which is actively constructing a person's reality to create in them a need for what you wish to sell them (2019).

Meijer mentions how the burnout society is coming more and more to the surface, and links this emersion to the self-help industry, which she considers to be the culprit rather than the cure. The industry, she says, creates unrealistic expectations, through this idea that your life needs to look a certain way. If it then turns out that your life does not look the way it is "supposed" to, and/or that you are not feeling the way you are "supposed" to feel, then the industry can sell you the help that you "need" (2019).

But whether this help is actually helpful, is questionable. Meijer explains that she is not so much interested in the self-help practices themselves as she is in the fact that the self-help industry is the fastest growing in the Western world. She critiques this system where people make money off of what she inherently thinks are created insecurities: "Mijn vraag is eigenlijk altijd geweest: Is die twijfel die jij in jezelf hebt, is die autentiek, komt die uit jezelf,

of wordt die deels ingegeven door die industrie? […] Je zou kunnen zeggen dat het hele kapitalisme natuurlijk gaat over mensen iets voorhouden wat ze kunnen kopen en mensen het gevoel geven dat ze dat ook willen" (2019).

Taking mindfulness as an example, Meijer points out the problems with promises of a return of agency, the idea that mindfulness gives you the insights you need — for instance, figuring out that your current job is not the right fit for you. But for people who do not have the option to just change jobs, these "insights" do not lead to an increase in agency, but rather reaffirms the reality that they are stuck. Meijer sees this especially in young adults: "Er zijn heel veel jonge mensen die problemen hebben met het vinden van een vaste baan, kunnen geen hypotheek nemen, kunnen moeilijk op die manier hun leven in order krijgen, werken vaak met kortlopende contracten. Er is een soort gevoel dat er voor jou honderd anderen zijn" (2019).

Just because you can reason that your job does not make you happy, does not mean that you have any more of a choice to quit than you did before you started your journey into mindfulness. Mindfulness itself cannot fix this for you. Meijer gives another example of one of the filming locations: "Wij waren wel eens op plekken en dan kregen mensen een soort training om met ademhaling en concentratie of een soort meditatie met stress om te gaan. Dat was dan een bedrijf. Maar die mensen lunchten wel allemaal aan hun werktafel omdat er geen tijd was om naar buiten te gaan. Ik denk dan zelf, ja, dan kan je echt mediteren totdat je een ons weegt, maar dan gaat het 'm gewoon niet worden. Als jij in een omgeving zit waar mensen heel veel druk op jou leggen, waarin je geen ruimte hebt om naar buiten te gaan, dan kan zo'n bedrijf een cursus mindfulness aanbieden maar dat is gewoon niet de oplossing" (2019).

ASMR vs. Mindfulness: both have a gender problem

The promises of ASMR overlap with the promises of mindfulness and meditation. From a cultural perspective, Ayesha Nathoo (2016) describes how the contemporary Western mindfulness movement is "often portrayed as a sign of and remedy for our restless, overloaded times." Mindfulness has become widely accepted as (additional) treatment for pain, mental illness and stress management, as is in line with preventive medicine and "well-being agendas" (p. 71). Hence why mindfulness, like ASMR, is seen as complicit with the neoliberal citizenship training program (pp. 71-72). Both offer something akin to a "reset" button, a temporarily relief of the burden of reality so that the individual can remain productive and employable within that same reality.

Much as Tasha Bjélic (2016) considers ASMR as inherently noncontemplative, subjugating "reflection for pleasure" and thereby attending to the very poverty of care it claims to soothe (p. 103), Roland Purser (2019) accuses mindfulness practices of internalizing neoliberal commands: "each individual should take charge of their own "self-care" to remain employable. The dismantling of social protections along with market deregulation leaves people reliant on self-governance to manage their stress and help them thrive. Mindfulness delivers the message with a velvet glove, but it still contains the iron fist" (p. 35).

Purser describes this process almost as a brainwashing. The mindful imperative to "accept things as they are" and to practice "nonjudgmental, present moment awareness" negates room for any critical inquiry. The idea that *as long as I am mindful, I am OK* seems to reflect the neoliberal myth that "the source of people's problems is found in their heads" (p. 45), once again shifting full responsibility onto the individual and rendering powerful capitalist systems immune to critique.

Mindfulness reframes problems as the outcomes of individual, "free" choices (p. 41). Vulnerable subjects are not disproportionately affected by social inequality; they simply need

to work harder to better themselves. Yet because the individual is constantly working, *laboring*, to monitor this "project of the self" (p. 44), the mindfulness of truly being "present" is unattainable. Purser adds another term to the list when he quotes Jennifer Silva, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bucknell University, who coins the concept of the "mood economy", which runs on the premise of making individuals solely responsible for their emotional fates.

Mindfulness becomes a form of capitalist spirituality, perfectly attuned to maintaining the neoliberal self (Purser, 2019, p. 34). The mood economy regulates emotions as a means to enhance the individual's emotional capital (pp. 51-52). Late capitalist positivity cannot possibly elicit any negative emotions like "anger, disgust, sadness, contempt frustration and aggression" — the individual simply needs to take a break and focus on their breathing (pp. 49-50). To quote Slavoj Žižek (2001), mindfulness is "establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism," by helping people "to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity" (para. 1).

Nathoo points out that this complicity of mindfulness with the neoliberal political agenda is not a new development (pp. 71-72). Ever since the late 1970s, when Western, secular, mindfulness-based interventions were made popular by molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn (p. 72), the neoliberal fantasy of mastery existed avant la lettre in the form of the mastery of the skills needed to be mindful, which could be learnt through discipline, involving weekly instruction with a qualified physician and one or two hours of home practice every day.

Once "mastered", the short spells of deep relaxation that seemed to be a nifty side-effect of the mindfulness practice could be used as a means of increasing efficiency, of "enjoying modern civilization without burning the candle at both ends" (p. 73). The postwar decades saw antenatal teachers taking the lead in the field of relaxation, creating and meeting

a demand to help mothers better manage the multiple challenges of parenthood (p. 75) and to help the overworked, "Type A" businessman to minimize stress in order to prevent heart disease (p. 76).

In essence, these relaxation practices made sure that both men and women would properly fulfil their traditional gender roles, whether that be bearing children or paying the bills. Furthermore, the relaxation instruction was aimed mainly at an "upper-middle class audience", the group most likely to be able to afford practice both in time and money (pp. 76-77). All of these were uncritically framed as helpful for the well-being of individuals and therefore for society at large (p. 76), once again invoking the neoliberal fantasy that "social action is merely the sum of individual actions", ignoring the power of capitalist institutions (Purser, 2019, p. 44).

Much in the same way, Bjélic considers ASMR as "part of the poisonous architecture" responsible for the symptoms that ASMR promises to relieve (2016, p. 103). Atkinson & Ayers (2010) emphasize that seeking refuge online and support networking do not automatically challenge social values or political processes; these do not represent a radical alternative in the caring practices for health (p. 79). As seen in the previous chapter, too much emphasis on the "natural" or the uncritical adoption of scientific jargon (Andersen, 2014, p. 687) can render ASMR as neutral, ultimately ignoring the formative power of identity categories, commercialization and the commodification of touch (Fest, 2019, p. 2).

Sexit, Alexa, and Maria: How ASMR perpetuates the outsourcing of care as devalued feminized care labor

Just as mindfulness has a habit of reinforcing rather than queering heteronormative culture, ASMR has a gender problem (Andersen, 2014, pp. 692-693) and favors traditional displays of femininity (Smith & Snider, 2018, pp. 45-46). Female ASMRtists, typically young and

conventionally attractive, by far outnumber their male colleagues. Barratt & Davis (2015) suggest that this is tied to our social understandings of the world (p. 11).

ASMR content traditionally tends to recreate heteronormative models of care and intimacy directed by women towards (overworked, "Type A" business)men (Andersen, 2014, pp. 692-693). ASMR explicitly seeks to create intimate, caring, comforting and nurturing experiences for their viewers (p. 11), qualities typically associated with femininity and womanhood. Bjélic suspects that this could be a response to the disappearance of the "maternal" hand of the welfare state (2016, p. 102).

To explain this tie between affect and gender, ASMR can be said to engage in what Atkinson & Ayers call "caring-as-caring". They make the distinction between caring-as-caring and caring-as-curing, the latter being the dominant mode of caring within the sphere of healthcare today. Caring-as-curing involves "treating the patient as temporarily dependent due to a condition that can be managed through the application of scientific knowledge, traditionally determined by the male physician, within a rationalized system for health care provision" (p. 77), which echoes the sentiments of neoliberal reform as well as the application of mindfulness.

Caring-as-caring on the other hand contains "the invisible and informal care work carried out in private spaces" which is "traditionally part of the routine work of the female nurse" (p. 77). Because it is considered private and female, caring-as-caring has a much lower value accorded to it. At the same time, evidence that caring-as-caring can be central to a therapeutic process and prominent in the caring for patients with complex, chronic diseases suggests that the distinction with caring-as-curing is blurry. But caring-as-caring carries the element of emotional engagement, which is explicitly excluded in mainstream approaches to policy-making and system development for healthcare (p. 77).

