

Greetings Mr president



Jo'burg streets are alive with the unemployed underworld. Writer **Gael Reagon** went for a walk through it

On the cusp of the old into the new year I received a mandate from the children and adults living in the Jozi inner city and immediate environs. The equivalent of 3 days 'n nights I walked with a calling and strength from our ancestors. The first time I was sent was on a Wednesday morning @ 2am. I walked from Yeoville to Hillbrow. First stop: a place designed for the car herd - disused during the night it is run by a woman not older than 12 or 13 years. I have as currency in my bag a smidgin of ganja, about 4 rands, toiletpaper, grapevine cards and a pen & koki. Oh, and Alice Walker's 'Living by the Word'.

So here is this group of adolescents. I go in, place my butt in her circle, intro myself. They've already seen me enter, it's at least a 7 m walk to the inner periphery where she and her boyz are blomming (males are mainly older, perhaps up to 17 yrs). They've had

enuff time to scope me and decide on response. I have very little to say beyond introduction. She's burning the tar. A controlled fire. Sy manage die hele ding. My eyes crisscross this fairly huge carpark. Clusters of boys all over. Clearly mutual protection is in action. There's a deference to her as young female providing fire inventively & maintaining her poise in a scenario that screams stereotype: that whole collocation of rape, abuse, mutilation, theft and this and that bullshit.

Sit for a while. Watching. Listening. Occasional interjection. Not liberalistic about the fact that this is a virgin or a victim, on the streets everything is currency, but really it's how you maintain dignity in transaction that matters. They are ok. I give thanks, greet, leave.

Move on. Up towards Pretoria street. Find a group of boys - varying ages - from about 8 to 17. Hectic concentration on a street game of chance. Feel emboldened to engage more directly. Hallo, ek is hier, howzit, are you ok? Can I ask you some stuff? No real answer, just degrees of what kind looks. So, if I were to write a letter to Mr Thabo Mbeki tomorrow, because I'm a writer and have to use my skill, what shall I say you guys say? The littlest of the coons, does a jack-in-the-box. 'We want your poes'. Haikona. What's wrong with you? You're so tiny, you have sexual

feelings, go around the corner and wank. I am your mother, die poes van jou ma. You come from me and in my natural order I don't fuck little boys of eight. Has your environment warped you so much that the only way you can see me is through a sex prism. I can give you love & food and some understanding and that's about it, so let's recheck.

Tatamachance game arrested for a moment, the group heaves in laughing appreciation.

Older, very beautiful eyes, direct gaze, young man says: so you're serious. Like, ja.

In 3 phrases and 11 seconds he sums it up: the churches and the shelters are doing very good work with us. What we need is extras. More food, more blankets, some books and art materials and stuff like that.

...the place where I am squatting id est artists park, the burnt-out house in the cul de sac of Wyndcliff avenue, just beneath the water tower. It is here that I return at 5.30 am after Hillbrow sojourn. Now at this house, there are mainly musicians and Jah people - you occupy a space, you rebuild and make habitable. While I am there, I harangue the whole yard to plant spinach (having gifted them with a pkt of seeds) saying, if you plant now, you have your first crop in Jan/Feb 2006. As in any social organism, human development is

irregular. So that while some yardies are industrious and inventive, some have succumbed to a toxic cocktail of ennui, excessive consumption of African beer and/or hard drugs and hopelessness. The room that I am in has three double-beds, on any given evening there are between 8 and eleven people sleeping. Gooftroep the head honcho, has not only constructed a corrugated iron ceiling, but has established engineering and aesthetic mastery by providing a skylight (an open section where the tin slabs meet) so that you are in constant commune with the rain, thunder, sun and stars; yet never get wet. At the same time, it reduces the horrendous impact of the fly population residing there because of the rubbish heaps that have not been removed. This too becomes a daily battle: I organise refuse removal bags, a spade and hope to get the men on the yard to start cleaning up. In the event this starts slowly, until I lose patience and instruct the children to make art out of the rubbish and install their works in front of the house. Anyway, Gooftroep charges males R10 per night for a bed and a cooked meal. Females pay in kind – cook, do washing, look pretty and sexy, keep the room clean and generally maintain some kind of moral order. Sexual transactions are private.

