



City of  
**OAKLAND**  
California

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News from: **Economic & Workforce  
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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**City Announces Inaugural Poet Laureate**

*Oakland, CA* – Today, the City of Oakland’s Cultural Affairs Division announced Ms. Ayodele Nzinga has been selected as the inaugural Oakland Poet Laureate. She is a poet, playwright and community advocate. During her two-year term through May 2023, Ms. Nzinga will deliver an inaugural address, partner with the [Oakland Public Library’s Oakland Youth Poet Laureate](#) on a collaborative reading series, deliver four readings at City-owned locations throughout Oakland, and write one poem that commemorates our city.

“As our Poet Laureate, Ayodele will make poetry more accessible across Oakland,” said Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf. “Her decades-long commitment to Oakland’s arts scene will feed the richness of her storytelling as she nurtures creativity in others.”

Ms. Nzinga is author of *SorrowLand Oracle* and *The Horse Eaters*, both books of poetry. She is also the founding producing director of the Lower Bottom Playaz, Inc., a theater company in West Oakland. Ayodele is a founding director of the Black Arts Movement Business District (BAMBD) Community Development Corporation, where she produces BAMBDFEST, an annual international month-long arts and cultural festival celebrating the Black Arts.

“I am absolutely overjoyed at being selected as Oakland’s first poet Laureate,” said Ayodele Nzinga. “I look forward to representing ‘The Town’ and the honor of bringing poetry to the people!”

Nzinga holds an MFA in Writing and Consciousness from the New College of California and a Ph.D. in Transformative Education & Change from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco.

Following a [public call for nominations](#) that ended May 19, a panel of five members of Oakland’s literary community reviewed nominations using the following criteria:

- Understanding of the multiplicity of the aesthetic speeches of the city and consideration of the ways literature, heritage practices, film, arts practices, etc. illuminate how Oaklanders express their poetic souls.
- Command of poetry as a craft.
- Affirmation of a poetic voice that expresses Oakland’s diversity, beauty, and distinctions.
- Community engagement experience and ability to communicate well across a diverse range of communities.
- Understanding of civic narratives around equity, culture, and belonging.

“Whether in the visual performing arts, music or literature, the talents of the Town’s artists are world renowned and deserve recognition and financial support,” said J. K. Fowler, Cultural Affairs Commissioner and Chair of the Poet Laureate

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selection process. “This Cultural Affairs-led program is but one of many ways that we can lift up, recognize, compensate and offer additional platforms to Oakland artists.”

The work of the Oakland Poet Laureate will advance the value of “belonging” as articulated in Oakland’s Cultural Plan, [\*Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan\*](#), the tagline of which is “Equity is the Driving Force, Culture is the Frame, Belonging is the Goal.”

Poetry can help rebirth/reinvigorate, situate ourselves in space and place, and assist us in future casting/visioning for more embodied ways of moving forward, together, in our amazing city.

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***About the Cultural Affairs Division***

The Cultural Affairs Division is housed in the City’s Economic & Workforce Development Department. The division includes the City’s cultural funding program, which provides approximately \$1 million in grants to support the arts in Oakland; the public art program, which has more than \$1 million in funds currently dedicated for public art installations across Oakland and staff working on special events, film production permitting and walking tours.