Sharma (2016) explains that withdrawal from this care, or exit, as she calls it, is incredibly gendered. In her talk, she first addresses this gendered nature of exit through a personal anecdote. She tells the story of the time she was sitting in on a student presentation when she received a message from home that her baby was having a fever. Sharma found herself unable to get up and leave, plagued by questions, insecurities and even shame at the thought of exit, especially as this exit was tied to her identity as a mother.

Her talk further explores this specific link between exit and gender: "Patriarchal figures — not always men — are able to just get up and leave, [to] take a call in the middle of a meeting. They can exit at will, even making a point about it, letting everyone know they're bored, tired or annoyed. Why they exit is irrelevant; it's the way they exit. They get up swift, fast, loudly, no finger waves, slouched shoulders, never a skirt tucked into their derrieres — but no one really cares if the patriarchs pants fit right anyway. There's no performative tiptoes, nothing no phantom waves. But this doesn't motivate me to get up, except myself. Their carefree accents don't pave the way for my own" (2016).

Sharma's talk highlights how the indispensability of care leaves precarious people, mostly "women, refugees, [and] prisoners" unable to exit, while patriarchal figures, who are increasingly feeling either disposable or overqualified and underpaid, can choose to exit at will — be it for different reasons. This divide that Sharma observes has everything to do with how society has structured care in a way that is centered around women and domesticity. The care that is so indispensable to society is at the same time devalued by that society, ultimately leaving said society devoid of care. This social neglect that stems from a lack of care creates the need for withdrawal; it creates the need for ASMR.

But ASMR does not provide a radical alternative. Instead of embracing ASMR's nonnormative intimacy, the community grasps back to heteronormativity in an effort to legitimize itself. In this attempt to be taken seriously, ASMR clings to heteronormative

culture and polices its identity based on this culture's restrictive norms, rejecting anything that could even remotely be considered strange. This is why ASMR can at best only offer temporary relief, because it plays into that same dysfunctional system that creates the need for ASMR in the first place. ASMR as it exists currently is stuck on a constant feedback loop: neglect, distress, relief, repeat.

Sharma states that the focus on care opens up a more inclusive category that does not refer to heterosexual life or biological regeneration, but instead to how life is sustained and regenerated. She uses her own example of the mother/child relationship specifically because "it is a departure point, but never an exit." Sharma quotes Adrian Rich, who wrote that the institution of motherhood must be made mandatory, to take reproductive labor out of the gendered private and into the general public. Sharma advocates for social reproduction, which she defines as having significant others that fall outside the realm of our normative lives that we make time to care for ("making kin and not just babies") (2016).

This new mode of care calls into question the restrictive spheres of home and work, and multiply such spheres of care and intimacy so that it becomes radical: "Politicizing the power of social reproduction only requires a fundamental recognition that we were all born, that we will die, and that all lives depend upon reproduction and that this reproductive work has historically been done by women and people of color for little or no pay." However, Sharma concludes that this disruptive political potential of care is being contested by the "masculinist patriarchal pension to exit" or the "male phantasy of exit". She frames this exit as an exercise of privileged politics at the expense of collective autonomy (2016).

Techno culture and the feminized voice

ASMR's distant intimacy relies on heteronormative gender roles of care, where intimate care is gendered as female, and the female as nurturing (Andersen, 2014, p. 692). This emphasis on the female as caretaker reinforces gendered professionalism and the devalued caring labor

performed by women, which corresponds to the caring-as-curing/caring-as-caring distinction. Sandall et al. (2009) state that, numerically, "female-dominant occupations such as nursing and mid-wifery have been assigned a 'semi-professional status and constrained by both male and medical preference for prestigious positions in healthcare organizations as well as in society at large" (p. 530).

The digital dimension of care adds to the already existing demands on women (Atkinson & Ayers, 2010, p. 80) in the form of increasing caregiving responsibilities brought on by the deinstitutionalization of healthcare (Reid & LeDrew, 2013, p. 81). The feminized voice plays a big part in this narrative. ASMR viewers sense a change in their physiological response to ASMR content when a man embodies the caring role (Smith & Snider, 2018, pp. 45-46). Maria (*Gentle Whispering*) stated in 2012: "There are not a lot of things that men could whisper about that don't seem creepy". In the hands of a male, the affect is transformed from pleasure to fear (Andersen, 2014, p. 693). Furthermore, "the robots that men voice […] tend to be in positions of power – often dangerously so. Think Hal 9000, or the Terminator: when a robot needs to be scary, it sounds like a man" (Hern, 2019).

While the male voice is more likely to elicit fear, the female voice has traditionally been linked to service. Through examples of 60s adverts, Hester demonstrates how at the time the optical reader was compared to women in the workplace. While the optical reader could not be a social butterfly, it was more important that it could not take maternity leave, experience morning sickness or complain about being tired either. Hester emphasizes this thingification of women: "It should be clear to the viewer which of these things is more useful to have around the office" (2016).

Advertizing based on such thingification often points to the "trouble" with female employees: their embodiment, their getting distracted and/or being distracting, their annoying sociability and maternity. Instead, new technological apparati assume the position of the

secretary. "Technology becomes her." Hester states that this merging of woman, machine, and work takes on a new meaning in the twenty-first century's "digital assistant". Among the most famous examples are Siri, the voice of Apple; Cortana, the voice of Microsoft; Alexa, the voice of Amazon. These "voices" represent the automation of what has been traditionally deemed to be women's labor, and conveniently remove the issue of having to regard them as human (2016).

ASMR evokes a sense of control in users, who can determine the flows of communication through video, evoking controlled interactions within care service industries (p. 694). The user controls the affective experience, choosing to view the ASMR videos and artists that most appeal to them, deciding when and in what context to use ASMR, all without the burden of co-presence or vulnerability (Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 46). While these feelings of control can reinforce feelings of safety, comfort and nurturing (p. 46), they can simultaneously reinforce normative modes of sexuality (p. 693); one does not rule out the other.

Maria addressed her preference for close-ups in a video where she answered ASMR-related questions. The question was "What's the most absurd request you received from a fan?", to which Maria responded: "Most of the time, people want me to show my body, and… Hey guys, I'm not into that. […] It's just not something that I like to showcase in my videos, unless it has to be in the video, like in the Tesla video where, in order for me to show the car, I have to be in the shot. […] Sometimes the comments are more concentrated on that than on my work, so… To me, it gets confusing. If I spend hours and hours and hours on a video and all I get is: *Great rack!*" (*Gentle Whispering ASMR*, 2018C).

He conquers, she serves

Gender markers associated with apps like Cortana further emphasize the connection with "feminized labor" of service work. Hester quotes a billboard ad as an example of such gender

markers: "Meet Cortana. She not only learns and remembers what you like, she can also provide reminders based on you location and contacts. All you have to do is ask." Though there are male voices available, digital assistants are usually advertised with female voices, and are often referred to as "she" (2016).

This type of pre-recorded, disembodied, robotic, yet recognizably female voices can be found everywhere in the contemporary city environment. For example, she leads you to your destination in the car and in public transport, just as she guides you through self-checkout in the supermarket. Hester sees a direct connection between the disembodied female voice and issues of exclusion or under-representation of women's interests in the public sphere. "Women's voices have historically been used to issue instructions […] precisely because women themselves have not been around to be heard" (2016).

Hester quotes Eva Gustavsson, who suggests that the preference for the gendered avatar is "rooted in the stereotyped image of women as being, by nature, more suited for service work" and emotional labor than men are. Stereotyped female qualities, such as caring, empathy and altruistic behavior, are the service script's default. Service work is therefore inherently positioned as feminized labor, because the sector itself has been designated as feminine, which in turn then results in feminized digital assistants. We are so used to this idea that women adopt caring roles that we think nothing of it when technological interfaces are being coded as female (2016).

Interestingly, the original voice for Siri was male. The original ad in 2009 contextualizes this voice as "the intelligent assistant of the future". He is not a personal secretary, but rather a research assistant, an academic librarian, an information manager. The avatar itself even features the bow tie, that classic signifier of expertise. This is masculinized software, a clear barrier between the male professor and the domestic sphere. This changes significantly with the arrival of the disembodied mother in 1987. She annoyingly reminds

users to call their spouses, sends birthday messages, and helps people to identify acquaintances in the street. She reminds, prompts and guides. While the masculinized proto-Siri symbolizes human mastery over knowledge, the mother remains a bit of a nuisance (2016).

The emotional labor that was once outsourced to both secretaries and (office) wives, of course amongst a certain privileged class, is now outsourced to electronic devices. Hester contextualized this development with the help of Ian Bogost's notion of hyperemployment. Rather than saving workers from certain labors, technology generates even more tasks and responsibilities for the worker. Next to our usual jobs, we are now committed to many other jobs as well, for which the real cost is not pay but time. If we fail to do these jobs, due to either resistance or overwhelm, we alone have to deal with the consequences of missed deadlines, unanswered e-mails, etc. (2016).

