



Camilla Fascina\*

## INTERVIEW WITH ABIODUN OYEWOLE, FOUNDING MEMBER OF “THE LAST POETS,” A GROUP CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF THE EARLIEST INFLUENCES ON HIP-HOP MUSIC

*On November 12, 2015, I was invited to attend the international Conference on Hip-hop “Teach-In: Words Beats & Life, Remixing the Art of Social Change: Expanding the Cipher,”<sup>1</sup> in Washington DC. Abiodun Oyewole<sup>2</sup> was the special guest of the opening ceremony. Oyewole opened the event sharing with us anecdotes of his career and he eventually expressed his views on Hip-Hop as an art that can cause social change. I transcribed parts of the round table discussion between the Master of Ceremonies,<sup>3</sup> Mr. Oyewole, and the audience. I asked Mr. Oyewole some questions concerning the use of the “N-word.”*

**MASTER OF CEREMONIES:** My first question is, what is your relationship with Washington DC, the Chocolate City, as you would put it?

**ABIODUN OYEWOLE<sup>4</sup>:** First of all, you know, just the name itself, the idea that there is a place called Chocolate City in America, I mean, that says enough. We know basically that a lot of black people came here looking for opportunities because this is the base, this is the home for the government, so a lot of folks knew that if they got closer to the government there would be many more opportunities available to them. So they moved, they were coming from different parts of the South, and I had relatives who live in DC, and I would always come here and enjoy just being in the area, just being in the environment. And of course there have been a number of things at Howard University, and how Howard University has been the Harvard of

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<sup>1</sup> The Conference (12-14 November 2015) took place at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington DC.

<sup>2</sup> Abiodun Oyewole (born Charles Franklin Davis in 1948) is a poet, teacher and founding member of The Last Poets. The Last Poets were a group of poets and musicians that gathered in the late 1960s during the years of the African-American Civil Rights Movement and the Black Nationalist Movement. The members of the group changed several times through the years, but the original group actually consisted of Gylan Kain, David Nelson and Abiodun Oyewole, who performed for the first time on May 19, 1968 (Malcolm X's birthday) at Marcus Garvey Park in East Harlem (this concert is considered to be the genesis of The Last Poets). Abiodun Oyewole is the author of *Branches of the Tree of Life: The Collected Poems of Abiodun Oyewole, 1969-2013*. Lantzville BC, Canada: Leaf Press, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The “Master of Ceremonies,” also known as MC or emcee, is the host that guides people through staged events, street performances and that draws the attention on the artists he (or she) is presenting. Since rappers identify themselves verbally as MC, to show that they are at the center of the attention on a stage or in a show, in hip-hop the title MC switched to the performing artist, i.e. the rapper (A/N).

<sup>4</sup> This interview retains the colorful and peculiar language of Abiodun Oyewole. “Language” here refers to Oyewole’s use of African American Vernacular English, which is a variety of English language with its own phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical patterns and rules (Green, 2002). This variety has been labeled in different ways, such as Black dialect, Black English, Ebonics and Afro American English (Green, 2002, 6). I chose to use “African American Vernacular English” (also referred to as AAVE) as it is one of the most common and settled labels (Mufwene et al. eds. 1998). Among the many scholars that have investigated the use of AAVE see also Baugh (2000, 2004), Dillard (1972), Kautzsch (2002), Lakoff (2000), Lippi-Green (1997), Poplack (2000), Rickford (1999, 2000), Smitherman (1977), Perry and Delpit (1998). For the above-mentioned reasons, during the transcription of the interview I decided not to turn Oyewole’s peculiar expressions (such as “Imma” for “I am going to”) into Standard American English in order to suggest the musicality of Oyewole’s speech (A/N).



Black colleges, so, you know, there is a lot of culture here and when you are talking about poetry, you are talking about the culture. You can't be a poet and not be culturally connected, you have to be culturally connected. And DC has always been a place that is the pedestal of black culture in spite of whatever was going on in the world. There always has been some kind of a feeling of "we're gonna be black *deliberately*<sup>5</sup> in DC."

