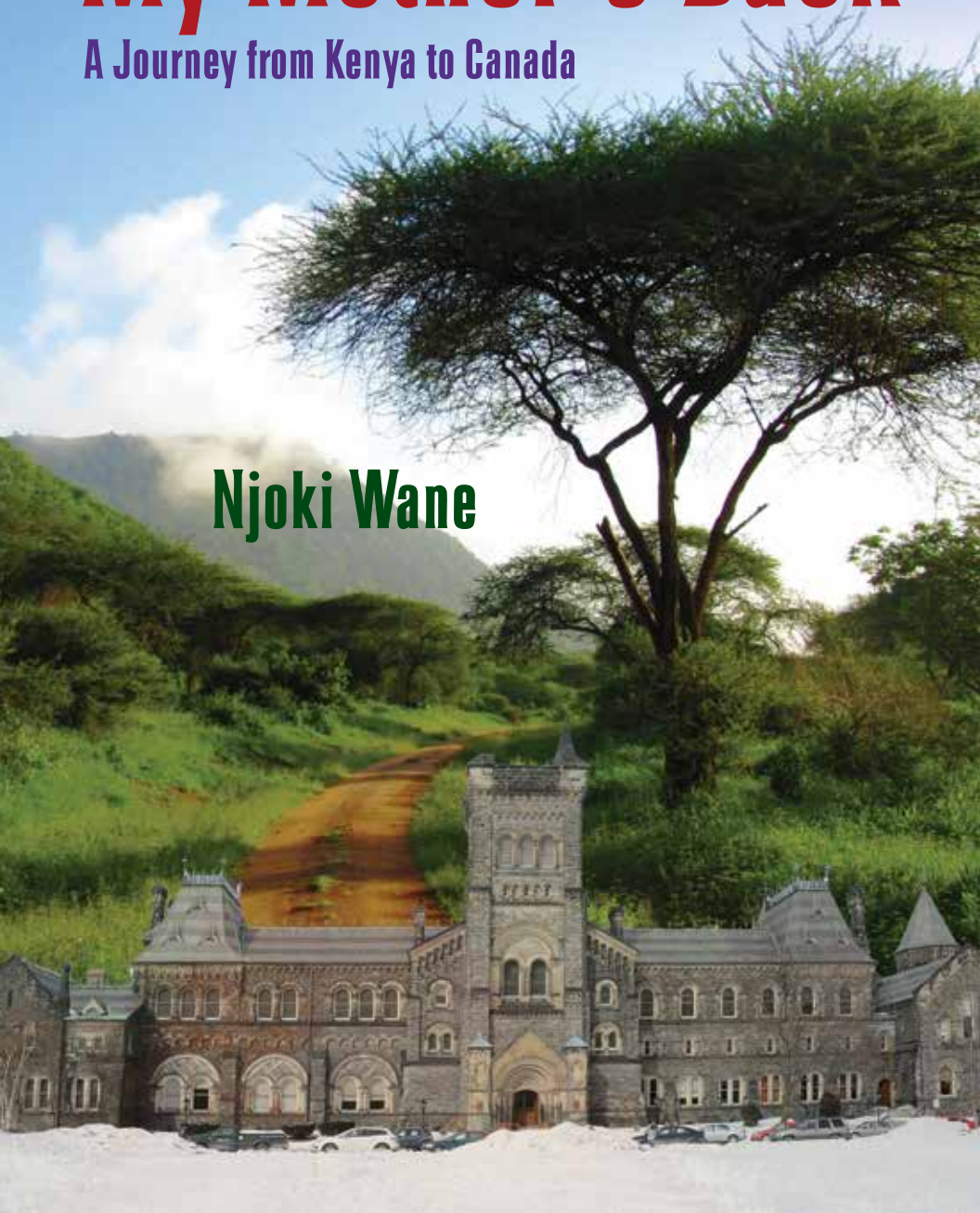


*From*  
**My Mother's Back**

**A Journey from Kenya to Canada**

**Njoki Wane**



# **From My Mother's Back**

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*From*  
**My Mother's Back**  
A Journey from Kenya to Canada

**Njoki Wane**



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Cover and interior design: Marijke Friesen  
Cover images: iStock and Njoki Wane  
Author photograph: Njoki Wane  
Typeset in Caslon Book  
Printed by Ball Media, Brantford, Canada

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Canada Council  
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Conseil des arts  
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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Government of Canada.