This redistribution of clerical labor as a result of downsizing, cuts, and profit maximization, means that, while other people used to do these jobs in exchange for pay, we are now obliged to take on the extra labor ourselves. "When we take our own blood pressure at the doctors, or issue our own books at the library, or check out our own groceries – when we perform any of these newly individualized tasks, which would once have been undertaken by paid workers – all of this testifies to a state of hyperemployment. As such, we can be hyperemployed even if we are out of work (and indeed, the amount of form filling, appointment organizing, and self-assessment required from job seekers suggests that it is hard to be unemployed without being in a constant state of hyperemployment)" (2016).

Furthermore, this waged labor is infiltrating the home. In the words of Bogost, "we work increasingly hard for increasingly little, only to come home to catch up on the work we can't manage to work on at work." No matter where we go, we can never leave the office. So the distinction between home life and work life no longer holds up. The home is not

protected; it is an additional workplace and the backdrop of unpaid shifts. Within a context where economic gain is considered a top priority, people who were previously seen as unemployable because of e.g. parenting, caregiving responsibilities, disability, or ill health, regardless of the reason, have been redefined as employable (2016).

Reid & LeDrew (2013) observe that "women continue to juggle paid and unpaid work, precarious unemployment, multiple jobs, and insecure seasonal work with few work-supported health benefits. Many women are involved in unpaid, underpaid, under-the-table, or illegal work" (p. 79). Employability-based approaches do not address women's unpaid caregiving work, nor the fact that women are at a greater risk of poverty than men and that their poverty is more persistent over time (p. 80).

Men still dominate higher-earnings groups, while the majority of women remain in the lowest earnings categories in increasingly part-time, temporary jobs that offer little financial security and few, if any, healthcare or disability benefits (pp. 80-81). Reid & LeDrew attribute this to the traditional role of women as mothers, homemakers and caregivers, which still requires them to perform unpaid caregiving work. The demands of this unpaid work reduce women's opportunities to participate fully in the paid work-force.

For working class women, minority ethnic women, and other socially and economically disenfranchised women, this reality of the "home office" is nothing new. The home has always been a workplace for many, but the work performed at home has been largely invisible, classified as "care" not labor. The deeper gendered and racialized distinction between labor and "care" explains why hyperemployment is typically labor performed by wives and mothers. An example of this is the redistribution of housework onto the shoulders of low paid workers, often women from the South and from former socialist countries (p. 81).

Andersen (2014) also makes an interesting observation regarding the popularity of "foreignness" as performed by an accent or a different language as an ASMR trigger, arguing that ASMR keeps the Other under control through echoing the stereotype of the female immigrant spa worker (pp. 693-694). Many claim that accents help induce ASMR more intensely and more reliably than when the ASMRtist shares the same dialect as the listener.

The distant intimacy of ASMR mimics other forms of intimacy that struggle with normative modes of sexuality, and Andersen refers to bell hooks (2005) who "discusses sexual encounters with the Other as an imperialist pleasure of control, where invasion of foreign space, or the submission to the foreign in an intimate zone, is fraught with the politics of domination and fear" (pp. 693-694). Deinstitutionalization and "closer to home healthcare" result in increased caregiving responsibilities for women, who are already expected to take up the role as caregiver anyway (p. 81). ASMR content that reinforces the traditional role of woman as nurturing caregiver only adds to the burden of unpaid care work that already exists for women.

"The desire for the political": Care ethics and protection

Ever since 2012, when ASMR videos began to hit millions of views on YouTube, the

phenomenon has garnered more and more public attention. According to a Google Trends

analysis performed by Giulia Poerio in 2016, interest in the term 'ASMR' peaked both in
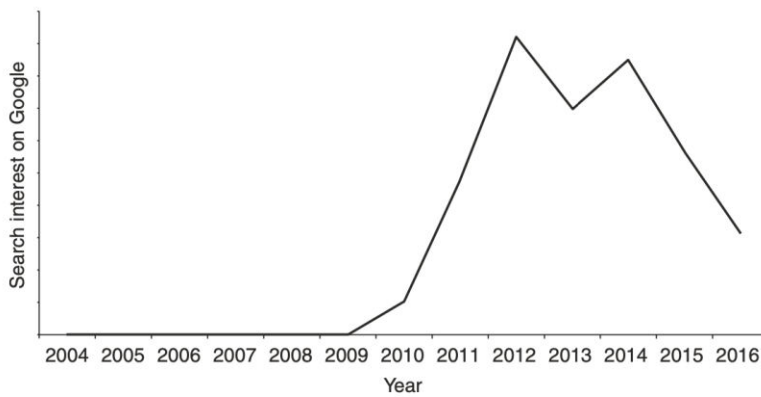
2012 and in 2014:

Fig. 15.2 Interest in the term 'ASMR' over time, using Google Trends (which analyses the amount of Google searches over a period of time); search done May 2016 (p. 123).

The same Google Trends analysis performed in June 2020 by yours truly shows that interest

in ASMR continues to grow worldwide, having reached peak popularity once again in May

2020. At the time of writing, the world finds itself in the middle of the Corona crisis. I would

not be surprised if the sudden peak in ASMR searches is related to a global increase in

feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. ASMR promises the viewer to help them relax, which I

suspect is very appealing in these (extra) precarious times. With governments failing to

protect citizens from

(Google Trends, 2020).

The sentiment of this chapter, of this thesis, stems from a desire for protection, namely the protection of members in society from social neglect. The previous chapter demonstrated the history of this neglect, as well as its contemporary manifestations and their ambivalence. Neglect is what inspires the desire for withdrawal, and for this discussion specifically, neglect inspires the desire for ASMR. Neglect birthed the crisis of care, which inspires in me the naïve desire to seek out the aid of a system that is designed to protect, rather than one that consistently burdens individuals with the sole responsibility to be able and to be able *like that*, hailing productivity and efficiency and condemning dependency of any kind, while fencing in the good life as an impossible dream that needs to be earned.

Fest also argues for new modes of care, but concludes that ASMR discourages the critical scrutiny necessary in order to reconsider care (p. 6). I agree with this, in that ASMR as it is now largely executed lacks critical scrutiny. However, this chapter will demonstrate that ASMR does have the *potential* for resistance. But before the necessity of care ethics can be explained, the system that currently defines care and protection need to be analyzed.

Contractarianism: Gendered, antagonistic, and ultimately careless

The current leading doctrine of political legitimacy when it comes to care and protection in the West is Social Contract Theory (SCT). This segment demonstrates how this leading doctrine which contemporary "caring" systems are based is highly masculine, antagonistic, and ultimately careless. SCT has enabled the current care crisis through a backwards framing of concepts like care and protection that has stood the test of time.

The state of nature

Though the thought experiment itself has origins in antiquity, SCT did not emerge as the leading doctrine of political legitimacy until the Enlightenment period. Within early modern political philosophy, SCT is concerned with the legitimacy of the authority of the state, following the argument that individuals once consented to give up some of their freedoms in

exchange for state protection of their remaining rights to create a social order. The maintenance of this social order requires individuals to continuously and consensually submit themselves to an authority who in turn agrees to bear responsibility for the collective (Friend, n.d.).

The consent to submission is explained through an examination of human "nature" as "free" from any political order, which in turn explains why individuals would agree to a shift from this "state of nature" (defined as such by Thomas Hobbes in his 1651 book *Leviathan*) into a political order (Hobbes, 2004). The state of nature takes many different forms depending on whose work we read, as the state of nature reflects said author's specific worldview. The consent that follows from this state of nature also differs, as it is based on specific conditions created by the author.

Thomas Hobbes' take on SCT remains dominant in contemporary political doctrine. Hobbes saw the state of nature as a "war of all against all", where individuals only have to answer to their personal power, resulting in unlimited natural freedoms that allows people to "plunder, rape and murder". Life under these conditions would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," and thus Hobbes concludes that, to avoid this fate, free men once agreed to be contractually bound. The social contract guarantees security under an absolute sovereign, either monarchical or parliamentary. Even if this sovereign turns out to be tyrannical, Hobbes views absolute government as the only alternative as the state of nature is so horrid that absolutism pales in comparison (Hobbes, 2004; Lloyd & Sreedhar, 2014).

A society that bases its definitions of care on an antagonistic worldview will not be able to properly care for its citizens. The current climate of political legitimacy is heavily influenced by Hobbes's antagonistic worldview, which itself is deeply rooted in the liberal model of contract. The war of all against all manifests in late capitalism as the every-man-for-himself responsibilization tactic discussed in the previous chapter. Much as Hobbes

believes that even the most tyrannical sovereign is better than no sovereign, neoliberal

responsibilization establishes itself as an absolute truth, something that cannot be contested,

and internalizes this notion in citizens. These roots in SCT position neoliberalism in

opposition to care ethics, which aims for a more holistic version of care. But in order to

rethink care based on care ethics, the care depravity of SCT first need to be further examined

before there can be an alternative response.

