Mona Williams

Tell us a story out of your own mouth

Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui

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In 2023, I dedicate this pānui to my ancestors, the martyrs and survivors of the Demerara Slave Rebellion that began on the 18th August 1823, 200 years ago.

Foreword

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Mālō e lelei. Bula vinaka. Greetings.

Welcome to our Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui. As an organisation, we support writers and all readers (reading lovers, reluctant readers, old and young readers). We value whanaungatanga, which means we are embedded in a web of relationships: with writers, with schools, with whānau, with tamariki, and within our team, to mention but a few. We are often fortunate enough to have a relationship with the writer, or speaker, prior to the Pānui – and to see and hear the impact these writers make during their school visits. This year's Pānui speaker, Mona Williams, has had a profound impact on thousands of tamariki across more than

four decades of school visits. Teachers commonly use words like 'outstanding' and 'spellbound' to describe Mona's storytelling. One teacher recently wrote a page-long description of Mona's visit, saying the following:

> I have never seen this group of students, at this age, so engaged for so long in one spot – ever. Every single child was engaged, including those who normally find being focused a real challenge. The students were absolutely engaged with the materials which Mrs Williams provided. One of my students refused to glue his rabbit into his book because he liked it so much, he wanted to take it home that day.

It is sometimes difficult to truly capture the magic that can happen when a writer visits a school. Mona Williams creates that magic wherever she goes. The description above oscillates between showing the impact of storytelling on every child and the specific impact on a single child. It is rare to be able to share that glimpse into a school visit, which we know can be transformative.

This year, Te Pou Muramura tried to capture this impact beyond anecdotal feedback, using a research organisation to assess our Writers in Schools programme. We found that, like us, the network of authors, illustrators and school staff involved in these visits firmly believe that reading and storytelling make life better. 95 per cent of students said the visit made them want to read the visiting author's work, and 66 per cent said it inspired them to write or illustrate their own.

We know reading has a proven ability to improve social, cultural and economic outcomes for everyone: this is what inspires us to deliver programmes in schools and communities and to advocate for reading in Aotearoa. Despite not being able to deliver the in-person programme for a period due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen a record number of Writers in Schools visits in 2022 and 2023. But this environment brings other challenges. We do not rest on our laurels: we continue to work to reach more schools that have less access to reading and to champion equity for both writers and readers. It is in this post-COVID world that Mona reminds us how reading and stories are a tangible way to improve well-being:

> Stories are an inoculation for listeners. Young people can experience the anxiety, the treachery, cruelty and tragedy of Cinderella safely, surrounded by friends and teachers – confident that lessons can be learnt safely, if not happily. Children steeped in myths, legends, folk tales, fables and family history, can then face adult life with greater confidence, hope and insight instead of with perpetual terror.

This ability of reading to promote resilience appears to be more relevant than ever. Mona's words can be our inoculation, in turn, against pessimistic reading statistics. This passage makes me want to read to my own children, while simultaneously curling up with a book on my own.

The gift of reading and storytelling is so profound that it can be difficult to articulate the many ways in which reading is a taonga. Mona Williams understands this deeply. She has chosen to structure her Pānui around a series of questions that children have asked her, so that we go on a journey from Guyana to Aotearoa, to a recipe of how to begin your own story, to the meaning of truth from a

Norse saga, to what it's like to be a Black woman and an immigrant in Aotearoa – yet the power of story, and of reading, is ever-present in every question and answer posed.

Read NZ Te Pou Muramura is very proud to have journeyed together with Mona for so long. Our organisation is in a new phase: we have a largely new board, a new strategy and an amazing team. Our vision, though, remains the same – and the same as Mona's. This is an organisation that would like to help every child be steeped in the stories of Aotearoa New Zealand, so that they can face life as more resilient, empathetic and hopeful adults. Kia ora, Mona Williams, for bringing so many tamariki this gift.

I finish this foreword with a karakia written by our board member Darryn Joseph.