SO I WALK. This time, DAG 2, the ancestral void moves me to the Mandela bridge. Bare feet. Move over there at high noon. Pulsating car thugs, wie is djy. Towncrier. Ek huil op die brug. Move on, Market Theatre. Arrive. 1st stop, the entrance of the theatre leading to Moyo's. Burn Mphephu. Security. Avoid that punitive stuff successfully. Can avoid that stuff successfully because the market of people outside the Market has already shown them up. Check:

sleek cowhorn earrings and necklaces; check the Ethiopian kings with soft bridal cheesecloth to enclose the strident body of queen; regal bronze children in bas relief for the hearth or the throat; and everywhere, tourists.

From the Market precinct to Yeoville, where I've resided intermittently for eleven years, the last year of that period as fully fledged itinerant of no fixed abode. Now, Mr president, here the young and not-so-young people are very kinky and astute. They live, literally, by their wits and an ironic embrace of the hustle. Nobody cares that you hustle, just do it with some style and a high resolution entertainment gloss. Here, I meet up with the skarrelaars every morning and we write the day's news in whatever form with whatever resources are available. I move with the day's gedagtes which generally find resting and cognition point at the Basement at the end of the day, where the young come to boogie to hardcore local goema drum 'n bass, reggae, ragga and stylish house, hip hop & kwaito. I'm training them to dance when the tanks come. All year, the law enforcers have been instigating unruly behaviour with absurd curfews and raids and shows of force with SWAT teams and laser guns. I had warned the head of the local police that we are too smart to give them an LA riot scenario irrespective of their provocation and the local councillor and JDA disrespect and inaction (and possibly corruption) on the urban renewal programme.

Most of the rest of the hood operates, like the 70% of urban slumdweller across the globe, via an informal economy. What needs to be bought is sold: simple. You can get a plated meal of pap/rice with chicken/beef and a vegetable for R10 – R15. More often than not, that

plate is shared with 2 or three others. The most expensive cooked meal is R20 and that's ok because the Central and West Africans members of the community serve a mean fish plate while the East Africans (Ethiopians and Eritreans) provide a R15 – R20 smorgasbord of delicacies served with their local bread, injeera that can easily fill four stomachs. Beer quarts come between R7 and R8, African beer is anything between 1 rand and 5 rands per skaal while the Zimbabwean imported cigarettes go for 50 cents. If you have a home you can, at the lowest end of the economic spectrum feed 9 people 3 times a day on approximately R20 – that would be tea, bread, pap, chomole or cabbage and a bit of meat/ chicken necks/ kidneys or lungs for the evening meal. Most people factor in fresh fruit and eggs too.

Same principle of local trade operates with clothing, goat & cow smileys, hairdressing, furniture, live chickens, art works, internet cafes, telecommunications and so forth. Here people are taking over abandoned buildings and making them habitable. There's a shebeen in one Yeoville street that had me struck dumb early last year. So packed with families that the foyer to the house had a double-bed that housed 5 schoolgoing children and 2 adults. When I returned now in December; the place had been almost entirely renovated (with additions of outside rooms and toilets) and the inside rooms had been regulated. Spaces that are not rooms are partitioned by curtains and cloths and respect for privacy is maintained. At the same time, everyone resident has one key to the front door. All this instigated by and sustained by the magogos and females of varying ages who make their living brewing and selling

african beer.