Wolsak and Wynn Publishers  
280 James Street North  
Hamilton, ON  
Canada L8R 2L3

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: From my mother's back : a journey from Kenya to Canada / Njoki Wane.

Names: Wane, Njoki Nathani, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana 2018903873x | ISBN 9781928088738 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Wane, Njoki Nathani. | LCSH: Kenyans—Canada—Biography. |

LCSH: College teachers—Canada—Biography. | LCSH: Women immigrants—  
Canada—Biography. | CSH: Black Canadians—Biography.

Classification: LCC FC106.B6 W466 2020 | DDC 971/.004967920092—dc23

*To Mum and Dad; Tony, Francis, Maatha,  
Mike, Henry and Venancio*

*May your souls rest in peace.*



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## FOREWORD

Many African cultures believe that we cannot know a person unless we know their roots and that no one can achieve anything of significance unless they know where “they are coming from” or “where they belong.”

I know few people who are as conscious and proud of their roots as Njoki. In her memoir, she clearly shows that she’s fully aware of her heritage as she fondly recounts her experiences of growing up in rural Embu. As someone who sees her on a daily basis, I have witnessed how this rootedness manifests in her many actions.

Where many Western-educated Africans (not to say Kenyans) seem to relish their “Westernization” and distance themselves from their culture, Njoki has deliberately celebrated her Kenyan and Embu beginnings. One does not have to look far for evidence of this. The fact that a young girl known “officially” as Catherine has chosen to revert to her Kenyan name of Njoki instead of the European name she had to adopt while attending Catholic school speaks volumes.

Some might misinterpret this as a rejection of European culture or norms. However, anyone who knows Njoki will

see this more appropriately as evidence that one can practise what the late Senegalese writer and president Léopold Sédar Senghor advocated: “rootedness and openness.” Njoki shows that one can be at the same time very attached to and respectful of one’s culture while also being open and appreciative of what other cultures offer.

In this memoir Njoki shares with the reader stories about her life in Kenya and Canada. With great humour, she tells of growing up in the countryside, going to boarding school and receiving her first pair of high-heeled shoes. She also shares her life in Canada as a graduate student, then as a university professor at the University of Toronto.

There are many qualities to admire in Njoki. It will be obvious to the reader that she is a person who realizes that she has been blessed with a lot of opportunities in life and who feels it’s important to share with others. Over the years, I have met many of her students who privately have told me of her many acts of kindness that went beyond what they expected of a professor.

Despite all her achievements, Njoki is a humble person who relates equally well to the very highly educated and to the rural folks she celebrates in a lot of her professional writing. I have seen her equally at ease entertaining ministers or socializing with African women farmers.

This ability to navigate between many worlds is part of what makes Njoki’s memoir very entertaining and educational. Readers, irrespective of their backgrounds, will find some stories that bring a smile to their face or make them think of their own histories. Even though Njoki writes as a Kenyan, her stories will resonate with non-Kenyans and

non-Africans as the themes she discusses are universal: family, school, culture. Just as she does in everyday life, Njoki makes space for everyone in her memoirs.

*Amadou Wane*



## INTRODUCTION

It feels like just yesterday that I was a little girl hopping my way to the river to fetch water only to rush back home with an almost empty container because half the water had spilled on me. I can still remember trying to balance a small steel sufuria that my mother or my elder sisters had designated as my container for fetching water from the Ena River.