Karanga ki a Ranginui e tū nei,
Karanga ki a Papatūānuku e takoto nei,
Nei te reo maioha o Te Pou Muramura:
He korakora, he māpurapura i te pō uriuri,
He whakaihiihi, he whakaohooho i te ao mārama!
Tihei mauri ora ki te ao pānui pukapuka!

Call to our ancestor Ranginui,
Call to our ancestor Papatūānuku,
Here is the welcome of Read NZ:
Sparkles and flashes in the dark night,
Stimulating, inspiring in the day's clear light!
Breathe vitality into the world of reading!

Ngā mihi,

Willow Sainsbury
Chair
Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

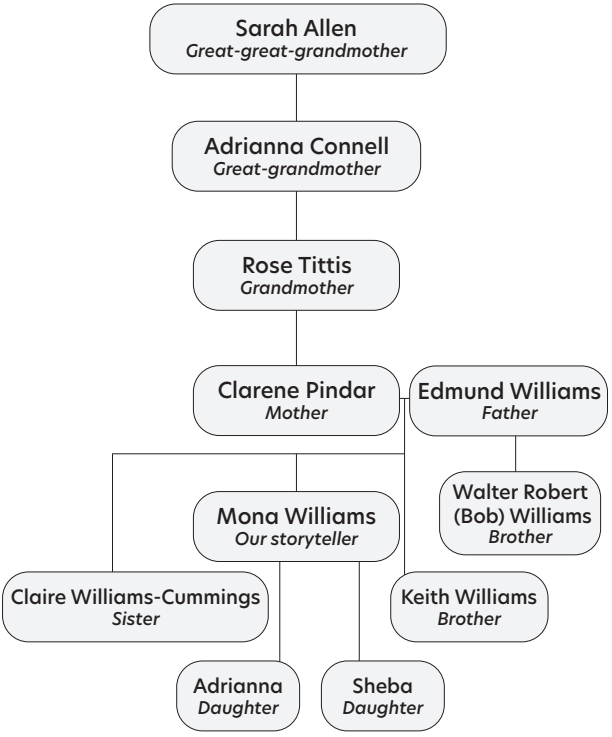
Introduction

Shalom. Thanks to all of you for coming and to Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, our host. My sincere thanks to the scholars, authors, poets, illustrators, storytellers, teachers and administrators in the audience. Thank you to the staff and students of Whitireia and to my family and friends.

I begin with my karakia, a Hebrew prayer blessing this moment, the Shehekianu.

I will observe the protocol of Aotearoa, forged with the history of my Guyanese culture.

My mountain is Roraima, in the Guiana Highlands of the Amazon. My river is the Demerara, which has a devastating history of French, Dutch and British slave plantations that produced sugar, rum and tobacco over hundreds of years.


Sarah Allen
Great-great-grandmother
Adrianna Connell
Great-grandmother
Rose Tittis
Grandmother
Clarene Pindar
Mother
Edmund Williams
Father
Walter Robert (Bob) Williams
Brother
Mona Williams
Our storyteller
Claire Williams-Cummings
Sister
Keith Williams
Brother
Adrianna
Daughter
Sheba
Daughter

My county, also called Demerara, witnessed slave rebellions that resulted in enslaved people being massacred in their hundreds by the British, according to British Guiana's colonial records. These rebellions are remembered among my Black compatriots. 2023 commemorates the 200th anniversary of the most infamous of these, when more than 10,000 enslaved people were slaughtered in Demerara's biggest slave rebellion. This August, the nation received an apology, in person, from a descendant of the Gladstone Family on whose plantation the uprising took place.

My village, Mackenzie, once held the largest known deposit of bauxite in the world. That ore, smelted into aluminium, made Canadian, British and American investors super wealthy for 70 or more years. In contrast, my village today remains spectacularly poor.

My nation is the Co-operative Republic of Guyana (formerly British Guiana, hence why I refer to it in both forms in this Pānui) within the Commonwealth and situated on South America's northern shore.

