

2006

Hyp[h]enation nation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.92g7-94np>
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HYPHENATION NATION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the English Department

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Mofolasayo Ogundiran

May 2006

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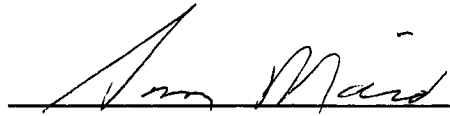
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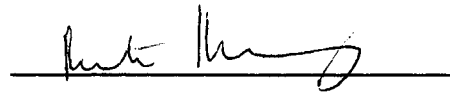
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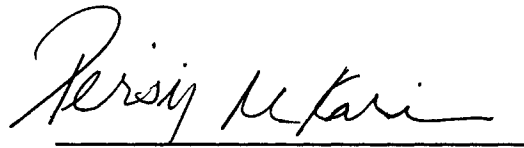
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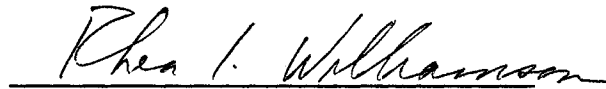
Dr. Samuel Maio

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ABSTRACT

HYPHENATION NATION

by Mofolasayo Ogundiran

Grammatically speaking, the definition of “hyphenation” is the connection or the division of two or more words with a hyphen. Therefore, the function of “the hyphen” is to indicate the similarities or differences between two words by joining or separating them with the visual signifier of a hyphen. *Hyphenation Nation* appropriates “hyphenation” from its grammatical context and restructures it in a cultural one.

Hyphenation Nation is a 29-page collection of poems that explores the lives of New York City (NYC) first-generation and second-generation immigrants, as they assimilate or separate from American culture. This collection of narrative, persona, and lyric poems traces the myriad of survival techniques that first generation and second generation immigrants employ, in order to construct and/or deconstruct their hyphenated identities.

For Tolani and Fadeke Ogundiran
"Mo Dupe..."

The poems in this collection have appeared in
the following:

Slipstream: "The Parking at La Bruja's Carnival";
Reed: "Pennies"

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INTRODUCTION

I have divided *Hyphenation Nation* into two sections. The first section is composed of poems written in the voices or from the perspectives of first-generation immigrants, who arrived in NYC in the late 1960's/early 1970's, and the children of first-generation immigrants, who were raised in NYC beginning in the late 1970's. I have chosen to focus on these two specific historical periods in order to creatively explore the hyphenation process of immigrants, who arrived in NYC after the passing of the US Immigration Act of 1965. In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson persuaded congress to repeal the US immigration quotas based on national origin. In place of the repealed legislation, the Immigration Act of 1965 would accept non-native US applicants into the US based on their occupation/profession/work skills, as opposed to nationality. Significantly, my father was a product of this bill.

Part one of *Hyphenation Nation*, entitled "*Forget Who We Are // Forget Who We Were*" features the sentiments of first-generation immigrants, like my father, whose main objectives for coming and staying in America/NYC, were the acquirement of education and steady employment, conceiving children, and eventually, returning to their native land academically educated and

financially wealthy. Part one depicts the struggles that these first-generation immigrants face as they struggle to achieve their goals, all the while resisting the subjugation or displacement of their native culture with an American one. *Forget Who We Are // Forget Who We Were* contains a large selection of narrative and persona poems, as opposed to lyric. In *Forget Who We Are // Forget Who We Were*, one would find stories of first-generation immigrants like the NYC Gypsy Cab Driver in “The Hustle: 20 Minutes in the Life of a NYC Gypsy Cab Driver,” and the machismo-filled husband in “Caesura.” Both of these poems are poetic hybrids, a mixture of the persona and narrative forms.

Furthermore, in the narrative “The Hustle” I appropriate the dialect of a Nigerian Cab Driver who learns the stealthy, cyclic art of “hustling,” and in “Caesura” I adopt the mindset of a disillusioned alcoholic whose vice forces a divide between him and his family.