**MC:** How did the Last Poets first meet and how did you become a group?

**AO:** When we first got started, first of all let me say this: I was raised in Queens, New York and I was raised to be, I guess, a middleclass negro and I was planning to be a doctor, I guess I have seen enough TV shows about doctors. I wanted to be a neuro surgeon, at least I thought I did, and it was very interesting how that happened because I started working in an anti-poverty program with a young man named David. He was writing poetry and I had been writing a little poetry in high school because I always liked to date older girls and never went out with girls my age. I did not think a girl my age could teach me anything, I had to have a sister that was going to teach me something so she had to be three, four, five years older and I would lie about my age, so I was always dating an older girl and I had this one older girl. We were having a little problem and so my English teacher gave me ten words of an assignment to do poetry, to do a little composition and I told her "If I put these words in a poem, will I get extra credit?" and she says "if you put these words into a poem I'll give you two extra credits." I wrote a poem dealing with the relationship I was having, which was kind of falling apart, with this young lady and I remember my teacher told me "I don't know what you are gonna be, but you are a natural poet, you have natural poet ability," and she put my poem in a contest and I won, but I never thought about it. But David Nelson told me he wanted to get together a group of poets to function as a collective, to give an example to black people about how seriously we have got to unify, because poets are individuals for the most part and they can live a reclusive life like every day they can go over to the park and not even talk to people, they talk to trees and flowers and streams and stuff, and they be very happy, and it's a joy to connect with nature. So, when David and I reconnected I was trying to write some poetry in French and I was trying to write some little romantic poems. He was doing the same thing in Spanish, so we connected and started sharing ideas and when he said he wanted to get this group together it was a nice idea, but I was not taking it too seriously until April 4<sup>th</sup> 1968. When Doctor King got killed I lost my mind.

That turned everything around for me. I could never have marched with Doctor King because I am not a turning cheek person: you put your hands on me? I might try to break your arm. No question, I was raised that way. But my mother and my whole family revered Doctor King, I could not believe that they would actually kill this man and he was functioning on a platform of nonviolence, so I lost it. I called David, I said 'David we got to get the Last Poets together, we gotta get it together now because if not, Imma get a gun and Imma be a serial killer, Imma go crazy.' He 'said calm down, I'll put our name on a list. Malcom X's birthday is coming up, Imma book us up for a gig in Mount Morris Park,<sup>6</sup> so here I am running my mouth talking about we gotta do this group. But when he said that we were going to do a performance at Mount Morris Park, I knew that was in Harlem, and that there was going to be a bunch of Harlem people. I almost lost my mind because I am thinking that all of Harlem was like the Apollo<sup>7</sup> and if you go on stage and you don't do well, say a man come pull you off the stage, that's the end of your whole life.

I was intimidated. I was raised in Queens and I only went to Harlem for church on Sundays and I loved Harlem but was totally intimidated by Harlem. Because I was afraid of failing on stage in Harlem, about two weeks before the performance I came to Harlem and walked around and listened and observed and at the time the song was *It's Your Thing, Do What You Wanna Do* by the Isley Brothers,<sup>8</sup> and also that song was

<sup>5</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Mount Morris Park is in Harlem, New York (A/N).

<sup>7</sup> He is talking about The Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York, a famous music hall which is a noted venue for African-American performers (A/N).

<sup>8</sup> *It's Your Thing* is a funk single by The Isley Brothers released in 1969. The lyrics of the chorus say: "It's your thing/ Do what you wanna do/ I can't tell you/ Who to sock it to" (A/N). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-9eOWsp8o>. Last visited July 7, 2016.



translated into revolutionary conversation. Brothers would say “Oh, what’s your thing brother?” - “Oh, I am a black panther” and “What’s your thing brother?” - “Oh, I am in the Nation of Islam.” So I was picking it up.<sup>9</sup> When folks said “what’s your thing?” it was not like “Oh I got a job in Macy’s,”<sup>10</sup> it’s “What is your revolutionary affiliation? What are you doing for the movement?” and I said ok that’s the latest expression, so I took that expression ‘cause that’s what poets do, we don’t give you anything new, we take what you already know and give it to you in a way that you never thought about it before. That’s the job of the poet. To define and redefine our circumstances. So, I took that expression and I wrote a poem: “What’s your thing brother.” It was a horrible poem, but it made sense based on the time. It talked about what’s your thing brothers and the black men who have saved black women and children will uphold the black nation and all that message and it worked.