Masculinity

SCT is so antagonistic because it is solely based on masculine principles. Obviously, we

ought to address the elephant in the room: Hobbes and his contemporaries refer solely to free

men as being protected by the Social Contract. Deconstructive analyses show that SCT is

rooted in the age-old dualistic philosophy that renders masculinity as code for mastery, while

the feminine stands for chaos. Kathleen Jones, as cited by Diana Coole (1994) explains then

that, when political authority is defined as the rightful imposition of order on disorder, the

feminine which represents disorder is excluded (p. 203).

Coole argues that SCT in general operates with masculinity as its norm. Coole's text

Women, gender, and contract: Feminist interpretations demonstrates how feminist and/or

psychoanalytical readings of contractarian thinking can help reveal its subversive subtext.

Contract theory assumes rational, conscious, calculating individuals who are transparent and

in control, yet the kinship relations at its center are based on masculine fears, anxieties and

(phallic) phantasies (p. 199).

The Social Contract does not change this human nature; it uses it as the basis of civil

society. Coole cites Christine Di Stefano (1983) who states that masculinity equals dualistic

thinking of the self/other. Patriarchy is here defined as "men's attempts to overthrow female

control over reproduction, while masculinity embodies a fundamental turn away from the

mother." Through a psychoanalytical reading, Di Stefano was able to reveal that Hobbes'

account of human nature secures masculine identity by means of struggle against a female maternal presence, thus conceiving identity in exclusionary terms. Hobbes' State of Nature consists of masculine ego "relations" based on combat as well as limited and impersonal exchanges. Sovereignty is automatically defined as a rejection of the bonds of maternal authority (p. 200).

Woman is viewed as that which man is not, which excludes her from history. Coole once again cites Jones, who, also from a psychoanalytical perspective, views the State of Nature as "pre-Oedipal, narcissistic fantasy", in which separation from the Mother is seen as maturation (p. 201). Adding to that from a Marxist perspective, Benhabib argues that the State of Nature is a mirror for the bourgeois man to project his dreams and anxieties, with the basic message that in the beginning, man was alone: "[T]he denial of being born of woman frees the male ego from the most natural and basic bond of dependence." From this perspective, the brothers rather than the mother are the source of rivalry and otherness, and the circumstance is bourgeois rather than patriarchal (pp. 202-203).

Another Marxist perspective comes from Michael Ryan, who emphasizes that the feminine is viewed as a permanent source of subversion, and so Hobbes' Leviathan, the move from State of Nature into society, represents a move from the maternal feminine to the masculine, which is framed a maturation (p. 204). Carole Patemen's *The Sexual Contract* (1988) however disagrees that what the "brothers" share is father-Leviathan in their move from infant to adult. Instead, she views the Social Contract as a sexual contract (hence the title) whereby the brothers acquire the rights over women's bodies through Leviathan (pp. 204-205). The only way then for women to gain individual personhood is through contract, aka through becoming a wife.

Social Contract Theory excludes from history those who are not considered free men. Within contractarianism, embodiment is viewed as intrinsic to the female identity; her

subordination is seen as inherent, as patriarchy takes contractual form and contractual relations are inherently patriarchal. This is why it would be disingenuous to adopt this contractarianism as a model of free and equal gender relations, as contractarianism itself is inherently gendered (p. 205). Julie Mitchell concludes that even if contractual relations include women, the very foundations of civilization, of what it means to be a subject, construct her as an object of exchange (pp. 205-206).

Introducing care ethics

Social Contract Theory, its individualism and theory of justice consist of specifically masculine norms. However, feminists have been considering alternative modes oriented around care, and feminist literature debates on how this traditionally private and gendered concept might be transferred into the public realm. This alternative requires alternative foundations (p. 206).

Care ethics explores such necessary alternatives. The notion that sufferers of neglect can best respond to the crisis of care by changing their individual habits, ergo shifting responsibility away from the state, is still perpetuated (Fest, 2019, p. 6). This in turn perpetuates the crisis of care in a vicious cycle: the neglected subject follows the internalized axiom of self-care which at best only provides a temporary relief but ultimately results in even more labor put towards the self while the neglect is never addressed. In 2020, ASMR still is this form of self-care which does not provide a radical alternative to this cycle. However, this chapter will explore ties between ASMR and caring concepts that do offer radical alternative modes of caring, in order to demonstrate how ASMR has the possibility to destabilize the chronic crisis narrative.

The inconsistency of the liberal model of contract lies in the impossibility of combining impersonal rules and authorities to which citizens must obey with a model of self-interested exchanges and rational choices as the paradigm for public relationships. The

alternative, through care ethics, promotes the model of conversation rather than contract. Consent remains essential, but rather than consensus the goal is now the dialogue between situated selves. But these practices themselves also seem to force the "feminine" — concepts such as relatedness, care for others, reciprocal collective life, compassionate judgment, and openness to ambiguity — into the sterile, impersonal, and deeply masculine "neutral". Feminist aims can never truly be united by contract theory, and so a caring contract is a futile attempt at demystifying the masculine approach. Discussions of the social contract and of contractual relations cannot be separated from constructions of gender (social, psychological, discursive) (pp. 206-207).

Several feminist scholars have successfully mapped out the implications of the masculine in social contract theory, and Coole's text summarizes these efforts well. In essence, the Social Contract is more or less designed to protect man from his own inherent (human) vulnerability. Here, protection is defined in terms of hostility and masculinity — which refers to the deeply gendered nature of social contract theory, and with it of contractarianism, of which hostility is an effect. This is obviously not the same as the kind of protection offered on the basis of care ethics, which specifically aims to destabilize this antagonistically gendered framing.

If the dominant political philosophy, deeply rooted in contractarianism, cannot provide the kind of protection necessary to respond to the priorities of our time, then what kind of framing would suffice? If this framing were to be based on a destabilizing care ethics, what would protection look like? Three authors specifically can help to reframe the concept of protection in such a way that it is aimed at caring, and from where the digitally mediated caring practices of ASMR can function as a practical example of constructing this caring protection in real-time.

This chapter explores the connection between care ethics and ASMR through concepts put forth by these three authors: Emma Bennett's concept loose personhood, María Puig de la Bellacasa's concept of technohealing, and Lauren Berlant's concept of ambient citizenship. Bennett's loose personhood will first help to reconceptualize ASMR as an *active* mutual experience, before Puig de la Bellacasa's technohealing can help to acknowledge the co-transformability of ASMR as this active mutual experience. Finally, having recognized ASMR's transformative abilities, Berlant's ambient citizenship can recontextualize ASMR as inherently political, thereby uncovering its disruptive potential.

ASMR vs. loose personhood: Fostering the neglected "you"

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that ASMR, in its current state, is a non-contemplative experience. However, this does not mean that AMSR is passive. An emphasis on relaxation does not take away from the fact that ASMR requires active participation from its community. In order to produce affective content, both ASMRtist and ASMRer need to be actively engaged. Rather than a simple offer of relaxation, Bennett (2016) thinks ASMR might offer a relief from a certain kind of personhood.

If we think back of Han's notion of the burnt-out soul, who is no longer able to be able, we can see that projecting oneself outwards into social space can be exhausting, especially for late-capitalism's achievement subject (2010, p. 15). Bennett explains that, in a society where valued labor is that which delivers services and creates and maintains social networks, "the embodied social acts of projecting one's "self" out towards others — smiling, speaking, comporting one's body in relation to others, turning one's face to the world — feel increasingly like work" (p. 134). This being-fatigue of the achievement subject, is somewhat catered to at the doctor's or the spa, but the degree of anonymity granted there is only valid to a certain extend. One is still expected to act like a person, to project an image of a self that is somewhat coherent.

Bennett claims that ASMR disrupts this expectation of having to project any kind of coherent, bounded "personness" outwards; the ASMRtist instead projects a "loose personhood" *on to* the viewer. This loose personhood is as much neutral and impersonal as it is specific and personal (2016, pp. 134-135). On the one hand, in the realm of neutral and impersonal, the ASMRer is a thing, a camera and a microphone, positioned in front of the ASMRtist, who handles *stuff*, by speaking into the microphone or stroking the camera. But while the position of the viewer is that of a thing, they are being addressed *as if* they were a person. This personhood that is projected is abstract; it is that of *a* human shape or form, not that of the specific individual. The ASMRtist does not address the viewer by name, nor is any response by the viewer really taken into account (2016, pp. 133-134).