In addition, part one features the sentiments of second-generation immigrants, like myself, who must continuously construct and deconstruct hyphenated identities in order to assimilate into or resist from being an American. In Part one, I focus on using literary devices -rhyme, alliteration, allusion, metaphor, and the like- to craft each lyric poem. My goal is to have the form and literary devices of each poem synchronous to the tone of their

content (similar to the style of the poet Ai, whose influence I will discuss a bit later). Furthermore, the overall tone of Part one is tragic, yet beautiful. This dichotomy is present in the poem "In Brooklyn, it was always on." In the stated poem, the narrators appear to bask in the demise of their neighborhood, and the ignorance and degradation of their lives into vacuity. Yet, the vivid imagery and lyricism of the poem- rhythmic fluidity, alliteration, wordplay, enjambment- proposes to mimic the lifestyle of the narrators, showing that the use of literary devices can make their tragic, collective narrative, somewhat beautiful.

Part two, of *Hyphenation Nation* entitled "*Projects on Fire*" is a series of vignettes that function as verbal snapshots of NYC and the ethnic narrators who are compelled to tell their stories from within it. Relying heavily on minimalist and objectivist sensibilities, *Projects on Fire* intends to capture slices of NYC life and culture through poetic, yet colloquial language, all the while using images to display the polemical discourses of gender, race and class within the urban and immigrant inhabited communities of NYC. Even with the feeling of urgency depicted in poems such as "Double-Dutch Over the Moon," where the "too grown tits" of the collective narrators are uncomfortable demarcations of girlhood and womanhood, or "This is

Something,” where the male narrator is caught in the propagation of financial and familial oppression, the free verse narrative form allows each poem to convey a sense of “ordinariness” that, in some ways, parallels Frank O’Hara’s “personism” and affirms what I would term as oxymoronic depersonalized intimacy.

As stated previously, the poems in *Hyphenation Nation* are a mixture of three poetic forms: the narrative, the persona and the lyric. The main poetic influences for my narrative and persona poems, such as “In Brooklyn, it was always on” (in which I modeled the collective “we” point-of-view after Gwendolyn Brooks poem “We Real Cool”) and “The Hustle: 20 Minutes in the Life of a NYC Gypsy Cab Driver,” are Ai (author of the National Book Award winning book, *Vice*) and Frank O’Hara (author of *Lunch Poems*). In the persona poem “Riot Act, April 29, 1992,” Ai adopts the voice of a young rioter who recounts his day of reckoning; his day of looting during the Los Angeles Riots. Not only does Ai masterly adopt the voice of a male looter during the LA Riots, but she also utilizes the dramatic monologue superbly by matching the form (free verse) and literary devices (short lines, deliberate rhyme, idiomatic language) with the attitude of rebelliousness in the voice of the

narrator. In my persona poems, it was my intention to always match the form and literary devices of the poem to the tone and attitude of the speaker.

In writing poems for *Hyphenation Nation*, I found it quite difficult to separate the persona poem from the narrative poem. Hence, I could not help but fuse Ai's methodology of matching form with content to O'Hara's colloquial narrations. O'Hara would never admit to preordaining a literary structure or device to his poems. It is his poems such as "The Day Lady Died" (25), that neglect form and fastidiously uses everyday, conversational and often synesthetic language. O'Hara's style inspired me to write poems like "The Hustle: 20 Minutes in the Life of a NYC Gypsy Cab Driver."

I consider my lyric poems, such as "#7 Train Blues/Lines in the Wall" and "Congratulations, Emmanuel, It is Now Morning," the bedrock of *Hyphenation Nation* and my poetic style as a whole. It is no coincidence that the influences of my lyrical poetry are writers that are deeply rooted in the modernist and early post-modernist literary traditions. The Post-Modernist, Black Arts Movement herald, Nikki Giovanni, introduced me to writing poetry, further, lyrical poetry. In the poem "Stardate Number 18628.190," in *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, Giovanni cleverly ignores grammatical rules and uses slant rhyme, metaphors, and imagery that captivate all senses,

in order to craft ingenious lines. It was with Nikki Giovanni with whom I first learned how to devise a lyrical poem by deliberately neglecting grammatical rules, and using rhymes, metaphor and imagery.