**MC:** Where does your group name, “The Last Poets,” come from?

**AO:** We were on stage and we were not called The Last Poets, we were called with our names. So we did our very first performance in Mount Morris Park.<sup>11</sup> David Nelson went about trying to find a name, he was reading some poems and the poem that gave us our name was a poem written by a brother named Keorapetse Willie Kgositsile<sup>12</sup> and nobody could say his first name so they affectionately called him “Little Willy.” So “Little Willi Kgositsile” had a poem and it’s in a very, very popular anthology, probably the most potent anthology done dealing with black writing and the anthology is appropriately named *Black Fire*.<sup>13</sup> *Black Fire* is the name of the Anthology edited by Leroy Jones, who we know is Amiri Baraka, and Larry Neal, who is no longer with us either, but on page 336-337 there is a poem called “Towards a walk in the sun”<sup>14</sup> which actually outlines the conditions that African people had to go through living under the apartheid regime and we hear the poet’s anger raging in the poem. He even changed the font at the end and he says this “The wind you hear is the birth of memory. When the moment hatches in time’s womb there will be no art talk. The only poem you will hear will be the spearpoint pivoted in the punctured marrow of the villain; the timeless native son dancing like crazy to the retrieved rhythms of desire fading into memory.” So we said to ourselves: “we are the last poets of the world.”<sup>15</sup>

**MC:** So what is it about The Last Poets’ ability to transcend race? You know, like they can speak to indigenous people, brown people, black people, Asian, what is it?

**AO:** Well, first of all the one thing that The Last Poets did, we dealt with the issues of the government and the system but we really waged war against niggers and when I say “niggers” I am talking about that

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<sup>9</sup> He means he picked up this trend (A/N).

<sup>10</sup> Macy’s is a department store (A/N).

<sup>11</sup> The Last Poets were born on May, 19, 1968 in Mount Morris Park in Harlem, New York, during their renowned gig for the birthday celebration in memory of Malcolm X. See Oyewole Abiodun, *Branches of the Tree of Life: The Collected Poems of Abiodun Oyewole, 1969-2013*. Lantzville BC, Canada: Leaf Press, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> A South African Poet and activist born 1938, influential member of the African National Congress in the 1960s and 1970s (A/N).

<sup>13</sup> He is referring to *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal in 1968.

<sup>14</sup> “The Last Poets Pure and Potent” in *The Liberator Magazine*.

<http://weblog.liberatormagazine.com/2011/05/last-poets-pure-potent-allowing-us-to.html>. Last visited July 7, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> After reading this poem that stands as an incendiary battle cry, the members of The Last Poets felt they were on a mission, that they were about to become “the voices of the East Wind blowing away the West with our sound. The Last Poets, men who knew in their youth the truth must be told, the lies must be revealed and we got to be sassy and funky and sincere about it.” (Oyewole Abiodun, *Branches of the Tree of Life: The Collected Poems of Abiodun Oyewole, 1969-2013*. Quotation taken from the introductory part of the book called *Invocation*)



negative element in our community<sup>16</sup> that was stopping us from being unified so, you know, we go through the whole discography of the Last Poets you see we have poems called Wake Up Niggers, Niggers Are Scared of Revolution, Die nigga!, Run Nigger.<sup>17</sup> We were niggerfying everything, it was crazy. We are trying to take that negative take on nigger and spin it around and normalize it, we take this word and now it's ours, we're gonna take it.