My family's name is Williams. Not an African name, it attests to the historical fact that African

slaves, sold to slave owners, were branded and then assigned the name of their plantation owners. My ancestors were owned by Welsh members of Britain's plantocracy, the Williams Family.

My mother married my father, Edmund Williams, and bore him three children. They separated when I was two, when my father immigrated to England to help rebuild the 'mother country' after World War II. He lies buried in Guyana.

My mother's family has lived in both the Caribbean and Guyana. My foremothers have been small-business owners in every generation.

My great-great-grandmother, Sarah Allen, a fishmonger from Barbados, immigrated to Guyana in 1880. She was numerate but illiterate (it had been illegal to teach Black people to read or write). Yet Sarah Allen built and owned her own home by selling fish shrewdly for 40 years. Her daughter was my great-grandmother, Adrianna.

Adrianna Connell was literate, a successful laundress and a skilled 'bush' midwife. If any of the mothers or babies she attended had died, Adrianna could have been jailed for life. More defiantly, Adrianna was a secret farmer in our Amazon jungle. She avoided paying the colonial government a land tax by sly-farming Crown land to feed our family.

Sarah Allen and Adrianna Connell lie buried in Demerara County, Guyana.

Adrianna Connell's eldest child was my grandmother, Rose Tittis. Rose prized her Standard Six education. She owned and ran a thriving bakery, importing wheat flour from Canada. When I was ten, I realised that Rose owned a two-storeyed home, five rental properties, a quarter mile of land and what a back garden! It had avocado, mango and papaya trees, coconut palms, a banana sucker, taro plants, chickens and vines. Before selling up, my grandmother was a community leader.

Her husband, Caesar Nelson, my step-grandfather, was the highly respected chief pharmacist of Mackenzie Hospital.

My mum, Clarene Pindar, was Rose's only child. Rose bore Mum to a Panamanian merchant marine. Mum was brought up as a rich, spoiled, only child. She became a primary school teacher, working with Deaf children and children with disabilities for 20 years. In 1967, Mum won a Fulbright Scholarship to study in America and a Commonwealth Scholarship to study in England. She accepted both.

After experiencing these wealthier worlds, Mum chose to immigrate to America in the 1980s and

trained first as a pediatric nurse, then switched to geriatric nursing, her final career.

My grandmother Rose, the baker; my mother Clarene, the nurse; and my only sister, Claire, a nursing administrator, all immigrated to America and are buried in Washington, D.C.

I have two brothers. Walter Robert (Bob) Williams, my older brother, was my 'brother by another mother'. He lived in Britain and was given the honour of being a member of the Royal Society, an honour awarded to Sir Edmund Hillary and Dr David Livingstone. That is a whole other story. Bob's pride rested in having built Saudi Arabia's fourth airfield, a military airfield. He died early this April in England.

My mother's eldest child was my sister, Claire Williams-Cummings. Claire immigrated to America in the 1970s, gained her nursing degree, and married but had no children. Buried in D.C., she shares a grave with Mum.

I am the second born.

My little brother, Keith Williams, was the family's pride and joy as the only male member of the female-ruled family. Keith immigrated to America in 1967. After graduating from university, he has worked disbursing federal funds to social welfare

offices in Eastern Washington State and Alaska. Keith lives with his family near Seattle.

Finally, I am Mona Williams, a very proud descendant of slavery survivors and a fifth-generation South American. I am the mother of two daughters and nana to seven mokopuna. In my early 20s in Guyana, I won a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship, and at university, a Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship. I graduated from Stanford University in California in 1970 and proceeded to work at and perform as a storyteller in San Francisco, on KQED TV Channel 9. At Stanford University, I met and married a fellow foreign student, a Kiwi, then immigrated to New Zealand in 1971. Since my arrival, I have been at different times a primary and secondary school teacher, writer, storyteller, a teacher of Caribbean dance, a Massey University lecturer, a singer of Hebrew liturgy in my synagogue, a Jewish feminist, a citizen and an international educator. I am also the recipient of a rare personal apology from the NZ Government atoning for 51 years of destructive, racist treatment.