If Nikki Giovanni is a literary godmother to me, Langston Hughes is my literary godfather. Similarly to Giovanni, I also learned a great deal from Hughes' use of rhyme schemes (particularly, the blues), metaphors and imagery. Still, what Hughes taught me, more significantly, is the importance of linguistic and thematic repetition. In his collection *Selected Poems*, the language of the classic poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" rings with linguistic repetition. In this poem, which also inspired Nikki Giovanni to write her own creation myth poem "Ego Tripping," Hughes appropriates the voice of the African Diaspora. He uses repetition to reiterate the simile and theme that his soul (the African Diaspora's soul) is like the breadth and depth of a "river." My objective in writing "#7 Train Blues/Lines in the Wall" was to appropriate the collective voice of NYC first-generation immigrants and their children, and to use repetition to show the perpetuation of their struggle for survival. Because survival is an overlying theme in *Hyphenation Nation*, I have made "#7 Train Blues/Lines in the Wall" the preface to this collection.

Hyphenation Nation is not only an exploration of the NYC immigrant's process of constructing or resisting a hyphenated identity, but also the exploration of poetic forms and devices that best represent the voices of those immigrants. *Hyphenation Nation* gives a justified voice to NYC first and second generation immigrants, and additionally, pays homage to those writers whose poems have aided me in molding my poetic voice.

#7 Train Blues / Lines in the Wall

I.

Wound
like snails, we slid
then stopped

together,
tucked talk under
neath our tongues
until
we were filled

with silence.
Wound and still,
tongues tucked like snails,

we stopped
together
until

we were
filled with silence.

II.

We landed
on a note, obscene
place for bottom

blue
shades of black
default
lines in the wall.

We slid.
Landed on a note,

obscene place
for bottom blue
shades of black
default
lines in the wall.

Forget Who We Are // Forget Who We Were

*"We didn't start the fire."
- Billy Joel*

1829-1999

Have the men come to you at night?
did they rub your skin,
bite the flavor out of your tongue,
snap the rungs of your bodice,
lip-lock your bosom?

Have the men come to you at night?
did they cast a net
between your thighs,
smack fire out of your ribs,
open your throat with a crowbar
and blow coal smoke in it?

Have the men come to you at night?
Did you believe they were ghosts?
Did they finally catch your spirit?
Has your belly reaped the light?

Have the men come to you at night?

Have the men come to you at night?

Have the men come to you at night?

Congratulations, Emmanuel, It is Now Morning

-African Burial Ground Discovery in Lower Manhattan

Their bones are scattered inside government
graveyards, underneath bludgeoned tenement
and breaking pavement, wrapped in dung
and hung by the sonatas of blood
and bricks, tongues of one thousand stripped trees
resting on thirty-story rooftops,
on the jive talk corners of bebop,
skeletons of fevered mamas have rattled
their scat attacks

se-babadoo-mebabadoo-ooosedooya-
chacha-babadoobebop-badooya-hiphop-
bababebop-debop?

And still in Harlem heat,
loose threads of their anthems wave restless
from barrio debris, as street vendors be/come
a new canvas, as hair braiders be/come
the changing factor, as hyphenated AmeriKans move
for-words to be/come trails stoned to death by memories,
immigrant martyrs strewn across bulletproofed Bodega windows,
dying for some/thing-- hardcore
beatings of Yoruba *dun-dun*,
velvet eyes of dead panthers, struggle-less.

From Algeria

When the plane came to a halt,
jerked our bodies forward
then back like ping pong,
you pushed
me aside to look
through the fogged window,
to see if the city lights
were really pinches of sun
spelling out our future
in French.