The container felt special because it was small, just like me, and my mother never used it for cooking. It was always left in the kitchen, on the wooden drying platform made of twigs, ready for me to pick it up and run to the river to fetch water. Everyone in the family knew how fast I could run (unless I was instructed otherwise) and because of that I was always the one sent for errands: buying salt or sugar from the village shops, delivering a pint of milk to my grandmother's house, being sent to the bush to look for firewood. I took great pride in my tasks even when the results weren't quite what had been expected. The only firewood small enough for me to collect was supposed to be used to make tea for my brothers' visitors. They could only laugh when I regularly returned home with a load of twigs that

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were not nearly dry enough to burn and could not be used for weeks, if not months!

Who cares? I thought. As long as I brought home a load of firewood, even if it could not make anybody's fire, I had fulfilled my purpose. I was imaginative and ambitious, always looking to the future and painting my world with images of wonder yet to come. I was quick to point out to my brothers or sisters that it would only be a matter of time before the world changed. That I would just press a button to prepare a cup of tea for them or turn a knob and water would flow – my imagination always carried me away. I always thought of the day when I would never have to go to the river to bring water home or go to the bushes in search of firewood.

Many times I would arrive from the river, soaking wet, and would turn to Mother and say, "Mami! When I am done with school, I will make sure you have piped water right there." I pointed to the centre of the compound. "No more calabashes or big containers on your head or back."

My mother would laugh and say, "You know, Njoki, I believe you. One day you will have water in your own home, not here: far, far from here."

All members of my family knew me as a happy little girl, very playful, full of life and nothing bothered me. I was a joyful child.

Not all my imaginings came to fruition before my mother passed on, but she was able to enjoy cooking with a gas stove and having water piped up to her compound – but not inside her house – before she died. However, she did not live to enjoy a cup of tea produced by a microwave.

Who would have thought that the small girl who used to run to Ena River to fetch water, or go to the bushes to look for firewood, would one day stand in her kitchen far from her kijiji – which means village in Kiswahili – and be pressing buttons for cooking. That she'd press a knob and water would flow, press a button and dishes would be washed.

Probably for many Canadians, my childhood seems far-fetched. It is not for someone who grew up in a small kijiji in rural Kenya. Kijiji for me was that place where everyone knew one another. Where the women assisted each other during childbirth. Where neighbours ploughed and harvested for you when you were not well. Kijiji had a sense of belonging. There was one primary school, one Protestant church, one chief. Later in the book, I talk about our evacuation during the fight for independence. People from the kijiji were forced to leave our homes; however, when independence was declared in 1963, everyone returned.

My own children did not experience my life and nor will their children. The village experience is something you might see in a movie – but that was my reality and I loved it. Today, when I look back, I experience some turmoil. There are some things I would have liked to keep from my rural life in the village, such as organic food, kinship, relationships and the spirit of the kijiji where children grew without fear. I know things like the microwave make life easier for us. However, the health impact is something I think about on a daily basis. I guess those like me who have embraced many aspects of modernity, whether in the West or in other parts of the world experience dissonance as they



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make sense of the complexity in their life caused by what surrounds them.

Not all lessons happen in order. Most come in fits and starts over the course of our lifetime and it is the gift of memory and our willingness to reflect that gives life and value to lessons decades in the making. How often, as an adult, have you looked back to an event in your life and thought, I see. I see now why my elders constantly repeated the same thing over and over again.

I see why they employed proverbs and riddles almost on a daily basis – particularly when there were challenges to be overcome, and especially when certain struggles did not make sense at all. Now, as I look back, I understand how these events have shaped me, made me who I am today, have made me the professor I am at the University of Toronto. When I teach, I usually challenge the students to find something from their far memory. I challenge them to recall stories they were told by their parents or their grandparents or their neighbours.