A comment posted by *Myosotis* on Julia's roleplay video "ASMR hypnosis + guided relaxation | hand movements, positive affirmations (whisper)" describes this detachment: "Very immersive roleplay, she noted how long it was since we last saw each other (which was never before) and after my answer to her question: '[W]hat happened to you since our last meeting[?]' which was '[I] was born' she properly reacted with '[I']m sorry to hear that'" (itsblitzzz, 2019B). The viewer is not supposed to answer Julia's questions as literally as they would at the doctor's, which can create the kind of comical discrepancy as described by Myosotis, nor are they supposed to nod along in passivity or disengage altogether. Instead, the reason Julia incorporates the asking of questions into her video(s) is to emulate the experience of for instance going to the doctor, or in this case at least some kind of health provider.

Asking the viewer questions, pretending to listen to a response, and to then react to that imagined response, has the sole purpose of immersive roleplay. It requires both the ASMRtist and the ASMRer to be actively engaged, to play along. This is why Bennett speaks of ASMR as a mutual performance. She refers to ASMR as a form of ventriloquism,

"whereby the speaker throws not only their voice, but also human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" (2016, p. 134). Following the thingification of the viewer, Bennett focuses on the ASMRtist's use of the term "you" as a way of speaking the viewer into place. It suffices to quote Bennett at length here, who describes her ASMR experience with ASMRtist *Olivia Kissper ASMR*, whom Bennett simply refers to as a friend, as Olivia:

"When Olivia says, *you have a beautiful scalp, very symmetrical, very smooth* [her emphasis], and somewhere off-screen, her fingers find my hairline with a dry grassy sound which reminds me my skull is there, and also not there, I am her "you," spoken into place. I hover between states. My body is imaginary (to Olivia) and irreducibly here (in my room, on my bed). I'm doubled, folded over and pleasantly displaced. This is how it feels, I think, to feel (and luxuriate in) what it is to be a "you." No "you" in particular, this given you, the one that happens to be the object — the much-prized object — of the occasion of address" (Bennett, 2016, p. 135).

Here, Bennett calls on philosopher Adriana Cavarero to explain the destabilizing value of "you". Between the individualist "I" and the collectivist "we", the "you" designates a gap to be filled. A "you" is not filled with self-assertion nor with the positive feelings of community or solidarity; a "you" could be anyone or no one. Bennett uses Cavarero's conceptualization of "you" to showcase that Olivia's (and by extension ASMR's) "you" is not a "me", not really, as it just addresses "the space that I am, for this time" (p. 132).

The viewer is rendered somewhere between personhood and objecthood (p. 134), and that sense of not *having* to be able is something many find solace in. Bennett's definition of loose personhood through mutual performance helps to reframe ASMR as actively impactful rather than a passive pastime. First of all, because it frames ASMR as an *inter*active experience, leaving the agency of both the ASMRtist and ASMRer intact. Second, because

the thingification Bennett identifies as an integral part of ASMR's loose personhood is not a degradation but a means of relief, of withdrawal. It is a matter of revaluing instead of devaluing. Bennett herself clarifies that this person-shaped space is both provisional and full of reassurance, as ASMR allows for this previously neglected space of "you" to be seen (p. 132).

ASMR as technohealing: An alternative to permanent intouchness

Can this visibility of the neglected "you" be in any way transformative? If we go by Puig de la Bellacasa's concept of touching visions, as described in her book *Matters of Care* (2017), we might even say that as the neglected "you" is being seen, it is being touched as well. For Puig de la Bellacasa, touch implies reversibility or reciprocity; a co-transformability, as "we can see without being seen, but can we touch without being touched?" (p. 97). This co-transformability holds a similar premise of reciprocity as Bennett's mutual performance, in which both the ASMRtist and ASMRer are actively involved in creating the affective experience. In a sense, they are touching one another: the ASMRtist is as much affected by the active input of the viewer as the viewer is by the ASMRtist's efforts, as they both rely on the other for the transformation of ASMR content into an affective experience.

This inherent reversibility is why, according to Puig de la Bellacasa, reframing care requires the haptic (ASMR is my example, not hers). Much like care, touch is a neglected mode of relating. Puig de la Bellacasa relates this neglect back to the dominance of vision, and instead she opts to seek out what she calls a "reembodiment of thinking and knowing", a thinking and knowing that is "in touch" rather than a detached vision — a search that is aligned with Donna Haraway's concept of situatedness (p. 95). Touching visions is basically a more accurate vision, that counteracts the dominance of vision alone, of the detached perspective and what Haraway deems the irresponsible "view from nowhere" that claims to

see everything all at once, which limits our knowing (p. 97). Touch, with its roots in reversibility, is seen as an antidote to this detachment (pp. 98-99).

But rather than providing a quick-fix solution, thinking with touch opens up new questions — which is not a bad thing (p. 98). Puig de la Bellacasa wonders whether there can be a detached touch, a touch that does not automatically mean being in touch. I would propose that ASMR can be understood as a form of detached touch. ASMR as detached touch in Puig de la Bellacasa's terms can be unaware, and ASMR has a lot of blind spots (as shown in the previous chapter). But ASMR can also be detached touch in terms of distant intimacy. Puig de la Bellacasa acknowledges that care is ambivalent, and that "touch exhibits as much ascendancy as it exposes vulnerability" (pp. 98-99). She calls on Judith Butler and Thomas Dumm, who remind us that touch reminds us of life's "inevitable mortality, partiality and vulnerability", that this is the human experience, and that therefore we need each other and are undone by one another (pp. 99-100). It will then require trust to allow us to open up to this reality, something ASMR seems to be highly aware of, as it bonds ASMRtist and ASMRer together as people who do not know each other but who nevertheless trust each other.

Furthermore, this exposure through touch is often translated into healing — usually the sole redeeming quality ascribed to ASMR by outsiders who find the phenomenon odd (to say the least). Puig de la Bellacasa comments on the mystical, prosaic qualities of touch, and equates technoscientific promises with those of religious salvation. This technobiblical side of touch seems a bit backwards, as touch is more often associated with the material rather than the spiritual, as material knowledge that opposes "bare" belief (pp. 100-101). Yet, the global financial crash of 2007/2008, centered around dematerialized wealth, demonstrated the very real (meaning this dematerialized crash had direct material impact) consequences of literal out-of-touch capitalism (p. 101). This tension of what is real that comes with

discussions of touch — what is real, authentic and worthy of belief? — often implies that *feeling* is the ultimate substantiation of reality, while seeing is more distant and believing is not even considered as a reliable measure of realness.

The boom of touch technologies, and with it the boom of technoscientific/technobiblical promises, leads Puig de la Bellacasa to wonder whether this increased desire for touch can manifest the urge to rematerialize reliability and trust. Touch technologies transform what matters; Puig de la Bellacasa believes that they are "bringing the *neglected* sense of touch into the digital realm" (p. 102). The marketing of touch technologies centers around sensorial immersion, mimicking the "real" thing, promising more immediate connection. This vulnerable exposure can be exciting and/or reassuring (p. 103). Puig de la Bellacasa cites haptic geographer Mark Paterson (2006), who explains that touch technologies promise immediate manipulation, rendering others and things that are physically distant as "co-present". Immersion through sensorial effects give a feeling of "reality", yet the reproduction of the sensorial is performative. Considering what will be the right feel of a virtual object implies that such designs could potentially remake what touching means. Puig de la Bellacasa adds that haptic technology works with the imaginary of touch to produce an *appealing* technology (pp. 103-104).

The problem with this technotouch however is that it is primarily concerned with what is "real", whereas an ethic of care requires the *how* as the object of critique: "By which forms of connection, presence, and relation is technotouch supposed to *enhance* everyday experience?" (p. 104). The desire for transhumanism, to transcend human limitations, as it is now reinforces accelerated productiveness rather than innovating relation. There is nothing subversive about it, at least not from a caring perspective. To touch is to get, and to get it "fast, faster, fastest". The goal is intuitive immediacy, reduction of training to direct expertise, elimination of mistakes based on preordered selection. Plus, touch screens are

supposedly "cleaner" (hands are usually the contagious culprits, as we can see with the current pandemic). The driving force behind these wants is a need for enhanced effectiveness, but enhancing this material connection does nothing for the awareness of embodied effects (p. 105).

Puig de la Bellacasa thus emphasizes that touch and proximity are not caring per se, and that "making touching technologies a matter of care requires that we learn about the possibilities overlooked by an industry in hasty development: missed opportunities to be in touch with the consequences that constant keyboard touch feedback doubled with pressures of efficiency has had on user's everyday lives" (p. 106). The technobiblical promise of permanent intouchness is overwhelming, exhausting, and therefore harmful. Getting in-touch online can get us out of touch with our bodies, neglecting certain labors and marginalized experiences that are silenced by technoscientific mobilizations.

Technotouch is supposed to enhance living conditions, and so rather than *more* touching we should aim for *better* touching, a touch that accesses the body and the embodied as well (pp. 107-108). "A scattered heart, bleeding fingertips, and a ruined back, frustrations of "distilled intimacy", are not enough to stop efforts to remain in touch through screens" (p. 107). Efficiency understood in terms of reduction of costs and human resources negates the notion of technohealing. Distant care transforms rather than reduces burdens of labor (pp. 108-109). We need responsible touch: "If touch could offer a sensorial, embodied grounding for the proximities of caring knowing, we also need touching visions more susceptible to foster accountability for the mediations, ambivalences, and eventual pitfalls of touch and its technologies" (p. 112).

