TONGUEBITER

a musical history of silence

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Tonguebiter is a musical showcase of an augmented replica of the Scold's Bridle, or Iron Gag. Used from the I6th-I9th centuries, these masks silenced people by locking a spike in their mouth, and were originally used in two pathological contexts:

I. In Europe, to silence women who were too talkative, combative, annoying, or accused of witchcraft;
2. In the Americas, to prevent enslaved people of color from running away, eating crops, and/or eating inedible things when they were being starved.

This reimagined Scold's Bridle aesthetically symbolizes the continued pathologization of identity. While such masks are obsolete today, other constructs have since inherited their functional role as disciplinary and normative tools - institutional, self-imposed, panoptic.

As a speculative project on infrastructures of silencing pathologies, this project depicts a larger assemblage of artifacts that inherited the legacy of these masks. The reimagined Scolds Bridle manifests a technological lineage of silence through performances discussing electroconvulsive therapy, lobotomies, pharmaceutical addiction, and gender affirming care.

Musically speaking, the mask is a microphone with thematic acoustic features explored below, to resonate sympathetically with my voice and message. It complements a performance system of backing tracks, signal processing patches, audio samples, archival lyrics, and visuals to invert each network of silence, illuminating the ghosts locked within these sinister machines.

Post-Concert Survey

I. i wish i could tell you

I discovered I was trans when I decided to go clean-shaven for the first time in a few years. The razor, a technology I previously neglected, instantly became visible as a mundane yet essential form of gender-affirming care. While gender-affirming care is often demonized as a method of "enabling delusions", the reality is that everyone uses technologies to change the way they present and perform in social gender roles. The impossible ideal of a 'natural' or 'perfect' body necessarily assumes dehumanizing tropes of abnormality.

The mask's mustache is a kalimba made of electrical snake tape and a grounding block, referencing the neglected history of queer conversion therapy. By linking the output of the kalimba to a razor blade with a surface transducer, the overlooked act of shaving bursts into focus through an electro-acoustic feedback loop, imagining a future where feedback from trans people is valued in debates on the repercussions of unchallenged gender roles.



II. mother's little helper

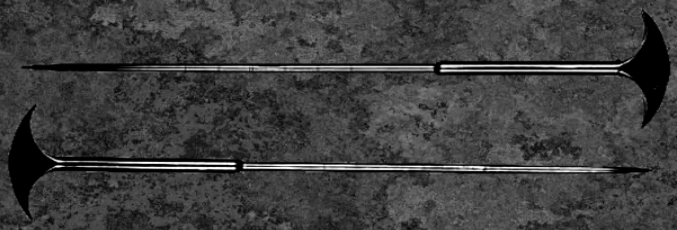
Pharmaceuticals have historically been used to help people cope with the pressures of social conformity. In the I950s, the discovery of modern psychopharmacological sedatives and amphetamines were marketed as "Mother's Little Helper", leading many to believe that the trick to a happy household came in pill form. Initially, these products were easily accessible and massively successful. However, many of these drugs were heavily addictive, leading to vicious cycles of substance abuse that only exacerbated anxiety and depression. Chemically speaking, withdrawals from benzodiazepines such as Valium can be some of the most excruciating experiences a human brain can endure.

This piece sonically depicts the quotidian struggles and marketing environment of the post-war household that drove many women into addiction. With the generalization of household work through electrical appliances, women were paradoxically expected to do more tasks with the time they saved, drastically increasing the cognitive and emotional burden of daily life. This song captures the blur of one task/burden into the next, swallowed whole by the numbness and mindless repetition of substance dependency.



III. free man

Before psychopharmaceuticals, to mitigate the problem of overcrowded mental institutions, they resorted to lobotomies as a cure-all. This barbaric procedure sought to make psychiatric patients who were considered violent more docile by severing areas of their brains, and had a fatality rate of ~20%. While initially intended for the most severe cases of schizophrenia and PTSD, the procedure was regularly used to treat homosexuality, hysteria, and even things as trivial as misbehaving kids as young as four. Lobotomies were disproportionately used on black women and gay men in places such as California's Atascadero State Hospital, which gained the moniker "Dachau for queers". Over 3500 lobotomies were performed in the US by Walter Jackson Freeman II, who p opularized the procedure for its speed (~10 minutes) and low cost. He killed 490 people.



A retractable tine in the mask's nose guard mimics an icepick, which is 'played' over a harmonized sound associated with the nonsensical meme genre of 'lobotomy core'. Segments of interviews with victims Howard Dully and Roman Tritz are included, as well as samples from a forum about JFK's sister Rosemary Kennedy, who was lobotomized at their father's behest.

IV. metempsychosis

Pioneered by physicist Luigi Galvani's experiments with frog legs, the field of bioelectricity promised new ways of controlling bodies. From early galvanic experimentation with reanimation to euthanization devices in Edison's war of the currents, electricity became both medicine and toxin. Electro convulsive therapy, infamous for its use in queer conversion therapy camps, mental asylums, and the electric chair, is still used today in places such as the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center in Massachusetts. There, it is used on behaviorally/developmentally disabled children to avert undesirable behaviors, which the UN special rapporteur on torture has condemned.



This song reckons with the significance of trans musicians in the history of electronic music, portraying the struggle of metempsychosis: the transformation of the soul between bodies The mask's electroacoustic nature and construction from electrical equipment seek to address the ambivalent nature of electricity and the violent terminology and origin stories in electronic music history. Running the microphone through a variable amplitude modulator gives the voice a more electrical quality. This is accompanied by musical Tesla coils and guitars tapping out 'listen' and 'help' in Morse code.

V. Tonguebiter

Scolds' Bridles were interventions meant to prevent women from the crime of talking out of line; "scolding". Described contemporaneously as an 'engine of torture', these ridiculous crowns of iron were locked around a scold's head, barbed with a bit to muzzle her insolent gossiping, which tore at her mouth as she was yanked around town for all to see. Its visible brutality provides a stark window into how technologies have long been used to silence resistance through violence. The ritualized spectacle of the bridle - its trauma, and even the mere knowledge of its existence - worked to condition both victim and witness against rebellion.

Because of this ritualized visibility, the Scold's Bridle occupies a powerful position for resistant reclamation through performance, illuminating the disciplinary legacies that undergird modern Western society. In this piece, church bells, pipe organs, and digital choirs envelop adapted archival texts - drawn from philosophical treatises, common adages, and poems on public punishment - to critique the patriarchal theocracies that continue to shape our material conditions.



VI. remembering Anastacia

The final song contrasts with these neglected histories, embracing silenced figures as emancipatory inspirations. It situates the story of the Brazilian patron saint Escrava Anastacia, an enslaved woman who performed miracles while wearing an iron gag. While her story was an invention to give context to a long-lost picture of an enslaved woman, she was popularized through a TV series depicting - and perhaps canonizing - her life story. She has become a national symbol of healing, resistance, and cultural fusion, appealing to those struggling against racism, gendered violence, religious exclusion, and other forms of silencing.

Anastacia's recentness and idiosyncratic originality show that these distant histories are still up for negotiation and resistive reclamation. In times of increasing censorship and erasure, finding ways to fight when words fail has become essential. Combining the rebellious traditions of Afro-Brazilian drumming rituals, Samba musicians working around the criminalization of anti-governmental music, and modern Brazilian groove metal's decolonial globality, we can speculate on what our futures might look like if we too embraced these histories instead of hiding them.