The essence of these stories is to compare our contemporary times with times from the past. My emphasis here is about one's culture or ethnicity. I find this is a good way to ground students who think they have no culture or that they are just Canadians and have no ethnic background. We are all Indigenous to a place. I say this constantly because we are all from a place; we do not have to have visited that place, but that place is carved in us. To some extent, we do connect with some of those stories from our past – and some stories are very traumatizing, while others, students remember them only as they were narrated or

passed down in their family line, generation after generation. I believe sharing these stories (even if they are being told by a fifth generation) is important. They create a connective tissue, something tangible that keeps families, communities and sometimes societies together.

I believe that our most important lessons are the ones we have to wait for. Each of us has struggled, fought and despaired at some point in our lives. We may have faced down a terrifying foe or sat down at the end of the day, utterly defeated and asked ourselves, “Why me? Why do I have to fight this hard? What can I possibly learn from this much pain other than to avoid it at all costs?” Other times, we have looked back and appreciated the many blessings, the abundance in our life – and many times, we do not even think of why we have been so blessed with so much. It does not make sense.

Let me give you an example: Even when I was eight years old, I wanted to be a professor. Do you know how long I waited for that to happen? It was not a straight path. For instance, I waited for almost seven years to join university. Why? Why could I not go from high school to university like all my classmates? Why did my mother die before I graduated? Or, why did I have so much material wealth in my early twenties when I could not make sense of it, while some girls of my age had little to nothing, and then have next to nothing in my thirties? Life is extremely complex and many of us go through it not noticing what is happening. There is too much of the unevenness of abundance.

But for me, as I sit to reflect on my journey, I believe my experiences have been so beautiful, so rich that I would not

have wanted my life to have unfolded differently. I have enjoyed the simple things in life. I have enjoyed grand aspects of life. I also have enjoyed counting pennies because I did not have enough money to feed my Canadian family, and later in life, when I finally got my teaching job, I enjoyed treating them to good dinners and outings. These are the moments that shape us; these are the memories that carve our future from the woodwork of possibility. Struggle and challenge, appreciation and gratitude narrow our focus, define our values and provide us with stillness necessary for grounding. *From My Mother's Back* is a story told through lessons and connections, pairing the present with the past to allow the reader to experience the complete phenomenon of what it means to have a meaningful life full of abundance. I believe the present is a mirror of my past. The struggles made me strong, made me appreciate my parents' teachings. The constant use of proverbs would be a reminder that even the difficult moments will soon pass: *no matter how long the night, dawn will come*. Looking back, I have been blessed with great family members; the good in my life outweighs the challenges.

This story is about real-life events and will explore many issues, including culture, spirituality, education and status, as well as personal drive, family values and the fickle nature of destiny.

Gratitude shapes a person as often as grief and this story is filled with all the necessary ingredients to grow a strong, independent and thoughtful woman or man. You will see mistakes, judgment and selfish pride as often as you see strength, integrity and humility. I encourage you to

react to each story as it comes rather than wait to see what happens next.

So often in life, we are offered only a brief snapshot of an individual's character and we must make decisions based on that single interaction, observation or event. Only with the people we spend most of our time with do we have the luxury of watching an individual grow, struggle and adapt.

And even then, we miss most of what truly makes them who they are: reflection, self-evaluation – a resolution to change when necessary. More often than not, such a process happens in the privacy and sanctity of our own minds, rarely shared and even more rarely dissected in depth.

Each of these chapters has a story to tell. Each one of them narrates a memorable moment or event. Respond to each chapter; judge each person as if you will never meet them again. Only then will you be able to truly connect with the emotional, spiritual and mental minefield that makes a person who they are; what makes me the person I am today.

Remember, it is often a twist of fate whether or not we meet a person on their best day, their worst or in the midst of growth. Some say that people never really change. This could not be more false. People change all the time, on a minute-by-minute or even second-by-second basis, sometimes in such extreme ways that they appear to be completely different people. These changes are not discarded; rather they are experienced, evaluated and adjusted faster than most people can imagine.