ASMR vs. ambient citizenship: Out of the gendered private and into the general public

So, how do we do that? How we secure the accountability for this co-transformable touch? Berlant's view revitalizes political action by valuing it as the action of not being worn out by

politics. It slows down our gaze to fixate on the present, that which is so difficult to grasp, the uncertainty of which leads people to want for the immediacy of intimacy (pp. 261-262).

Lauren Berlant describes ambient citizenship as a type of political action, as "the action of not being worn out by politics," specifically in the era of chronic crisis (2011, p. 262). Ambient citizenship seriously considers the idea of de-filtering the political space. Berlant uses the example of ambient art to demonstrate the ability to refuse the reproduction of political, social, and economic exhaustion. Attention to the affectsphere, the ways in which affect circulates and influences those within the sphere of relationality, of the historical moment has the possibility to inhibit the generalizing of the contemporary moment into a perpetual genre of crisis. Chronic crisis creates rationales wherein the good life can be understandably postponed, and suggests that the new method of political engage should be a "lateral politics" because such a posture has the ability to slow down the process of political engagement as to better see its cruel and coercive tendencies.

The final chapter of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), titled "On The Desire For The Political", opens with the transmission of noise as a way of, in the words of Rancière, separating the political from politics (p. 224). Berlant recalls former US president George W. Bush's statement in 2003: "Somehow you just got to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people" (p. 223). Reminding us that "a filter separates out noise from communication and, in so doing, makes communication possible", and that, from a perspective of situatedness, there is no communication without noise (the filter is you who communicates, your context, your situatedness; the message is necessarily transmitted *through* you, a filter) (pp. 223-224), it must be concluded then that Bush's wish to eliminate the filter means that he wants to "transmit not the message but the noise" (p. 224).

Berlant states that this points to something profound in the desire for the political: mainly, the desire for affective binding, for a political attachment that feels immediate, one

that seduces people into a sense of shared worldness. This desire is likely spurred on by the circumstance of chronic crisis and the powerlessness it evokes, rendering people without a framing device, unable to grasp the present. The current affective structure is an anxious one. Bush tried to take away this uncertainty, by eliminating any self-reflexive critical distance, ergo by eliminating the political from politics, and instead opting for a sense of immediacy and solidarity through affect and evoking a sense of belonging (PP. 224-226). This attempt at producing "intimate publics" is not the same as the production of public spheres, which are always affect worlds that bind people. Rather, intimate publics have specific characteristics. Berlant lists five:

> "1.   One senses that matters of survival are at stake and that;
>
> 2.   Collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, recognition;
>
> 3.   Promising the sense of being held, no need to audition for membership;
>
> 4.   Grown into a full-fledged community that started as a niche interest any person can contribute to;
>
> 5.   Do not have to do anything to belong, they can be passive and lurk"

(pp. 226-227).

Berlant goes on to explain how such an intimate attachment to the political can create a relation of cruel optimism. Our feelings confirm our attachment to the system, thereby confirming the system and the affects that bind us to it. So, rather than a disrupting force, the desire for alternative filters, as expressed by Bush, is not, as it claims to be, passive, but rather an active desire for the political (p. 227).

Going by the five characteristics as identified by Berlant, can ASMR qualify as intimate public? "One senses that matters of survival are at stake." This pertains to the crisis of care, which renders people "no longer able to be able" (Han, 2010, pp. 18-19), causing a

rise in symptomatic sufferers from depression, anxiety and burnout (Nathoo, 2016, p. 73). "Collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, recognition". ASMRtists acknowledge the pain and suffering of their audience, making them feel seen and cared for (Bjélic, 2016, p. 102). "Promising the sense of being held, no need to audition for membership." The ASMR community revolves around sharing as much of this caring affect as possible. YouTube's format enables anyone (with an internet connection) to join in. There are no tests, no screenings, no qualifications — anyone can and, as far as the community is concerned, *should* join in (Fest, 2019, p. 1; Smith & Snider, 2018, p. 41). "Grown into a full-fledged community that started as a niche interest any person can contribute." Over the years, ASMR has grown from a niche absurdity into mainstream weird. Again, YouTube has made it incredibly easy for anyone (with an internet connection) to create and to consume ASMR content, making it much more widespread (Andersen, 2004, p. 688; Gallagher, 2016, p. 1). "Do not have to do anything to belong, they can be passive and lurk." One of the perks of the ASMR community is that it allows for mute interaction. Being a viewer already makes one part of the ASMR community. Members do not have to participate by commenting or engaging in any other way than simply consuming ASMR content (Bennett, 2016, p. 134).

So, now that ASMR can be identified as intimate public, how would this then go to show that ASMR does in fact represent a desire for the political? Berlant's cruel optimism shows similarities to Stiegler's pharmakon. The intimate attachment to, in this case, ASMR as perceived antidote to the system, in this case void-of-care capitalism, in reality confirms our attachment to said system, thus confirming the system itself and how it binds us rather than breaking with the system. Berlant however continuously emphasizes that this relation of cruel optimism is *necessary*. She recalls Grant Farred, who "calls fidelity to the political

without expectation of recognition, representation, or return a profoundly ethical act" (p. 228).

How can this unconditional fidelity to the political manifest? Berlant uses traditions of silent protest as expressed in contemporary art as examples of affect shaping the event, as silent protest "that aims to remobilize and redirect the normative noise that binds the affective public of the political to normative politics as such" does not have speech to fall back on. She invokes the sentiment of Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that minor work of political depression demonstrates a sense of futility, the exhaustion and disappointment felt at the lack of profound political impact, yet it also creates a world through political affect in which new practices of politics may be invented (pp. 228-229). While it can on the one hand ineffectively lead to participation in the poisonous architecture it aims to disrupt, detachment can also create new opportunities for radical alternatives. "Acts of aggressive passivity always seek to expose the corruption of, or toxic noise within, political speech, as well as to measure the perverse relation between ideals of the political and the practice of politics" says Berlant (p. 229).

So this attachment to the political is inherently paradoxical? Not necessarily. Berlant offers a way out of the double-bind of cruel optimism through the concept of ambient citizenship. "[A]s sound, ambience provides atmospheres and spaces in which movement happens through persons: listeners dissolve into an ongoing present whose ongoingness is neither necessarily comfortable nor uncomfortable, avant-garde nor Muzak, but, most formally, a space of abeyance [a state of temporary disuse or suspension; the position of being without, or of waiting for, an owner of claimant]," says Berlant (p. 230).

Ambient citizenship concerns itself with the question of *whose noise matters*. Who has the formal and informal right to take up soundspace? When is public withdrawal a mending gesture? How can it be activating? "Performative silence is both a form of political

speech and of noise" (p. 231). Berlant appears to hint towards a middle-ground between naivety and nihilism. She highlights that no form of being in the political or politics, that includes dis/connectivity, will ever solve the problem of framing the historical present.

"Doing" politics is a means of being in the political with others. It is in this sense a refusal to back down (p. 260), just as ASMR is utilized to keep the burnt out, depressed and/or anxious citizen's boat afloat, even if just for a moment. This located politics sees the becoming of citizenship as "a dense sensual activity of performative belonging to the now in which potentiality is affirmed (p. 261). So, Berlant's cruel optimism might not actually be all that cruel. Rather, it describes "the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such" (p. 259). Dis/connectivity is not traditionally considered heroic, but Berlant argues that such disengagement is also a kind of refusal (pp. 259-260). In this view, attachment to the political would ideally be an attachment to the process of preserving attachment itself.

Parody always reveals: Some examples that could make us feel more optimistic

How can we recognize ASMR content, predominantly uncritical and living a paradoxical existence, as the bare minimum evidence of not giving up on social change? The combination of parody and ASMR usually reveals ASMR's attachment to the political, as well as its disruptive potential. Judith Butler states that parody and drag can function to reveal the imitative structure of gender (Butler, 1990, p. 137). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler acknowledges that parody and drag are strategies of subversion and agency (Butler, 1993, p. 21). However, she also warns that parody by itself is not subversive, and could merely confirm the boundaries between the normative and the non-normative (Butler, 1993, p. 126; 231).

My hypothesis however is that parodic ASMR content contains parody that mocks the gender restrictions themselves rather than the subject who struggles with such restrictions.

This attitude functions to both reveal gender as performative (Shugart, 2001, p. 95) *and* subverts this performativity by demonstrating alternative expressions of gender (Butler, 1993, p. 21). Whereas ASMR usually emphasizes stereotypical caring roles, the following examples show how parody can help visualize a care that is not tied to any restrictive notion of femininity, liberating care from its heteronormative constraints and attributing different value to it that is rooted in a more universal notion of care rather than a gendered one. I am not suggesting that ASMR needs to be parodic or that it cannot embody traditionally feminine or masculine stereotypes. These parodies merely function to show that ASMR does not *need* to cling to traditional stereotypes in order to be affective, and this in turn shows that care comes in different shapes and sizes.