Tell us a story out of your own mouth

To read, to tell stories, is to think, that is, to attempt to make sense of our world.

'Do you know that you are all storytellers?' is a remark that prompts disbelief. Some are storywriters. Every nation tells stories. From the beginning of time, humans have attempted to give structure and coherence to our jumbled life experiences by telling stories. Myths explain phenomena 'beyond our ken'. Sagas teach us of life cycles extending across four or more generations. Folk tales enlighten us with the profound wisdom of seemingly simple folk. Selected details help us to decide who we are, who others are, what is right for us, what is

unethical, what are cherished insights, who our heroes are, who were destructive to our ancestors and what sort of person we should strive to be. *Damus petimus que vicissim*, we give and receive in turn, was the motto of the nation of my birth, the former British Guiana. The British colonial rulers presented trade as a 'fair give-and-take'. In contrast, I saw how this former slave colony had imported African people as chattels and, over the centuries, exported volumes of sugar, tobacco, cotton and rum. In the 20th century, they also ripped out and shipped out bauxite, timber, gold and rice. Yet our nation remains poor. We received a pittance for the resources exported and bought British manufactured goods at inflated prices, thus plundering the money we had earned. In deals to satisfy Britain's trade arrangements, we imported ridiculous goods like Norwegian salted codfish, despite Guyana bordering the abundant Caribbean Sea. I regard nothing received from Britain as a gift. Our education system, roads, hospitals, civil service and ports existed to facilitate Britain's colonial exploitation.

However, who could have foreseen that, living in Aotearoa, I would support the work of the New Zealand Book Council, its name in former years,

by promoting reading, writing and storytelling in schools and communities for decades? How could I have known that in so doing I would be healed of the brutalisation endured as a Black citizen in the white-ruled colony of my birth? Welcomed as a Writer in Schools, I was accorded dignity and respect from audiences, even before I began storytelling performances or readings. Such was the prestige attached to visiting schools under the auspices of the Book Council. I offered and received from audiences the deepest acknowledgement of our common humanity.

Mind you, Guyanese life differed so spectacularly from my high school texts like *The Wind in the Willows,* I accepted that I would understand only some of the story. I sometimes explained to schoolchildren that I found it impossible to understand Pākehā thinking or ways of life only by reading about it. Living as a Kiwi, that is, knitting cardigans, eating roasted mutton, bringing 'a plate' to a party, singing 'Taumarunui (On the Main Trunk Line)', meeting Hirini Melbourne, Witi Ihimaera and Joy Cowley, and walking the Milford track, these were the key.

In order for you to appreciate the influence and patronage of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura on my

life, allow me to share my experiences of becoming a writer and subsequently entering schools as a storyteller and a Writer in Schools. Children often asked:

'*Mrs Williams, how did you become a writer in New Zealand?*'

An editor of the *School Journal*, the late Jane Thompson, was an acquaintance. I confided to her that I had written a letter to my white mother-in-law, sharing how differently Guyanese people celebrate Christmas, having experienced Christmas in San Francisco and now in New Zealand. My mother-in-law had been particularly hostile about the marriage of her son to me, a Black woman. I had hoped to correspond with her on any subject that was pleasant, in order to build a positive relationship. Her outraged response to my letter disclosed a misunderstanding; she had interpreted it as 'putting down' New Zealand traditions. She had ascribed to it a hidden agenda.

Deeply distressed, I asked Jane to read a carbon copy of the letter I had sent. Fascinated by the details and finding nothing disrespectful, Jane praised the letter. In her role as an editor, she suggested that

I rewrite it as an article. Then she accepted and submitted the text to the *School Journal*. I felt impelled to write more. From 1972, I poured out autobiographical stories and Guyanese folk tales. Jane advised me to send to Guyana for pictures and other details to improve my writing. I rewrote stories many times, which were published in the Journals. The pride I felt from being read by Kiwi schoolchildren overwhelmed me.