I mean we were niggerfying everything and it was crazy because I think that many of the hip hop artists who did listen, and they were quite a few, they did not hear what we were saying about niggers, they just heard the word nigger and got carried away and got stuck, and called everybody nigger. And the nigger has become the nigger because of hip hop. The nigger has become the rebel on planet earth. That's what the nigger is seen as, that person that you cannot put in a box, that person that's gonna break all rules and do what they please and we tried to reel that kind of nigger in. Constant effort to reel that kind of nigger in.

We tried to make it clear, if we are gonna have any unity we have got to deal with that negative aspect. But our mission primarily was to upgrade humanity, it's about humanity and humanity is not black or white, it's people, period. And that's a human concern that is still my concern.

I travel a great deal and when I travel I am always looking for angels, I don't care if you fat skinny white green purple, whatever, the fact is that I look forward to meeting people who want to help me to get where I gotta go. And make my journey even more enjoyable, and I have been very fortunate. I met angels all over the world. I still have issues with the two notable social scientists in America: Skinner and Wheeler,<sup>18</sup> when they say people are born inherently evil. That's bullshit, people are born good and giving an opportunity can be extremely beautiful, I have had that experience, I can tell you I can list on two hands the snots that I have met. Most of the people I have met are gold, are beautiful, and they have shown love and I constantly received that when I go, I know that it has something to do with what I bring -- and at the same time what I have been receiving from folks that I run into has been phenomenal.

**MC:** You mentioned earlier something about niggerization, what do you think of Dick Gregory<sup>19</sup>'s position about niggerization and how did you kind of like I guess relate or not relate to him at that time?

**AO:** With Gregory, yes, Dick Gregory is a special man. I am a part of a group out of Detroit and every summer we have a poetry in the woods festival and we would always have a guest and about eight years ago the guest was Dick Gregory. Man! We walked and talked for hours. His information is overwhelming, the man is filled to the brim.

We are walking in the woods, men! And he is looking at stuff that I would call like weeds and he says 'If you take that and boil it down it would be good for this.' His information is off the chain – so great, so dope!

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<sup>16</sup> He is talking about the Last Poets' fight against the "individualistic" nigger who undermines the unity of the community, the one that has the attitude of "Imma go get what I want" and "I am the biggest baddest nigger on the block, you can't put me in a box, fuck all you." Special thanks to Caressa Franklin (from the University of Chicago) for this insightful explanation.

<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, they are all renowned songs by The Last Poets.

<sup>18</sup> He is referring to radical behaviorists B.E Skinner and R.H. Wheeler who have engaged themselves in the discussion concerning the nature of humankind.

<sup>19</sup> Dick Gregory (born October 12, 1932) is an American writer, civil rights activist, and social critic who wrote the famous book *Nigger, an Autobiography by Dick Gregory*. The book opens with Gregory's words to his mother: "Dear Momma - Wherever you are, if ever you hear the word 'nigger' again, remember they are advertising my book."

In my opinion, crucial to the understanding of Gregory's position as regards the concept of "niggerization" is the incipit of his book: "Hot Damn, we're going to bust the thing. This is a revolution. It started long before I came into it, and I may die before it's over, but we'll bust this thing and cut out this cancer. America will be as strong and beautiful as it should be, for black folks and white folks. We'll all be free then, free from a system that makes a man less than a man, that teaches hate and fear and ignorance. You didn't die a slave for nothing, Momma. You brought us up. You and all those Negro mothers who gave their kids the strength to go on, to take that thimble to the well while the whites were taking buckets. Those of us who weren't destroyed got stronger, got calluses on our souls. And now we're ready to change a system, a system where a white man can destroy a black man with a single word. Nigger. When we are through, Momma, there won't be any niggers any more." (Gregory, 1964, *Incipit*) (A/N)



I learned so much hanging out with Gregory plus I know his daughter and we are close and it is like he is a special person, a very special person and this whole being on this last poet road has given me an opportunity to be around some very important people and he is definitely at the top of that list. We did a very wonderful conference in New York city and the thing I love about Greg is that he reads everything so when he is giving you a lecture he refers to some literature that he read to get this information so, ya know, he ain't making this stuff up. This is stuff that somebody else checked out too, and documented. He is definitely at the top of the list.