The Sassy Nun

While ASMRtists commonly adopt the role of the traditional caring female, ASMRtist Angelica produces alternative content that demonstrates that a woman can create ASMR content without having to embody any particularly caring stereotype. Her channel, aptly named *Angelica*, features parody and (historical) role-play videos, mixed with some "regular" ASMR. Angelica embodies characters that oppose the traditional nurturing mother and caring wife. More often than not, Angelica's characters are uninterested in actually being of any help, simply using the viewer's time and to vent about their own personal problems and frustrations (*Angelica*, n.d.).

Angelica's content is nevertheless affective as ASMR. She consistently puts out ASMR content, without actually poking fun at the movement itself. She simply uses the ASMR format to play with, for instance, constructions of gender. Angelica clearly knows what she is doing, as she adopts many known ASMR techniques and even experiments with them (e.g. binaural recordings, layered sounds, using props, coordinated hand movements and mood lighting) (*Angelica*, n.d.).

Angelica's most popular video to date is a role-play video in which Angelica is dressed up like a nun in the 1300s who "takes care" of you in bed as you are slowly dying of the bubonic plague. The nun stands in front of you, surrounded by mood lighting and (fake) flowers. She makes it very clear that she is simply waiting for you to die so that she can take your money. When she finds out that you do not have much money, she complains that "Apparently, someone doesn't appreciate health!" She refuses to touch her patient, much less offer any reassurance, and does not wish to waste her holy water on someone who is going to die soon anyway (*Angelica*, 2018A).

The video was published in 2018, but many people are (re)watching the content in 2020 and make the connection between the bubonic plague and the Corona virus. Comments read: "[T]his video hits different now that we are in the middle of a pandemic", and "[S]he really predicted how [A]merica's government was gonna respond to the coronavirus, huh". Despite the comedy, Angelica has paid special attention to the audio, as we can hear the crackling sounds of a fireplace, as well as some (royalty-free) Medieval music softly playing in the background (*Angelica*, 2018A).

Similar videos have reached a similar amount of views: a 1500s "Renaissance Lady Does Your Makeup and Paints You" video reached 1,7 million while a World War II nurse role-play video reached 1,5 million (*Angelica*, 2018B). Other than that, you can come to Angelica for some relaxing plastic surgery ("ASMR~ Girl Next Door Gives You Boob Job", 2019A), a relaxing sexual awakening ("ASMR~ Your Period Finds Out You're a Lesbian", 2018C), and, of course, Angelica can help you fall asleep ("ASMR~ Softly Stabbing You to Sleep", 2019B). She openly dabbles in politics, gently addressing today's cancel culture ("ASMR~ Crucifying You {oh well}", 2020) and subtly reflecting on the #MeToo movement ("ASMR~ Putting You to Sleep {You're Jeffrey Ep-Stein}", spoiler alert: she kills you and

then it is just a bunch of people, including Donald Trump, debating what story to tell the press, 2019C). It seems Angelica does not shy away from any topic.

Angelica's ASMR garners plenty of popularity, with a number of her parodies having managed to acquire millions of views. Judging by commenters (the subscriber count has been put on private, meaning it is inaccessible to outsiders), Angelica's viewers watch her videos all the way through as it does help them relax and fall asleep. Even though (or perhaps *because*?) Angelica disrupts the expectation of the caring female, she is taken seriously as an ASMRtist: "The thumbnail made me think she was going to be an adorable caring nun but she's sassy and funny […], loved it " (*Angelica*, 2018A). Angelica's audience values the content she puts out just as they would value "normal" ASMR content. The only difference seems to be that, with Angelica, the expected calm and relaxation holds the added bonus of a good laugh.

The Creepy Priestess

Angelica's parody is reminiscent of artist Claire Tolan's ASMR practices. Miranda Jeanne Marie Iossifidis (2017) argues that "through experimenting with techniques of feminized voicing and "soft sounds" in different spaces, […] Tolan unsettles and playfully interrogates gendered notions of care and devotion in ASMR" (p. 114). Iossifidis considers Tolan's work to be a form of resistance, a way of "speaking back" to hegemonic societal norms around care (p. 113). Tolan cites Judith Butler and Donna Haraway as influences for her "creepy priestess", a character that is the result of playing with the feminized role, a caricature of femininity. Iossifidis argues that such characters, like the ones embodied by Tolan and Angelica, playfully disrupt gendered notions of care, without satirizing the ASMR community or devaluing care work itself. Instead, Tolan in particular considers her ASMR sound art practice as a form of affective labor, recognizing care work as legitimate.

Furthermore, the creepy priestess is a comment on the technobiblical devotion that is attached to tech culture. As the name suggests, the creepy priestess turns the reassuring female voice of Alexa or Siri into something quite sinister. Tolan takes this voice out of the domesticized hybrid role as mother, wife, and nanny, and into different spaces (p. 113). Not only does this disrupt the domesticity of the feminized voice, it also disrupts the implied one-on-one relationship between ASMRtist and listener and ASMR defined as intimately connecting just two bodies. Through alternative forms and models of production and circulation, Tolan distributes notions of caring more collectively (pp. 113-114).

Tolan's project "SHUSH karaoke" requires a crowd to collectively whisper different phrases that are projected onto a screen onstage. Her "SHUSH" boardgame requires players to perform whispered roles. Tolan has even created "SHUSH Tones", a whispered alternative to ringtones, including reassuring wake-up messages of Tolan whispering: "You're so popular". Her varied approach to ASMR functions to critique elite appropriation of self-care and to investigate peer-to-peer care through more collaborate and open settings. According to Iossifidis, Tolan's work "plays with the transformative potential of ASMR, all the while questioning the listener's relationship with technology" (p. 114).

Iggy M. Manley

Men have much more difficulty establishing themselves as ASMRtists. As discussed previously, the male whisper is quickly labeled as scary, whereas the female voice has traditional ties to service work. Parody can help to better understand the position of the male ASMRtist. An example of this comes from ASMRtist Paul, whose channel *Ephemeral Rift* with over 800,000 subscribers once again proves that an alternative approach to ASMR does not necessarily mean a decrease in affective power. In fact, this channel is popular *because* Paul plays with the format (*Ephemeral Rift*, n.d.).

Paul describes himself as "a self-taught, independent, homegrown jack-of-all-trades master-of-none" (*Ephemeral Rift*, n.d.). His content certainly reflects this; some of his most popular videos include "Communist ASMR" (2018), "The Plague Patient [Plague Doctor ASMR]" (2017) (apparently, the plague genre is quite lucrative), and, everyone's favorite, a kidnapping role-play (2016). It seems that Paul has decided just to roll with the perceived "scary" in male ASMR. Yet, his audience does not deem his content to be scary, but rather genuinely helpful as well as entertaining. "I never thought a man that is allowed to cut off all of my limbs at once would make me sleepy", reads a comment under the Plague Doctor ASMR video (*Ephemeral Rift*, 2017).

His video "Manley ASMR – ASMR for Men", published in 2014, has over two million views. The video is making fun of not only heteronormative stereotypes of manliness, but also of the idea that ASMR is too feminine, and needs to butch up in order for a man to be able to dabble in it. The video's description box reads: "Tired of all those ASMR videos by women trying to put makeup on your face or showing you what's in their purses? Manley ASMR is a manly ASMR series for men, hosted by a man's man named Iggy M. Manley. From boots to video games and tools, you'll find nothing but manly ASMR here. None of that female stuff! To all of our female viewers, subscribers and Patrons: feel free to watch, but there's nothing here you'd understand. Besides, you should be cleaning, in the kitchen cooking, taking selfies or posting pics of your cat" (*Ephemeral Rift*, 2014).

Paul, or Manley, has furthermore listed "Ten ComMANdments for being a Man's Man", which contradict the parody, calling for people to, for instance, "[b]e respectful of all people no matter their age, race, creed, sexual preference / orientation, religion, etc. And yes, that even includes women." So kind. We see Paul as Manley, against a pitch-black backdrop, dressed in a sleeveless flannel, with tattoos on both arms. In front of him are some "typically masculine" props, such as a pair of combat boots, a video game controller, a can of Guinness

beer (which Manley claims will "put hair on your chest"), and a hammer, of course. Manley

is fed up, defensive, uses a lot of profanity, and thinks that a misogynist (which he

mispronounces) is the same thing as a gynecologist. The audience seems to enjoy this content

very much, with commenters saying "Fell asleep to this, woke up with a beard" and "This is

your scary father in law who wants to take you out to the garage." Many commenters cite

jokes present in the video, and many use timestamps that are near the end of the video,

indicating that people are actually watching the total one hour, eleven minutes and fifty-five

seconds (*Ephemeral Rift*, 2014).