'*Do you copy how other people write?*' they ask.

'Just the way that you read a story and afterwards begin to write, I too have learned to write,' I suggest encouragingly. Even from the age of eight, I constructed sentences that mimicked a book I had just read. I longed to begin a story with a historical date after reading Charles Kingsley's novel *Westward Ho!* His novel told the adventures of buccaneers in the Caribbean during the Elizabethan Age. I began my composition:

'It was in the year 1880 when I sailed in a sloop from Barbados in the West Indies to British Guiana, in South America. I took only my three children, five shilling coins hidden in my shoes and my sharp brain of a fish seller.'

In fact, I had not made up any of that introduction. My great-great-grandmother, Sarah Allen of Barbados, had sailed from the Caribbean to British Guiana in 1880 on a sloop and had no more than few shillings, but possessed the business skills of a fine fishmonger. My family's story incensed my headmaster. In the mid-1950s, I was attending his small, one-room, country school, and he was training me to sit a national scholarship exam. He hated cheating. He bellowed that I had copied. I had and had not copied. I felt utterly ashamed in front all of the other children. This discouraged me from writing until well into high school, but I told myself stories I should have written. Both artistic disciplines bloomed in my thirties, when I began to visit New Zealand schools to read my Journal stories and was encouraged to tell them too. I urged children to read voraciously and to copy styles and literary devices that enthralled them. They enquired:

'*Mrs Williams, did you find it hard to be a writer?*'

Yes. Making time was difficult, as I was raising children. But it was not difficult to write about childhood memories. The pay was miniscule at $14 per 1000 words in the 1970s, but the satisfaction

of having my stories read in New Zealand schools was immense. Children responded wholeheartedly to my own hilarious tales of stealing jam (which turned out to be burning chilli pepper sauce) or risking my life by swimming across a wide river with a bauxite ore tanker sailing straight towards me. Seeing themselves in my stories, children realised that they too had similar stories, to share orally or to write. They realised that they are writers, should they wish to be. Another frequent question was:

'*Mrs Williams, are your stories true?*'

My writing and telling reflected the difficulties of my childhood. Readers in the 1970s and '80s were usually incredulous and aghast that my being caned savagely in school for misspelling *wool* was absolutely true. It heartened me to see them reject corporal punishment in schools, even before the New Zealand government passed that law. On the other hand, they could be diffident when considering the ethics of punishing a child. For instance, when I was about six, I embarrassed my mum. Mummy had told a white lie; I had spoken up and told the truth, but that shamed her. I knew I was in for a whipping.

Surprisingly, a *School Journal* editor in the 1970s, Brian Birchall, confided that he had faced strenuous opposition to printing my story *You Really Saw My Father?* It explored a child's conflict (mine), in wishing to know more about her estranged father in England without antagonising her mother, the abandoned parent in Guyana. My story, it appears, was the first to reflect a 'broken home', a taboo subject in the *School Journal* and New Zealand society at that time. Children avoided discussing living with a solo mum for fear of losing status. I often seized the opportunity to address the topic obliquely. Stories of war heroes, like the tunnellers at Arras in World War I, enthralled the audience. I would mention that, sadly, some soldiers fell in foreign lands. Their wives became war widows on a pension, and those women held their families together and raised the children. So while appreciating the sacrifice of our fallen ANZACs, we also admired the fortitude of their capable wives. In many of our nation's homes, the heads of households were single or 'solo' mums because of the many wars from 1860 to 1945. Despite this history, modern separated or divorced mums in the 1970s and '80s were despised as feminists.

Children from single-parent homes, irrespective

of the reason, felt affirmed after hearing the 'blood and thunder' of the Gallipoli and El Alamein stories, when they realised that war widows had equally admirable stories, but no one was telling them. I reassured children confidentially, when on playground duty as a teacher. Years later as adults, some listeners mentioned that they had felt less ashamed after reading my memory of my parents' separation. I had used the *School Journal* to assist children to define their identity a decade before embarking on the Book Council's school visits.