**MC:** Where do you see yourself and Hip Hop in the next twenty years?

**AO:** I teach. I am doing a study at Columbia now where I teach and I use hip hop to teach science. I got a biology rap and I think hip hop is going to merge. Hip Hop is the world's voice; this thing is laid out for us to have a lot of communication with each other on a lot of levels. Just imagine how much different school would be if the kids would come in and rap when they are learning. You got some crazy words in science like 'endoplasmic reticulum,' you know, 'Mitochondria' and when you hook it up with a rap and make it flow it does not seem so mysterious and, consequently, I have a whole bunch of kids I have been working with I got four of my students from any grade become doctors right now and we did hip hop the whole damn curriculum we had the hip hop CV.

In a program I did a whole hip-hop rap about the parts of speech, because no one cares about conjunctions, transitions and all of that, but putting it in a rap makes it exciting. Hip-Hop could be a world's voice and we could all use it to learn and have rhythm and have fun and get some knowledge at the same time. And we know the commercial world is using the hell out of it. You can't see a commercial video without that bass beat or something and somebody trying to rap. It is always all you have to do: black folks have to be here and breathe and something creative is gonna take place.

**MC:** Can you share with us some anecdotes?

**AO:** Oh yes it's about the Star Spangled Banner.<sup>20</sup> I attended an event and when it came to sing it, since I was the key note, I said ok I'll stand, I won't be sitting down, but you will not see me moving my mouth to sing that song. So, I was standing there and when it was all over and they called me up to the podium to speak, a little girl, just only about 1500 people in the audience, and one little girl raised her hand and of course I acknowledged her hand. And she said "You didn't sing the national anthem and you didn't pledge allegiance to the flag." And this was a damn shame. The little girl threw me under the bus, just like that! And rolled over. Well, I said "No, I didn't!" What can you say? I couldn't lie and say I did! I said "I don't even sing that song because that song is a war song. The damned song is about bombs and about killing people. How can you ask somebody to be peaceful after singing a war song? It makes no damn sense." And I said I never pledge allegiance to that flag because that flag has never pledged allegiance to my people.

And there were some elders and teachers who started to clap. Some of the teachers weren't clapping right away, because I guess they just didn't want to lose their job or thought it might be a jeopardy. But you know what, I'm gonna tell you something. I love our elders who can give you some props and support you when you need it and then I acted real G<sup>21</sup> and I said "Besides, I got a much better pledge than the pledge of allegiance." I did not have jack on, I was thinking about doing something 'cause I work with young people and when I go into a classroom I put on raps and try to make them realize I got some juice you know. And it works, works a lot, but when you done something like that a thousand times you want to change up – so I was looking to change up my raps. "I haven't got anything written down, but now I run my big mouth and say I got a pledge better than the pledge of allegiance" and the girl insisted in the front row "Can we hear your pledge brother?" And I said oh shit I didn't have nothing. But this is the one they hear: "I give thanks to my ancestors and to my brain that's still working. And I can think on my feet," and I'm telling you, for all Hip-Hop aficionados, freestyle meant that we could deal it when you were bad with your ass against the wall. You called for something, so we got to do the pledge and now we are doing it together. Everybody say: "Free,

<sup>20</sup> The USA national anthem (N/A).

<sup>21</sup> In hip-hop slang, to 'act real G' means to act like a gangsta (N/A)



Grow, Misery, Down, True, Sad, A Lift, Here. Eight words that will be your response to my call. The only thing required is that you be in rhythm. If you don't have any rhythm, don't say anything. Just listen, be an observer. You understand? So my part will lead you to your words naturally if you are listening. Your words are Free, Grow, Misery, Down, True, Sad, A Lift, Here. Go!"