Dead Nigger Alert: She called to tell me

she was
a dead nigger now. No turning

back to brick walls, black steam risen
from the drawl of a loco machine

solemn shift- left switch whistle
screaming, "nigger please, get on

your knees 'cause there ain't no
place like home." She called

to tell me she was a dead
nigger. Back then, when she used

to put on her blue-white, polka dot
mini just to string a penny from any

working man journeyman who could
steal away for humps. In the front

seat of a paint-peeled pickup, her hips
churning like buttermilk, stirring

that mother--- into dreams. She called to tell me
she was a dead nigger

now,
"don't attempt to hide the stench,
just release the hounds."

The Hustle: 20 Minutes in the Life of a NYC Gypsy Cab Driver

She t'row a crumple' five ove' de seat. It bounce off de win'shield an' lan' on de dash. She need t' get across de Bridge in fifteen, gotta meet her boyfrien' on Brooklyn Ave, 'tween Park and Flushin'. I grab de five from off de dash an' tell her it gonna take leas' half hour to get downtown 'cause Chris'mas always cause bad go slow in SOHO an' Chinatown, but she jus' shake her head an' lean fo'ward an' t'row anothe' five ove' de seat. She say if I hustle I coul' keep de change.

Ten minutes late', I'm on Brooklyn Ave. headin' back to de city, when a boy runnin' 'cross de street wave me down. I come to de curb an' he jump in d'en ask, how much it is to get to Wall Street fas'? I say *twen-tee*. He say, jus' ove' de bridge? Why cos' so much? I say, gas price high, fare increase, if he don' like he can go and take de bus. He reach ove' de fron' seat an' han' me two ten. I grab dem an' tell him I do my bes' to hustle.

West Village Lights

Everything is loud, even our bodies at 3am on Greenwich Row,
when cabs fight for our flags of thumbs, ask us where to and swallow
us whole. When the bartender is alone smoothing down the wood,
one last look at the brunette whose hips lit the room on fire.
When everything is hot, even the slightest run of a hand
between your thighs fractures the cool, leaves you pecking
at a stranger's ear like a retarded pigeon looking for comfort food.

Below the snow-sheared asphalt, you'll find your religion on a train
that rumbles nowhere, and the rails won't mind that the veins
in your arms are bruised chameleons morphing into dead-end signs
because tonight everything is wide, even the elevator swings like a pendulum.
And inside your motel bathroom, the neon buzz will stay strung out on your face,
dying you some kind of yellow. Right then, I promise to be there,
loudly and hung, the only arrow pointing you away from the glow.

The Caesura

Sometimes, I just take to the way words sound when they hit
a blank, force me to rethink my steps like the moment after
I slapped my second wife, the stun-- her cheek flushed
brackish pink. The way words fade to brown
after begging the line to tie up the muse, strap the vice
to the stake, conjure a stronger spirit. There,
spilling out of a timber fence-- the break,
with a bloated tweed suitcase and other lines
that should've been used instead of, "Where

de fuck were you las' night?" Only to find
sentences wrapped around a bar stool, words waxed
on a tumbler to ease the burn. It's about words
when their backs are against the wall, their spines
bending to seal the muse. The way lines stack
up to a break. The way the pause is stirred.

The Parking Lot at La Bruja's Carnival

You slide into the front seat of the wagon
sweating petroleum and blood. You say
you're going to kill a four-legged bitch
tonight, one hand on the wheel, the other fussing
with the glove box latch. I pretend
La Bruja is in the backseat struggling against a noose.
There's a switchblade duct-taped to my thigh,
waiting for your cue.

The undercarriage of the wagon is cool,
hasn't been moved in a week.
You crawl into the backseat, like a baited coyote,
your one good paw already caked in blood.
I lean towards my thigh, knowing I won't sleep tonight,
haven't eaten in two days and my belly's like sheetrock
waiting for a nail.