A perennial question is:

'*Mrs Williams, how can I write the story to make it more interesting?*'

'Begin by writing about what you know. Add what you see, hear and think.' That would lead to telling my story *The Bicycle*, where a pivotal detail is withheld until the final, surprising sentence – that 'sting in the tail' technique. Such an ending disrupts the understanding of the story and forces the reader to reassess the narrative from the beginning.

We would read Tessa Duder's *Alex*, paying attention to the details of Alex's interior turmoil and her insight into championship swimming. Or

Joy Cowley's *Bow Down Shadrach* to pinpoint the hilarious details which delineated each character.

Children were encouraged to begin with autobiographical tales because, I assured them, these narratives require mainly the ability to remember what had happened to them. Audiences appeared astounded that they possessed an archive of autobiographical tales more numerous than all the books they would ever read. I would begin:

'Do you have a "hospital" story? Was it to farewell Grandpa? Was it to see the new baby? Were you hurt, ill or crying with a broken limb? How about a "pet" story? What did you like best about your pet? Remember your "journey" story? Did you travel by train, bus, air, car, bike or on foot? Who or what did you see? Have you met a sports star? Have you been blamed for something you had not done? Is there a "water" story about when you almost drowned? Did you ever throw a volcanic temper tantrum? Can you remember a birthday you enjoyed? How did it feel going to the murder house (the school's dental nurse)? Have you enjoyed spending pocket money?

'If you wanted to embellish your story with details, it could become realistic fiction with a few additions, like the realistic stories in the *School*

Journal or *See Ya, Simon* by David Hill. Was the day warm-summer-sunny, blustery, fogged-in, or freezing-winter-rainy? What were Mum's exact angry words? What were you wearing from head to toe? Were you frightened and hungry, exhausted and thirsty, or excited and bursting for a pee?'

Teachers later sent me notes to recount how children read, told and wrote avidly, comparing their stories with other stories they discovered in the Journals.

'*That Norse saga, Mrs Williams, is it a true story?*' a girl asked.

'Could *Elfwyn's Saga* be true?' I countered. 'Could a blind girl have saved her entire clan who all had good eyesight? Do the people in folk tales behave like people you know? Are some people kind while others are cruel? Are some folk hard-working while others wish riches by magic? Are some traders wise and others foolish? Are some rulers greedy while others are generous? Stories tell truths about the ways in which humans behave, even when the stories are folk or fairy tales. You can decide if there are any truths in that saga.'

Stories are an inoculation for listeners. Young

people can experience the anxiety, treachery, cruelty and tragedy of Cinderella safely, surrounded by friends and teachers – confident that lessons can be learned safely, if not happily. Children steeped in myths, legends, folk tales, fables and family history can then face adult life with greater confidence, hope and insight instead of with perpetual terror.

'*Mrs Williams, can you tell us a story out of your own mouth?*'

That child's request proved transformative. Oral literature in performance became my preferred medium.

In about 1976, I independently visited Wellington primary schools to read my Journal stories. Children's responses to my reading were 'ho-hum'. The instant I switched to dramatic storytelling of the written version, their engagement sparked into electrified participation. My relating the 'trickster tale' of a Kiwi farm boy on a remote sheep station stealing Christmas chocolates encouraged the class to recount exploits of their stealing sweets, cake, soft drinks and ice cream.

In addition, my tale of a foolhardy swim across our wide Demerara River or of almost being bitten

by a well-camouflaged venomous snake – these hit the mark. Children fell over themselves relating the moments when they were nearly bowled over by speeding cars at road crossings. They empathised with my anguish when I 'threw a tantrum' at feeling like *The outsider* in my family. Many shared their outrage that 'XXX is Mum's favourite child and gets away with murder, but I'm yelled at!'