I want to be, what I can be, to be proud, healthy and free<sup>22</sup>

I want to say what I know, to help my brothers and sisters grow

I want to feel good about me, and blame no one for my misery

'Cause I'll be strong to turn around, I wanna go up I'm not going down

I want to do what I can do to make all my dreams come true

Remember my past, the good and bad, how I made it up even when I was sad

I want to share whatever my gift and when you're feeling low I'll give you a lift

I want to live without fear and know that I am blessed for being here.

You know that I am blessed for being here

You know that we're blessed for being here.

We are blessed.

**CAMILLA FASCINA:** We are blessed, indeed. Thank you very much for being here with us today. I am amazed at your passionate words. Now, I would like to ask you something about the "n-word." I am studying the way you use this term in your lyrics and in your philosophy of life, but would you accept a white person saying the "n-word"?

**AO:** Well, it depends upon what context we are talking about, because it is a word that can be used but it needs to be understood, because people still use it in negative ways. And for a lot of the young hip-hoppers the nigger has become a rebel, and so you've got kids in Rome, white kids, Italian kids, people referring to themselves as niggers, so it's not that edge of being strictly a word to jab you in your heart. It can exist, depending whom is saying it and how they are saying it.

A lot of times things really depend upon how you say them as opposed to what you say, and tone has a great deal to do with everything. Now, if you say something in a way that has a negative tone, then it is going to come across in a negative way but when you say it from a level of understanding, and I mean I know a lot of white folks that will shy away from ever saying the word because they know it's been something that is taboo for them to say, but then I have some white friends who know how to deal with it and say it in a way that is not an insult to other black people.

Normally speaking, you are not going to find too many white people saying that word because they know that that's one of those words that was created to dehumanize black people, but because of hip-hop popularizing it you are gonna find some white kids saying it because it's in the rap and you can't get around it, and we have to understand that we poets have actually advertised that word over time and the entire world is saying nigger. For example, we were playing in Fes, Morocco five years ago and Moroccans came up to me and said "Can I be a nigger?" and I said "I don't know."<sup>23</sup>

**CF:** I was at a concert in Berlin, and Tyler the Creator<sup>24</sup> was performing. At a certain point, Tyler addressed us saying 'Hey niggas!' By saying that he clearly meant 'brothers' and 'friends' and all the people in the audience around me, both black and non-black, answered back 'hey nigga,' cheerfully, with that same spirit of brotherhood. So, in that very moment it happened that the "n-word" was chanted in the concert hall irrespective of skin color. Do you think this can happen outside of the world of Hip Hop?

**AO:** It is the magic of hip-hop primarily. Outside that, you just can't do it.

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<sup>22</sup> The words in bold are the eight words that we pronounced altogether as an answer to his rhymes.

<sup>23</sup> This statement is crucial to the discussion, and it opened up a set of new reflections I am still working on. In fact, the black guy from Africa, not having first-hand experience of American racism, is asking whether he is entitled or not to be called "a nigger" (A/N).

<sup>24</sup> Tyler, The Creator (born March 6, 1991) is an American rapper that uses the words nigger and nigga to unite his mixed audience (N/A).



**CF:** Previously, you mentioned a poem you wrote for a girl you were in love with. Do you still remember that poem by heart?

**AO:** Yes, that's I think the first poem that really gave me some feeling that I had poeting skills, was a poem that I wrote in high school when I was 15 talking about the failed relationship that I had with this young lady and it was taking the typical vocabulary words that my teacher gave us and I put those words in that poem, my memory does pretty good:

She is a rose who made thorns  
Tearing pride out of my heart  
Though she blossoms in many forms  
The thorns remain sharp, she rips and she hurts  
Yet stays projecting seductively fragrant perfumes.  
I protested so many ways  
But my manhood she somehow consumed completely.  
I am torn between blood and masculinity.

It is ancient and my teacher told me "You know you are a poet, I don't know what you are going to do with it, but you have to give it a chance."<sup>25</sup>

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