Pennies

pennies
packed in a Vodka bottle paperweight
pin down a stack of unpaid bills

The Kitchen

I.

My legs are baked
when I stand up
to you in the kitchen
and say "You forgot the beans."

II.

This apron is stained
with visions of escape.
Even the windows have space
between the bars.

III.

Oil pops in
a frying pan.
Blackened fish
lets off steam.

IV.

My love falls
from a microwave plate.
In that dream, you laugh
and roll over.

Again, West Village Lights

Barefoot, you lean against the elevator wall
and slur about how you'll never have another drink, again
words hang from your mouth like a row of planks
hinged on a swimming pool with no water in it.

On the nineteenth floor,
before we reach the apartment door,
you wrap your arms around my neck like a horseshoe
and beg me to throw out all the half-drunken liquor bottles

tomorrow,
between the aspirin and Pepto
I'll remind you where you forgot
your suede pumps

and again, you'll run back
like a colt into the night
to get them.

The Straight Way Was Lost

Stirring the mood,
Blackness drags us by the tail
into bloated towns, into beggars
with blue lips pressed against dry tumblers.
When poverty strikes from the tongue to the chest,
from the waist down, we whine
until our hairless skin repels
road signs that point towards dead
ends, every time we forget

the muse, hunger
streaked alleys, pool halls,
liquor marts, Blackness drugged
and slurring the mood, "steel struck
from the hip to the wound,"
"in heaven, still sucking a hard dick
for a fix." Since 1982, we forgot

the muse –nine to fivers
taken to slaughter,
shivering on a stretcher,
mama's varicose veins
catcalling to their remains, *baby,*
steal away, steal away to Jesus.

In Brooklyn, it was always on

even when the sun woke up, ill with jaundice,
torched our project skyscraper, left us
crawling on top of singed bricks, like fat flies
twitching for the funk of a piece of shit.
That summer, on the tar bidden rooftop,
it was always on, as we burned like riots
underneath the skin, waiting behind our walls
for something to jump out of the street below,
chameleons chanting for bullets, bombed in
our spirits, our shadows restless for the shift.

As southern cargo docked and Navy Yard bullhorns hit
at 3 o'clock p.m., it was always on, expanding
in subway tracks, heat beat-boxing on metal like *dun-dun*,
shaking us down until we changed our names
to T-Boogie and Sha-Ski, repeating the *Ogun* chant
of our father's machetes, swallows of Mad Dog
reshaped our dicks to bloat, to pull out of sagging jeans,
to piss on long rats camouflaged between jugged pipes
on the platform, fat rats scuttled at the slap
of warm, yellow water on their felt backs, black electricity
out running our fast burning booze,
underground, it was always on, fast

burning bones yearning for swigs of cool,
sneakers pumped with swoosh, we jumped
turnstiles 'til we landed on 125th street- skidding
off the fear, fucking the fare. We were born to ride

free, through fetid air, it was always on, pushing
us through double doors of seizures, opening
wounds that Baptist mamas couldn't whip us

through, like *dun-dun*, grinding pebbles
of cayenne and Yoruba into our lungs- "*O Baje*"¹
trapped in chords of cilia; we coughed
up the lead onto the tip of our tongues then lit another

cigarette of cool. Our limp walk stuck to city
sidewalk- strutting deep, even at dusk
when the drowning sun shaded our hides
from black to hollow, nothings
reclined between the wedge of Julio's Bodega
and our smoking skyscraper; baby lions
licking wounds on melted tar. Addicted to the fix,
sealing the scars. Right then, we forgot
who we are.

¹ "It has rotted."

Backslider

Risen above the cobblestone
steps, between St. James and Lafayette,
a black-eyed Jesus erects
precision into my bones.

I walk upright

until I spot a fat flamingo
hat wading towards me
with over-blushed cheeks,
a staid smile.

