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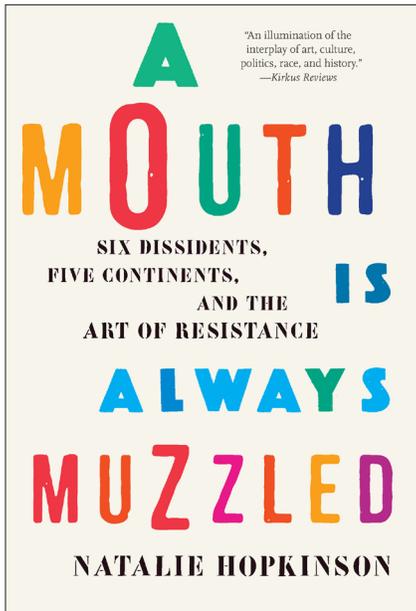
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**“A smart analysis of art and politics.” —*Publishers Weekly***

# A MOUTH IS ALWAYS MUZZLED

## *Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance*

By NATALIE HOPKINSON



“Hopkinson paints the creative class as essential players in modern society... *A Mouth Is Always Muzzled* loudly and elegantly articulates why artists are necessary catalysts in that shared better future.”

—*Foreword Reviews*

“This is a singular book, one that is not conventionally academic nor a conventional travel narrative nor a conventional work of arts criticism nor even a conventional piece of journalistic reportage, yet it draws from all of those disciplines as a deeply felt and passionately expressed manifesto....Not merely a book about Guyana, but an impressively rendered story about imperialism in general and cultural imperialism in particular.”

—*Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)*

“Powered by masterful writing and storytelling, *A Mouth Is Always Muzzled* is an instant classic that grapples with the essential questions for artists and all societies that profess to be democratic.”

—*Sheryll Cashin, author of Loving: Interracial Intimacy and the Threat to White Supremacy*

Natalie Hopkinson’s *New York Times* Op-Ed “The Booker Prize’s Bad History” (10/17/17) adapted from Chapter 5

- *Will our struggling town or city be reinvented as the next cool creative hub?*
- *Will our global cultural and political establishments reform?*
- *Is there a reason to be optimistic about the future of societies suffocated by a history of racial strife and economic struggle?*
- *When do ideas become action?*
- *When must the state protect society from subversive ideas? When must society protective subversive ideas from the state?”*

These are the questions raised by former *Washington Post* cultural critic and Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson’s new book **A MOUTH IS ALWAYS MUZZLED: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance** (on sale February 6, 2018; The New Press). Drawing on personal interviews with Guyanese artists during the country’s 2015 election year, Hopkinson explores the critical intersections of democracy and art. From Guyana to the U.S. and U.K., **A MOUTH IS ALWAYS MUZZLED** weaves together the work of Bernadette Persaud, Ruel Johnson, Kara Walker, John Berger, Martin Carter, and Walter Rodney into a gorgeous manifesto on artists and activism. Some of the key topics explored in the book are below:

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### **What is the role of the artist?**

In her opening essay “Your Eyes Pass Me,” Hopkinson invites readers into the vibrant scene of Guyana’s Mashramani festival on the eve of the fraught 2015 presidential elections. Hopkinson uses Mash to investigate the diverging viewpoints of local artists: the dissident Indo-Guyanese painter Bernadette Persaud whose career was built on lampooning Burnham’s administration and the young poet and activist Ruel Johnson hopeful that the evolution of Mash is evidence that the arts can be used to resist xenophobia and authoritarianism within the political system.

### **Two views from Persaud and Johnson**

In “Lady at the Gate,” Hopkinson lithely tells the dual histories of Persaud’s career and Burnham’s tightening authoritarian rule, noting Persaud’s continued ire and fear of the state. Hopkinson writes that even at the twilight of her career Persaud “still uses a deceptively bold bright color palette that’s sure to please even as she lampoons the powerful” [43]. Ruel Johnson is a young leader of Guyana’s fledgling creative sector and a cultural policy advisor to a multiracial alliance of parties challenging the incumbent People’s Progressive Party (PPP). Hopkinson explains Johnson’s resistance is a dangerous one: Throughout Guyana’s history, violence has been used to silence critics, most notably the slain historian Walter Rodney. Hopkinson links Johnson’s vision for the arts as a catalyst for political revival to a common narrative—not just in Guyana, but places like New York City and San Francisco—of arts and culture as a tool in service of economic development.

### **Kara Walker and black feminist art**

In “Sweet Ruins,” Hopkinson looks at Kara Walker’s “Sugar Sphinx,” the large scale installation that captivated audiences at the Domino Sugar Factor in New York City in 2014. As Hopkinson brings readers into the thick of the July heat and beneath the towering figure of the Sugar Sphinx, she paints a portrait of the viewers and the implication of their engagement with it, writing, “We don’t just remember the sexualized horrors of plantation life; we are participants, co-conspirators, and consumers” [69]. Hopkinson traces the historical path of gendered oppression, offering a gorgeous and critical reflection on the black women who became collateral in building empire, in Guyana and beyond.

### **John Berger and artistic survival**

Following the trail of the sugar empire further, Hopkinson looks to the British novelist John Berger who publicly denounced the Booker Prize, tracing its roots to a trading firm financed by profits from the slave trade. Examining the historic influence of the Booker family and its dealings in Guyana, Hopkinson turns next to Guyanese poet Martin Carter, a revolutionary activist turned government administrator. Martin Carter had struggled to find work and was ironically hired to a corporate job by a Booker chairman. Only a poem published in the local paper upon his resignation would allude to the incompatibilities between survival and political art—Carter wrote: “But a mouth is always muzzled/by the food it eats to live” [105].

### **Walter Rodney and the fight for black lives**

Hopkinson reflects on the legacy of Walter Rodney, a native Guyanese scholar-activist who was killed in a car explosion at the age of thirty-eight. Investigating the legacy of Rodney’s activism after his death, in which Forbes Burnham’s administration was a key conspirator, Hopkinson asks, “When do ideas become action? When must the state protect society from subversive ideas? When must society protective subversive ideas from the state?” [109]. Looking at the censorship and later memorialization of Rodney’s work across the Caribbean, Ethiopia, and the U.K., Hopkinson investigates the role of arts and culture in responding to state-sponsored terrorism against black, brown, and poor people in the thick of history and years later.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A former staff writer, editor, and culture critic at *The Washington Post* and *The Root*, **NATALIE HOPKINSON** is an assistant professor in Howard University's graduate program in communication, culture and media studies and a fellow at the Interactivity Foundation. The author of *A Mouth Is Always Muzzled* (The New Press), as well as *Go-Go Live* and *Deconstructing Tyrone* (with Natalie Y. Moore), Hopkinson lives in Washington, D.C.

Follow her on Twitter @NatHopkinson

### NATALIE HOPKINSON WILL SPEAK AT:

WASHINGTON, DC – Feb 6	Politics & Prose	7:00pm ET
BALTIMORE, MD – Feb 22	Enoch Pratt Library (Central Library)	6:30pm ET
CHICAGO, IL – Mar 3	Seminary Co-op <i>In conversation with Natalie Y. Moore of WBEZ</i>	3:00pm CT
WASHINGTON, DC – Mar 7	Busboys & Poets (14 <sup>th</sup> & V) <i>In conversation with Kojo Nnamdi of WAMU</i>	6:30pm ET

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