

RISE AFRICA

Inspiring Action for Sustainable Cities

Discussion Series

Poetry to unlock and re-map African cities

By Malika Ndlovu



THEME:

African urban narratives
through poetry,
photography, and
storytelling to drive urban
change



Above the nagging traffic drone
Clogging this weathered city zone
Even as I weave through another
Buzzing taxi-rank talent trap
Amidst smoke and hissing prima stoves
People in droves
Who seldom look up
Look up!

This morning is new
No matter where or when we wake up
No matter what we do
This morning is new

Even here in this not-so-grand parade¹
Where gutter fumes compete
With the reek of cheap liquor
The sight of children
Strewn like litter
Children like litter
Beyond the browning bandages
Around forgotten limbs
Unforgettable stab wounds
Beyond the lootings and shootings
Corruption, exclusion, toxic erosion
Densification, gentrification, erasure
Still...

This morning is new
No matter where or when we wake up
No matter what we do
This morning is new
It's new

This morning is new
a poem from Malika Ndlovu's 1999 debut collection *Born in Africa but*

Poetry is the art of weaving together wisdom from the past, possibilities of the present, and unlimited potential of the future. It is a way of dreaming into being, the as-yet unseen. These compact word, image, rhythm and sound tapestries can enrich our lives, expand our thinking, shift perspectives and enhance our experiences of the everyday. Giving permission to the free-flow of imagination, like most artforms, poetry embraces contrast, contradiction and even brokenness by drawing story beads and threads together. It is a visioning tool, a story or message reconstruction formula, a creative methodology and a form of research and documentation. It can serve as courageous witnessing, social activism and determined record-keeping in times of erosion and erasure, resurfacing the truths and treasures that somehow survive. Poets are called to respond to the challenges of our times and context in imaginative, innovative and restorative ways. In the places we come from, our indigenous rooting and local referencing is a vital resource in the production of this work. If poetry is to make an authentic impact - if it is intended to serve transformation, to ignite and bolster our hopes towards thriving societies and communities beyond the trauma of daily survival, injustice and inherited systems of oppression - then this poetry has to be the creative work of integrity.

Cities are the endocrine system of a body of land;

Reflecting the behaviour of the inner emotions matted out by each healthy gland.

We humans are cells powering a circuitry of the oldest piece of technology.

A body of work reflected in the cosmos as sacred geometry.

-

Tell our descendants we combed through the wisdom of the old to pave the future.

Tell the unborn that we planted hope in the soil for them to reap our Faith.

Tell them we manifested this reality so they can live better lives.

From Mutle Mothibe's Moving Light

In urban contexts and the evolution of African cities, our artists and specifically our poets are a mostly untapped resource. These architects of ideas, visionaries painting with words, are able to remind us of our intrinsic creativity and how this can be used without disconnecting from our humanity. As experts in integration of diverse elements and perspectives, we would naturally advocate for these communal hubs to be hospitable instead of hostile spaces, believing our cities can be places of inclusion and collective benefit rather than sites of exclusion, inequality and privilege. Poetry is a compact form of storytelling; if we desire to create or resuscitate cities as exciting and generative hubs, why not engage poets who recognise that all our stories matter and are inextricably interdependent? Why not explore how this poetic craft can contribute to insightful and just spatial planning, to the success of city industries, the promotion of healthy urban environments and development?

*I did not look for sustainability in economy analysis and
tall buildings that would not home my people, I looked for it
in unravelling the secrets of my father's generation
Peeling untold stories from pavement cracks,
collecting them from borders and abandoned ruins, from conversations
with the ghosts who hold custody over repurposed buildings
like a mad woman unseen and seeing everything -
I wandered the streets with one ear to the ground
tracing the scars on stranger's bodies
And imagining the invisible ones in their hearts
asking how each happened;
which conflict,
which era,
which government,
which alliance,
what grief,
or emotional plight
left this mark ...*

From Afeefa Omar's A Broken Compass

Whether it's about responding to human health and safety threats or encouraging eco-awareness, uplifting corporate and industrial working environments, or branding and promoting products, campaigns, dynamic translation of urban policies for citizens to engage with - poetry has a role to play. Whether it's in education and training of business staff or city workers, strategic urban community-building, effective street-dweller support rather than harassment, eviction and invisibilising - poetry can play a part. As message amplifiers and audacious dreamers, poets, through their creative texts, performances, documentation and storytelling skills can significantly contribute to shifting destructive cultures in city spaces and offer refreshing punctuation of the cityscapes, giving us pause...to reconnect with ourselves, and revisit our material and non-material aspirations. They can audibly and visually interrupt the daily hum-drum of city commutes and laborious work schedules and programmes.

