

## Divya Victor

*Things to Do with Your Mouth* (Les Figs Press, 2014)

REVIEWED BY JULIA BLOCH

### Powers of speech

Since 2005, Les Figs Press has been publishing installments of TrenchArt, an annual book series that takes its name from the tradition of forging art from the materials of war: think ashtrays made out of brass shell casings, jewelry out of scrap steel, sculptures out of metal, cloth, bone, wood. Several books in the Les Figs series have considered how changing times make new demands on an old form, such as Nuala M. Archer's 2006 book *Inch Aeons*, which uses the haiku to explore ideas about the loss of boundaries in an uncontained world. In what sounds like a love poem to the form, Archer writes, "In You—too—Haiku— / Broke loose forever—Breaking / Heart of me—Creature"; then, in a bitter gloss of capitalist lust: "Sated with High-Rise / Concupiscence—creating / Knee-high Rush-Hours home."

One of the critical questions around trench art has to do with whether its purpose is primarily decorative or commemorative, or whether it reproduces the memory of war or reimagines it altogether. If forging strange shapes out of war materials is where this series started, nine years later comes *Things to Do with Your Mouth* by Divya Victor, part of the "Logistics" chapter of TrenchArt: books that use the cut as an organizing principle, from Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt Norton* (2013), which "cunts" the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, to Redell Olsen's *Film Poems* (2014), which explores how cuts between word and image illuminate the mediation of what Olsen says can be understood as "that *something* burning in the projector called language."

Victor's text is also intensely interested in mediation, but in this case it's mediation that cuts both ways: language formed, controlled, modulated, and

released by the body, as well as the flesh worn, punctured, weighted down, sliced, or otherwise altered by words. The Logistics series plays with trench art's questions of tactile immediacy: if an object taken from armed conflict undergoes aesthetic transformation, does it still belong to the time of war? Does its viewer? *Things to Do with Your Mouth* takes up the organ best known for its material engagement with the world. If the 'something' in Olsen's TrenchArt approach to language seems a little indistinct and liminal, language in *Things to Do with Your Mouth* is always concretely contested. The language is as material as the flesh; it's the encounter between the two that matters. This book suggests something about surface and depth: in spotlighting the specific ways speaking women get silenced, Victor's poetry insists we reconsider the materiality of the speaking body. *Things* opens with an epigraph from the preface to Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* that describes an eighteenth-century treatment of hysteria: the patient is given ten to twelve baths a day for ten months, after which the tissues of the body begin to separate, get expectorated and vomited out. The body becomes visible as "damp parchment," which is in fact the thing the physician compared membranes to.

Across the four parts of Victor's book, named unsettlingly for different uses of the mouth—"Put Flesh on a String," "Gag," "Create a Situation," and "Answer"—Victor cuts language out from other sources, especially nursery rhymes, pediatric health guidelines, the Bible, and Freud's *Dora*, and reassembles it at different sites that confront the long history of silencing women's mouths. A series of questions and commands at the beginning of the first section invites speech in dangerous settings: "*what is the matter with you? / where does it hurt? / how are we feeling today? / when was your last confession? [...] 'OPEN YOUR MOUTH?'*" (4-6). Sometimes, Victor puts the banality of the instruction genre in flat contrast to gruesome-sounding titles like "put flesh on a string":

If you want  
to put something  
in a fixed place  
between or

among other  
things, you can  
insert it

If it's a liquid,  
you'll probably want  
to inject it,  
although to inject  
can also mean  
to add something  
new or different (18-19)

At other points in the book, such as “Dora and Flora: An Analysis of a Turn of the Case,” recombinations and substitutions make more visible a thread within found text. Here, for example, the gag as the thing that can hold the mouth open for examination or medical procedure but also the thing that halts speech, ingestion, and breath (elsewhere, Victor includes ‘instructions’ on constructing a gag from an apple, a belt, a handkerchief, etc.) gets inserted into the text, so that silence becomes as loud as speech:

Little Flora first came to my attention and enclosed the key and as my sister's governess she quietly gagged as if it were more than it had ever been like my coming down the second summer as my own much later knowingly gagged as if I had been looking at her for years and had known her always and my fortitude mounted afresh as we turned to my small charge as so many things thrown and gagged as if catching beyond the interval our voices on my way in the coach because I fear I had rather brooded while gagged as if she had got from some outside source my employer and I found to have composed knowingly my mistake which I attenuated as I pleasantly gagged as if to ask her why in my letter again to repeat it to her. (49)

The word *gagged* is the thing doing the gagging of the text: it's as if the poetry were performing a closer reading of the found text, making more legible its repetitive moves toward silencing.

There's silencing, and then there's also proliferation, which can function as another sort of regulation of speech. In a witty section named after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*, a book devoted to assessing both the creative force and the ideological archive behind the performative speech act, Victor writes:

Julia Kristeva spits on my Achilles tendon while my Adam's apple combs lice from Adrienne Rich's wigs as she gossips about my Alcock's canal when my artery of Adamkiewicz sidles up to Anne McClintock as she burrows into my Bachmann's bundle while it curls up with Annett Kolodny as she comes and coils over my Bartholin's gland while my Batson's plexus pets B. Ruby Rich as she braids friendship bracelets with my Long thoracic nerves of Bell (65)

It's feminist genealogy via thoracic nerve: as Foucault writes in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, descent "attaches itself to the body," in the nerves and digestive apparatus and everything that touches the body: diet, climate, soil.<sup>1</sup> In *Things to Do with Your Mouth*, descent is by turns ludicly and violently legible in operations upon anything attached to or expelled from the body.

One of the risks of trench art is that it will be usurped and sanitized in the interests of obscuring the effects of the war that produced it. As Victor writes hauntingly in a passage about Dora: "It was easy to interpret, stretch myself upon her, and speak with her mouth to mouth" (57). *Things to Do with Your Mouth* is built out of the materials of human conflict quite literally: nerve, tendon, uterine tissue, duct, gland, zits, foreskin, vaginal mucus, spinal fluid. It's a conflict not likely to end soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 147-48.