I duck
the the excuse,
make a righteous dash
for the back pew,
anxious to lay
my burdens down.

Projects on Fire

"It may smell like vomit, but I bet you it taste like taffy."

- Anonymous

The Projects on Fire I: This is Something

It smells like barbeque chicken. On the third floor
Ms. Morales is taking it in the gut, no telling
how long her bowels will be on fire. The toilet
in her shack is leaking her shit,
but Bobbito says he can't fix nothing
today. He'll stop by tomorrow
with his empty tool belt, just to say
"this is somethin,"
when the third floor is sinking
into the first and Papa's tie is wrapped around Mama's neck
and Mama's cigarette is pressed against Papa's chest.
The television has a big hole in its head
but Bobbito says he can't fix nothing
today.

The Projects on Fire II: Supper

The tar is slick with dew.
Mama stretches her head out of the kitchen window
and yells, "don't forget the pigeon peas."
Lala glances over her shoulder then shoots
pass Marco Pieto's hot dog stand, across Myrtle Avenue
like a loose orangutan,
her small, brown hands smelling of warm, white buns.

The Projects on Fire III: Double-Dutch Over the Moon

Ask the Con

Edison man if he got extra

wire so we can jump

double-dutch over the moon. Press our hands
against our too-grown tits cause Tito likes it too
much when we hop from foot to foot
and everything jiggles.

The Projects on Fire IV: The Brooklyn Bridge – An Outside/Insider View

Kenyatta is on
a ten-speed, halfway across
the bridge, when he passes
this couple shooting
at his stack of ghetto skyscrapers,
beyond the river,
 the brunette rests
 her camera on top of her chest,
 then slides the neon green visor
 from her forehead and says,
 “those are some *ugly* bricks over there.”
Her gray haired friend agrees, snapping once, saying
 “that’s where the navy barracks used to be”
 beyond the river,
Kenyatta reaches
the lowest district of the city
still pedaling, out
of breath.

The Projects on Fire V: Megalopolis Prelude

It's a step beyond
bronze bell echoes,
red, yellow, green buzz,
a brief caress of a cashmere scarf
close to a flushed ear,
 catching the L train
 cross-town.

It wakes on the reddest breast,
stretches across the East River,
rises from broad shoulders,
to mock a blanket of low waves.
It's there,
a recalcitrant wonder
 –this thought,
its true confidant.

The Projects on Fire VI: Megalopolis Postlude

For Victor Hernandez Cruz

When the line of demarcation
between the west side and the river,
becomes a mocha toned hooker bent over
a yellow hydrant by the pier, when the Lycra of her white
sequined dress bunches at her potbelly then rolls like hills
and hills of white elephants, when the block heel of her platform shoe
knocks the chalk-ridden concrete and a trail of subway cars
throttled by a tunnel, knocks back, when her lip gloss
is the color of blue wave petunias, but taste like watermelon taffy,
when the throats of newborn nightingales are lost in her neck
and her shoulders are pasty with pigeon shit,
when her breath smells like burning rubber
and her eyes water
when he calls her something
other than Sugar.

The Projects on Fire VII: Baptism

The city pool is too
dirty to wade in. Momma says look
how they bathe, tanned bodies soaking
up the day somebody forgot
to pay the water bill.

The Projects on Fire VIII: Catching Tigers in Red Weather

When the hydrant's red is chipped
down to its yellow night
gown and summer burns like a vanilla ice
cream cone that nobody can buy,
our mouths are spitless
because the neighborhood patrol guy
bow-tied the spout and we know
Mickey Dileo's father is driving
around in a black tow truck,
with a monkey wrench tucked in
the glove box, ready
to set our tongues loose.

Projects on Fire IX: Alley Dirge

Every night,
in the pan alley
between the tin cans,
there is this cat
that moans
like his woman
is pulling her claws
out of his back.

Projects on Fire X: The Possibilities

Mama leans against
the trunk of an oak tree, God's
eyes open briefly