*I am an Urban composer,
A scribbler of stanzas and verses in pages carrying the things I think in ink.
In pages carrying the impossible dream that I dared to dream lucid*

From Vusumuzi Mpofu's I am

Poetry can serve as a methodology for the preservation of the tangible and intangible heritage dimensions of cities, as well as capturing contemporary urban (r)evolutions in word and site-specific events. Afeefa Omar's poem exposing our often invisible yet intersecting story tapestries, the intricacies of lived experience in a city, as well as Vusumuzi's urban anthems - both awaken all our senses...and sensitise us to what is unfolding here. There is no urban development concern or socio-economic issue that poetry cannot speak to. Poetry harnesses and expresses our collective creative spirit, helps us face our shadows, interrogates our blind spots, and mirrors the ways in which we can be part of the problem or the solution.

It will be a mistake to ignore us:

*the ideas of our young people taking flight in Lagos on the wings of
technology, connecting the false hopes of yesterday to a cloud of dreams,*

In 1s and 0s, a graffiti of new beginnings eclipsing the old

We who built the 4th largest film industry in the world from tales by moonlight.

Imagine what we have done:

the lifeboats of survival we have spun from our threadbare

existence; creative hubs in Nairobi, Made in Nigeria ambitions

in Aba. Imagine what we do:

we who invent new worlds in Europe & spread knowledge from America to

*Canada, doctors & engineers, athletes & artists, conquering the world in every
sphere, Imagine what we can do here:*

with a leadership invested in calling the magic of our dreams to

life; inventors on the streets of Kano waiting to be let loose,

thought leaders expiring in the creeks of the Niger Delta because

we haven't done enough,

imagine how many more Nobel Prize winners we still have

in the belly of our struggles.

From Efe Paul - Azino's Untitled

It courageously penetrates the sorrow-filled silences that hang over all our heads, no matter what we come to these urban intersections to do, give or take. It invites us to navigate the currents of change and uncertainty together, invites our mutual vulnerability so we can restore points of human(e) connection where divides have kept us apart, numb and removed from the dreams of healing and well-being for all, the resource of our stories.

II

When people ask me where I'm from - I tell them

I am from a country mispronounced into modernity by wandering white men

From big men with small minds who stole the spoils of our struggles

With no shame or foresight

I tell them I come from those who resisted, those whose dreams defied their bullets

Even after their breath was stolen from their bodies

III

When people ask me where it is I'm from - I tell them

I am from a new story about this country, this continent, this world

A new tale told by new authors, unafraid to wield the pen as a small spear

Our ancestors as shield, our history as armor

As we use our words to help write this world anew

From Mwendé Katwiwa's *I Come From*

Cities have their roots in human imagination, brought to life by big dreamers and through orchestrated collaboration. They are a response to a need, a hunger, a yearning. They are intentionally centralised points of connection, exchange, architectural and engineering blueprints birthed into three-dimensional reality by the relentless will and invested labour of many. There is also the 'wild' unknowable and uncontainable emergent realm of cities, where our ways of being, our navigation and complex interactions within this dynamic environment, continuously reshape and often reveal the unimagined, the unplanned (for).