Discussing Kiwi Christmas celebrations in the 1970s, they told of lamb roast, pavlova and presents. I mentioned adults drinking rum and eating black cake in Guyana. They spoke of beach picnics and were fascinated to imagine our nights of street-dancing behind live steel bands and singing carols on the steps of St. George's Cathedral. When I related my story of outwitting a man who tried to steal my bicycle, the children matched with stories of 'putting one' over an adversary.

'*Mrs Williams, what was the hardest thing for you about writing?*' children enquire.

The challenge. I had to write in a language – English – which was quite different from the Creolese which I spoke at home. But I like challenges. The ways of thinking are far different, so I had to hop between

two ways of viewing the world; a Black way and a white way.

The answer I will give now is for you, my adult audience of listeners or readers. Writing in English evoked contradictory emotions. The process was in part creative, yet it was heart-piercingly destructive, because in English culture the colour black is used mostly negatively; for despair, depression, death, evil, disease, filth, treachery, the black witch, superstition, the black-attired villain in plays or in ballets; for ignorance, injustice, slavery, backwardness, coarse conduct; for many things like blackmail, black looks, being a blaggard, going over to the dark side and film noir.

I am Black and proud of it. I wrote a seemingly childlike story of 500 words about my brother pushing silver foil far up his nose when he was a toddler. He found it impossible to blow it out. Deemed a medical problem by the community, mum felt obliged to obey the British colonial authorities who had outlawed our Black citizens' healing practices. Mum took him to the white-run hospital. Surgery was planned for removing the foil but this was over our mother's heated objection. However, on the morning of the surgery, an old, Black female friend sprinkled black pepper under

his nose. He sneezed out the paper. The surgery was rendered unnecessary.

My memory of that incident was saturated with anti-British vitriol. I remembered how every aspect of our Black lives was denigrated by the colonial powers; our non-white religion, hospital treatment, education, business participation, ability to vote, holding professional jobs, promotions, political leadership, pensions, securing bank loans or publishing books telling our history from our perspective. Defiance was punishable by imprisonment or hanging. Thus, until I found that my writer's voice had been drained of venom and had morphed into a healthy expression of my thoughts, enough to earn my story a space in the *School Journal*, I resisted writing. Reading was equally difficult because I had to block my emotions or I would develop self-hatred. Yet I wished to understand the humanity of those writers with different skin hues, cultures, opinions, symbolism and philosophies.

When facing a predominantly white audience it was instantly clear that most of the teachers and children were stumped by initially needing to make sense of a Black person. Helping them to be comfortable with and knowledgeable about Blackness took precedence over beginning a story,

or little that I might have said would have registered. Few school audiences understood that Africa consists of more than 50 quite different countries; that Black former slave colonies had been separated from Africa, sometimes for more than a century; and that Black individuals in Europe, Britain, the Caribbean and the three Americas had contributed enormously to modern civilisations.

I observe looks of surprise when I explain that traffic lights, in their present form, are the invention of African American Garrett Morgan. I tell secondary school students of Black Nobel Prize winners in Peace like Kofi Annan and in Literature like Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison. I regale them with stories of inventors like Dr Charles Drew, 'the father of blood banks', whose method of storing and transporting blood plasma made possible blood banks, improved complex operations like caesarean sections and heart transplants, whose methods were adopted by the American Red Cross and whose methods have saved millions of lives since World War II. I tell of Otis, the Black engineer who made elevators safe, and of George Washington Carver, the Black American agricultural scientist who invented 300 uses for the pig food called goober beans. Today

the beans are named peanuts. What of the Black American president, Barack Obama? Similarly, who knew of Benjamin Banneker, the Black American whose drawing laid out America's capital city, Washington, D.C.?

Listeners knew nothing of an African university and library at Timbuktu, in Mali, at the time that Britain had its Middle Ages, nor did they know of Clarice Phelps, the first African American nuclear chemist, who contributed a synthetic element to the periodic table. Fortunately, they knew of Michael Jordan, Serena Williams, Michael Jackson, Pelé, Will Smith, Mohammad Ali, billionaire Oprah Winfrey and civil rights activist Dr Martin Luther King. And rap music.