Change is part of human instinct. We adapt to every situation as best we can, learning what works, throwing

away what doesn't. As a resident of Canada and a citizen, I have adapted to many things that I would never have imagined. For instance, I do appreciate the four seasons of the year, though I grew up in a climate that was constant and was marked by rainy or dry seasons, or by ploughing, planting, weeding and harvesting seasons. There is beauty when you take in every breath in the surroundings that you consider home even in its impermanence. I talk about this temporary feeling because once a person lives in different continents, it is difficult to completely consider one place more permanent than the other one. When I am in Kenya, I constantly talk about my home in Canada. And, when I am in Canada, I always talk about my home in Kenya. So, where is home for me?

Of course I have also had many encounters in both countries when people would ask me, "When will you go back?" Perhaps think of me as if I was suspended in the air, casting my gaze in both directions, northwest to Canada and southeast to Kenya. Or those times when someone would ask me, "Where are you really from?" This is a very common question in the West especially when you are not of Caucasian background. When I respond with "Pickering," they insist on their interpretation and say, "No – you cannot be. You speak with an accent." If I have some time to engage in a dialogue, I often ask my questioner, "Where are you from yourself?" They answer, of course, Canada. I then respond, "That is good – it's always great to meet an Indigenous person from Turtle Island." And the conversation would shift somehow and my questioner would say – "Oh,

oh – I am not an Aboriginal person. My ancestors came from . . .” and they would name the country.

These conversations are always a reminder to me that I am in transit; I really do not have a permanent home. These are the moments that I feel homesick, that I experience a sense of alienation and dislocation, and feel a lack of belonging. And, at the same time, a sense of gratitude. Gratitude for the opportunity to have my spirit floating in different continents in search of home, in search of beauty, in search of something that has no name, yes something – though I’m not sure what.

Consider, therefore, the lessons in this book and decide for yourself what should be remembered, what should be changed and what should be forgotten.





**Njoki Nathani Wane**, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Toronto, was the Special Advisor on the Status of Women at University of Toronto. Currently, she is the Chair of the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. She was born in Kenya.

Dr. Wane received her education both in Kenya and in North America. From 2009 to 2012, she was the Director of the Office of Teachers Support at OISE (OTSO). OTSO's central focus was to provide ongoing faculty development to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto's faculty and aspiring university graduate students. With a central focus on teaching, OTSO provided workshops, consultations and other professional development opportunities to the OISE community. In 2009, she was one



of the tvo Ontario Nominees for Best Lecturer and in 2008, she received the Harry Jerome Professional Excellence Award. In 2007, she won the African Women Achievement Award. In 2016, she won the President's Teaching Award.

For the last twenty years, she has been researching, writing and teaching in the areas of Black feminisms in Canada and Africa and African Indigenous knowledge, as well as African women and spirituality.



IT WAS A LONG WALK to the market and my feet started to hurt after only part of the way. The hot soil was burning the soles of my bare feet and I looked to my mother, hoping she'd notice and pick me up. At first she didn't and I huffed.

"What are you making all that noise for, Njoki?"

"My feet hurt, Mama. The road is hot and it's burning my feet."

She looked down at me, thinking for a moment before unwrapping a long cloth from her hips. Mother knelt down and I climbed up on her back, staying still while she wrapped the cloth around both of us to keep me from falling off. After she was sure that I was wrapped up tight, she started walking again and the gentle rhythm of her footsteps lulled me to sleep under the hot sun.

In *From My Mother's Back: A Journey from Kenya to Canada*, Njoki Wane introduces us to her mother, a woman of deep wisdom, and to all the richness of a life lived between two countries. A celebrated professor and award-winning teacher, she shares her journey from a Catholic girls' boarding school in rural Kenya to standing in front of a lectern at the University of Toronto. Along the way she reflects on the heritage that was taken from her as a child and the strengths and teachings of the family that pulled her through and helped her to not only succeed as a scholar, but to reclaim her culture, her history and even her name.



ISBN 978-1-928088-73-8



9 781928 088738

\$18.00 CDN/\$16.00 US  
COVER DESIGN: MARIJKE FRIESEN  
COVER IMAGES: ISTOCK  
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