The affectivity of ASMR is not necessarily dependent upon the ASMRtist having to

take the content seriously — parody can also be ASMR. The video's sequel, "Manley ASMR

2", premiered in 2015 and has garnered over one million views. The sequel opens like the

trailer for a Hollywood Blockbuster: "In a world full of face brushing, makeup tutorials and a

plethora of other women ASMR videos, there's one man whose man enough to save mankind

from drowning in an ocean of estrogen. He is: Iggy Manley" (*Ephemeral Rift*, 2015). Once

again, this type of content proves to be very popular. Playing with the format works well for

Paul.

Randall Otis

While Angelica, Tolan and Paul all consistently work with ASMR, comedian Randall Otis

has found his own way of playing with the format while being "outside" of the ASMR

community. Otis posts sketches to YouTube, and his audience is relatively smaller than the

ASMRtists' mentioned (*Randall Otis*, n.d.). Nevertheless, Otis is clearly very familiar with

the ASMR format. His video "ASMR for White Liberals" has garnered over half a million

views. This type of content also remains affective, in part because Otis knows the format he

is using. We see him against the minimal backdrop of a smooth render (created with a green

screen) that changes color. He alternates between two microphones on either side, making

use of the binaural technique that is commonly used in ASMR. Aside from his whispering, we hear the sounds of a gong, wind chimes, and ambient music commonly used in meditations. Many of the commenters focus on how affective the content is as ASMR, stating for instance: "I know this is for shits and giggles but the asmr was […] so good" (*Randall Otis*, 2019).

These techniques are here adopted in order to convey a critical message. Throughout the video, a mere two minutes and twenty seconds long, Otis makes sarcastic comments regarding racism. He takes off his beanie and rubs his head against the microphone, while the subtitles state *BLACK HAIR ON MICROPHONE*, followed by him saying: "You hear that? That's the sound of the hair you've always wanted to touch. And we love it. We love it when you do that," commenting on the disrespect and intrusivity of people blatantly touching the hair of POC. At one point, he takes out a trophy and starts tapping on it. "You hear that? That's the sound of the trophy you deserve for not being racist. Good for you. We're so proud of you. You're such a good person. You're better than the rest of them. We love you" (*Randall Otis*, 2019).

Arguably, the reason Otis is adopting ASMR specifically to debunk the myth that white liberals are not and/or cannot be racist is to highlight the difficulty of speaking out against racism. ASMR is gentle, non-threatening, and "softens the blow". It makes the other person feel more comfortable, as the confrontation with racism is inherently uncomfortable. This feeling of having to walk on eggshells when it comes to addressing racism, this notion that the person who is criticizing needs to be very careful with what they say and how they say it in order not to "offend", is cause for exhaust, and is furthermore counterproductive. By using ASMR, the epitome of comfort, to address a topic like racism, Otis' caricature also (unintentionally) captures this dichotomy between ASMR and the real world as well. Furthermore, while ASMR can be appropriated for perverse capitalist advertising (IKEA), the

video shows that ASMR can also be used for genuinely critical (and genuinely funny) content

and *still* be affective. What a relief.

Concluding remarks

ASMR does not need to stick to heteronormative notions of care in order to do its job. In fact, disrupting these traditional caring roles only allows ASMR to do its job *better*. By secluding care to the gendered private, heteronormative notions of care notoriously devalue care as it has been inextricably linked to the devalued feminine. So, instead of legitimizing its existence by holding onto this heteronormative framework, ASMR dabbles in self-sabotage by playing into a system that outsources and thereby devalues its core practice: caring. This devaluation is responsible for the very crisis of care that ASMR is symptomatic of.

Furthermore, uncritical adoption also renders ASMR (too) easily appropriated for capital. Thich is understandable, as ASMR is dependent on YouTube, a platform that, like any platform, runs on ads, and so ASMRtists rely on ad revenue for income. However, the exploitation of ASMR for the masking of shameless advertising as caring would not be so effortless were ASMR to become a bit more aware of its socio-historical context. This would probably require ASMR to find a new host, unless YouTube suddenly decides to do a 180, which is unlikely.

Were ASMR to embrace its inherent deviation from the norm, honoring its care as nonnormative, and reflect on its part in the crisis of care, the community's good efforts would not be overshadowed by the social neglect umbrella. Instead, ASMR would be able to disrupt certain restrictions around care, and aid in the process of taking care out of the gendered private and, in the words of Sharma, make it mandatory.

Largely based on feminist theory, this thesis has attempted to view the care crisis through an alternative lens, ASMR, in order to explore social neglect, its roots and effects. Care already is indispensable to society, judging by the alarming rise in numbers of people suffering from conditions that are symptomatic of a society that neglects its citizens and

condemns them to chronic uncertainty. Care needs to be acknowledged as such,

indispensable, and ASMR, due to its accessibility and its distant intimacies, could help bridge

the gap in necessitating care all-round.

The third chapter of Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* closes with the line:

"Failure loves company." Reminiscent of Boero & Pasco's (and Smith & Snider's) claim that

the internet facilitates the coming together of once isolated and marginalized individuals,

Halberstam states that "all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them

well, to bring down the winner" (p. 120).

Viewed from this perspective, the ASMR community has formed through a mutual

failure to keep up. Halberstam states that subcultural performers do carry the potential to

activate new sets of political meanings and references (p. 97), for "failure presents an

opportunity rather than a dead end" (p. 96). Halberstam says that the way to make the

"antisocial turn" is to truly embrace failure rather than to try and play the game of polite

exchange. This political negativity is "one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to

fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and

out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate" (p. 110).

ASMR's weapons of choice would include the whisper, the crinkle, and, of course,

the tingle. Formalized responses do not disrupt, and so embracing the failure to be formal,

embracing that "hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism" (an optimism that is,

as we have seen, based on false promises), could be the only road to success (p. 88). Perhaps

a whispered revolt would be just weird enough to ruffle some feathers.

Is it a man? Is it a… what is it, exactly?

More positive developments within the ASMR community is the slow but steady rise of the

male ASMRtist. Michael Richter from *ASMR Zeitgeist*, up until now the only male ASMRtist

who has been able to surpass the one million subscriber mark (*ASMR Zeitgeist*, n.d.), has

created a one-and-a-half hour collaboration with 28 other male ASMRtists called "MEN OF ASMR". The video ties together snippets of one video per ASMRtist, swiftly alternating between all 29. The video contains a wide variety of common and not-so-common triggers, ranging from your average whisper and tap to tickling the microphone with skeleton-gloves (*ASMR Zeitgeist*, 2018).

While these men do not carry out stereotypically male or stereotypically female ASMR performances, the comment section being flooded with jokes suggests that viewers are still relatively uncomfortable with men adopting the role of ASMRtist. Nevertheless, the video, published in 2018, has now nearly reached 12 million views, and is the second most popular video currently on Richter's channel (*ASMR Zeitgeist*, 2018). It is unclear whether the popularity of the video is due to its affectivity or to its apparent meme-ability, as Richter's other videos are usually well-respected.

A recent video "ASMR Ear to Ear Spa Treatments for Beauty Sleep and Blissful Tingles" has commenters expressing genuine admiration for the channel's quality and content: "This is one of the [ASMRtists] that most care about giving high quality content to his viewers, thanks!" Another commenter said: "I don't really get tingles so I like to go for the most unique and relaxing sounds and steam and water is usually my favorite and this video is perfect thanks :)". Commenters also take the time to write out timestamps in each video's comment section, so that people can easily navigate to their favorite triggers without having to look for them, and replay them whenever they wish (*ASMR Zeitgeist*, 2020B). Richter's own audience is very engaged with his content, so it seems then that users can deal better with a male ASMRtist one-on-one than they can with a whole army. The meme-fest in the compilation's comment section probably stems from a lingering discomfort with the male whisper, which will take some time to subside.

This process is going to take a lot longer if technology keeps differentiating between male and female. In his article on female robot assistants, Alex Hern (2019) wonders: "[…] when an Amazon Echo has no more a sense of gender identity than a lawnmower, why are we gendering robots at all?" (and other good questions). Hern gives a shoutout to EqualAI. The company, amongst others, has backed the creation of *Q*, the first genderless voice. *Q*'s voice is a mixture of voices of those who do not identify as male nor female, which has been put between 145 and 175 Hertz, the range defined by audio researchers as gender neutral (*Genderlessvoice.com*, 2020).

On www.genderlessvoice.com, the creators behind the initiative state: "Technology companies often choose to gender technology believing it will make people more comfortable adopting it. Unfortunately this reinforces a binary perception of gender, and perpetuates stereotypes that many have fought hard to progress. As society continues to break down the gender binary, recognizing those who neither identify as male nor female, the technology we create should follow. *Q* is an example of what we hope the future holds; a future of ideas, inclusion, positions and diverse representation in technology" (*Genderlessvoice.com*, 2020). Sounds nice.

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