In Marlize Van Der Merwe's potent 2014 article entitled *Africa's cities, crying out for re-imagination*², a number of leading urban scholars and visionary practitioners including Edgar Pieterse, Susan Parnell and Sean Fox speak to the need for persistent stereotypes about our cities to be dismissed, for better research to be done and disseminated. It also highlights how rates of city growth and development remain out of sync, perpetuating gross inequalities. This piece ends with a call for cross-sector collaboration including public engagement towards re-imagining the construction and ongoing development of African cities. Considering the momentum at which our cities are collapsing under the burden of the needs of their ever-increasing populations, surely harnessing the inherent and abundant resources of creativity and resilience make the most sense. This ingenuity and will to survive is evident particularly in the most materially impoverished urban settings. There are trained and untrained artists of all forms - poets included - within urban populations struggling to make a living not because they aren't talented or industrious enough. They too are hit by the hardest edge of unjust and undemocratic socio-economic factors and entrenched systems of marginalisation. Would it not be a welcome fresh energy at city "problem-solving tables" to have such passionate and

generative voices and minds present, engaged and paid to contribute to this work of re-imagination and reconstruction? Would such employment initiatives and transdisciplinary approaches not be perfectly aligned with noble aspirations of inclusivity, innovation and sustainability in the most holistic sense? Poetic inquiry as a research methodology, applied poetry in social justice, social cohesion, moral rejuvenation and anti-corruption contexts, poetry in processes of evaluation, commemoration as well as stakeholder consultation, in dynamic community engagement and creative forms of cultural identity affirmation or heritage preservation. All of these ways of tapping into the regenerative resource of poetry are possible, and examples of these exist all over the world, including the African continent. Our indigenous wealth and capacity to manifest the African cities we dream of, is closer than we think. In fact, to re-imagine our cities, it is precisely our thinking that needs this vital reconstruction work.

Now come with me, enter a city infused with multi-purposed poetry. See if it makes sense, whether you can truly sense this possibility:

*Poetry telling our stories, calling for change, conjuring the spirit of dreaming
On billboards, on the faces of buildings voicing a welcoming, a historical testimony
Posing questions on boardroom walls, in engineering and design discussions
Invoked and engraved on sites of remembrance, redress, urban rejuvenation
Poetry on park benches, speaking history or ecology under the old trees
Along the garden paths, off the page and onto the pavement, in script or sound
Connecting minds, heartbeats, breathing beauty into well-weathered streets
Down into the subways, lines like veins infusing buzzing transport stations
A different way of starting or ending a work day, a mental shift, a mood lift
A blend of languages affirming place, belonging, offering light, even humour
Poetry on the bus, matatu, the rickshaw, the train, on the back of the taxi
Giving doses of insight, inspiration to punctuate the traffic, ease the pressure
Poetry as a form of celebration in spaces of reclamation and reconstruction
Positioned in protest or as container for gentrification or greening conversations
Using its tentacles at sensitised boundary expansions, humanising legislation
Serving effective translation, conflict resolution towards authentic transformation
Injecting creative madness into the method, first to leap, embrace the cacophony
Knowing it is the brave opening of a window, emergence through the discomfort
That when the dust settles there is discovery, revelation, hope, a hidden synergy*

Malika Ndlovu

Endnotes

¹ Grand Parade (Cape Town) - [Wikipedia](#)

² 2014 article published in South Africa's Daily Maverick



About the author:

Malika Ndlovu's words and performances feature in various online platforms, on pages and stages across South Africa and globally. Contributing to South African arts, culture and poetry specifically, for over 25 years. This trans-disciplinary artist thrives on collaboration. She has published two plays and five poetry collections, edited and mentored several emerging writers' works, curated numerous multimedia events around and beyond poetry. As an applied arts practitioner consistently promoting healing and grieving well through creative expression, she is a member of the national Arts in Psychosocial Support CoP (community of practice). She features prominently in *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000 - 2018* edited by Makhosazana Xaba (UKZN Press, 2019). Malika's next book *Grief Seed* will be published in early 2022.

About RISE Africa:

RISE Africa is ICLEI Africa's platform for inspiring and fostering new connections that lead to swift and impactful actions for enhanced sustainability and resilience in Africa's urban areas. Exposure to forward-thinking ideas from different disciplines through a range of curated interactions will provide an antidote to outdated "silo" thinking that is well recognised to inhibit innovation. Instead of being another 'talk shop' amongst like-minded individuals, RISE Africa will bring a diversity of city role players together in innovative sessions to identify new opportunities for collaborative action.