So basically Mr president, the second economy is the first economy. In this space and elsewhere in the country. Now, I can not afford easy assessments. But, having returned to my mother city, I find that in Mitchell's Plain, that urban sprawl of perceived dislocation; besides the chemical enquirers and the ones primed as cannon fodder; the laaties are clued-up about the global and local state of play. It's a wired, anti-war, supersmart, anti-excess generation. These young ones - Biko's spawn/ Children of Fanon - are not so much unaware as they are waiting for adults to provide some kind of wise leadership and discernment. Our job really, is to provide moral and philosophical foundations. Be the ultimate semiotician.

Dag 3. Back to the Market Theatre. Day of the launch of 16/365 days of activism against violence against women and children. I take myself away for the afternoon and walk to Hillbrow where I go and give respect to the peeps blomming behind the communal toilets, then off to Harlequin's pub where I spend 2 hours counselling a Yeoville resident whose daughter is dying of cancer as well as writing imperatives artistically, as my central contribution to the messaging for the launch. Return to Market theatre where we start transforming the art workshop space into the launch site. I give 2 pieces of paper to 2 children and ask them to make something. One of the banners we've made proclaims: Cut out Child Abuse. I ask the young boy what he is making - 'a spine' - the young girl is making 'a snake'. I take these two pieces and arrange them like flowers so that the banner reads both as Cut out Child Abuse and as Cut out Abuse. At this stage two of the males (white males) with this

project interject and start ripping it apart. I object. Argument: this messaging is tired. Every adult is complicit in a social contract that breeds greed, violence and poverty. Let us all mea culpa and let us all, male and female and child start instituting a workable alternative.

Walk up Bree street, past the taxi rank, through an alley bordering Home Affairs. Just beyond, I come across rows and rows of blanketed bodies. Go up to our people, greet with handshakes and start talking to everyone row by row. Is this OK. You are not going to lose it, are you. What do you need to sustain. Every single one of the close to 100 people sleeping there, has a smile and a quip. No No, everything is alright. We just need to make more of a living. We survive OK, it's quite fun some times. No, we're not interested in violence, Elections, no we are not going to vote. We just need to make more work and more food.

I am a woman walking alone, so Karel is designated to escort me home. Up from the Windybrow Theatre as you ascend the winding hill into Hillbrow, there is a disused car park. Kom, Karel says, let me show you something. Ek is ook nie lui nie. Down we slither a hill of rubbish. Every single entrance to this place, with the exception of one, is composed of years and years of compacted rubbish. There are people living there. Karel motions me to a corner, which I can see leads to the main road. I follow. Just before the fence is a shitcovered cloth. He throws me onto it, pins me down with his weight. Asks for sex. No. How can I make a rational decision if I cannot breathe. If you force me it's rape. So what are you going to do. You were so cool, walking with me and showing me how our people are surviving and now what do you think I must take

back with me. Think man think. You are a real man, you are oulik, I love sex, but I also want to have a choice about it, you know. Hiatus. He releases me. I get up and shake Karel's hand, thank him, say goodbye and move on.

Mr president, you are president to a nation of nations that is characterised by cool and analytical thinkers. The diaspora stops here. Everywhere is home. The only ones who are excessive are those who already have. Those who don't have, possess remarkable restraint. Do not expect much from this round of municipal elections. As the man at the shebeen under construction says, your government "is in breach of contract". As award-winning filmmaker Xoliswa Sithole says, your and Mr Mugabe's biggest joint failure is "failure to deliver and invest in human capital". People want back-up, the edifice and the walls of the house are being built. You've given us the vote, you've given us a bit of magic space globally to manoeuvre and come up with a workable plan. We are getting there. Drop the falsehood of the 1st econ, take your cue from the remarkable, resilient nations of people who reside here and let's deliver for the world what your compatriot Steven Bantu Biko had prophesied: that Africa's greatest gift to the world yet needs to come and that is to give it a human face. Let's breathe together. Co conspire. Ubuntu is here. Respect and courage gael reagon

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This is an edited version of gael reagon's piece "Greetings Mr president". If you want to read or know more about her work e-mail: gael_reagon@yahoo.com. Although her work is most powerful when read out loud, SA Labour Bulletin believes is also has impact on the written page .