By exchanging stories with audiences, I earned my place of belonging in New Zealand society. Storytelling performances convey debates no less complex than those expressed in written texts. They demanded rigorous analysis, emotional authenticity, intellectual complexity, beauty and joy. With oratory, stories are more accessible than squiggles on the page. While a published story is permanently set in its vocabulary, storytelling comes to life differently with each performance: in the length of the dramatic pauses or in the volume

of responsive laughter; in the changes in the teller's tones, the characters' singing, the choreography, the energy of the delivery, even the mistakes. I have performed my most popular story, *The Black Rugby Shorts*, over 200 times but never twice in the same manner.

In the 1980s, children spoke of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, of *Alice in Wonderland* or of Pamela Allen but more of Margaret Mahy, Joy Cowley, Maurice Gee, Elsie Locke, Gavin Bishop, Tessa Duder and Lynley Dodd. When reading *The Hobbit* gave way to the excitement of *The Whale Rider*, I knew children had turned a reading corner. Then Keri Hulme burst onto the scene by winning the Booker Prize with *the bone people*, and Lauris Edmond won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. I witnessed the expansion of libraries' summer programmes, book festivals, and film versions of original adolescent novels like Tessa Duder's *Alex* and Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* and Joy Cowley's *The Silent One*. Teaching in intermediate school in 1979, and at high school from 1981 to 1986, my classes enjoyed the privilege of New Zealand Book Council visits by Hone Tuwhare. They appeared star-struck when he discussed 'Rain' and *No Ordinary Sun*. Remembering Hone's impact, in

the 1990s, at Palmerston North Teachers' College (later known as Palmerston North College of Education), I persuaded the principal to fund the children's novelist William Taylor. The following year the poet Vivienne Joseph became the writer-in-residence. The teacher trainees' greater enthusiasm for stimulating writing and reading in the classroom justified that experiment.

When asked by audiences to discuss the books that influenced my childhood, I hid from children the fact that during slavery, which 'ended' in 1834, and in the early years after emancipation, teaching Black people to read, even to read the Bible, was illegal. The white plantocracy theorised that slaves would justify rebellions if they read of the Exodus and of G-d freeing Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. Or that slaves would revolt against the normalised, everyday rapes of children and of using the strongest slave men to breed the strongest slave women, exactly like animals. Whipping slaves with more than 40 lashes and disregarding days of rest were forbidden in the Bible; moreover, slaves might read of G-d's punishment of Miriam for objecting to the skin colour of Moses' wife.

Further, the Anglican Church, to please the slave owners, produced the severely truncated Slave

Bible, a literary monstrosity, which had eliminated every single reference to liberation and redemption. The plantation owners made it impossible for Black people to acquire an unedited version of the King James Bible. Ominously, an act suppressing native religions made it illegal for slaves and, later, their emancipated descendants to practice any religion other than Christianity. I attended an Anglican Girls' high school for seven years yet hid from everyone that my family was Jewish. My family prized learning, reading and memorising G-d's Book, which held our five-thousand-year history. We spoke carefully in retelling horror stories of Guyanese rebellions, hangings, torture and fearfully practiced silent survival under British rule. These were not things to tell Pākehā Kiwis who disbelieved that the British were brutal rulers of their Empire (on which the sun never set), as many other imperial rulers had been.

Instead, I told audiences of reading everything I got my hands on; newspapers, Wonder Woman comics, Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, the *British Girls' Annual* about upper-crust girls riding horses that had to be pulled out of an English bog. I understood little of stories set in countries and cultures of which I knew nothing. I read

our family's treasured Bible in the 1950s–1960s. My great-grandmother, Adrianna, the illegal farmer and ostensible washerwoman, loved my reading and histrionic English accent, which I had acquired at my elitist British high school for girls. Adrianna insisted that I memorise Psalm 91, the Ten Commandments and Ecclesiastes Chapter 12. I imagined myself as the Bible's heroine, Deborah, the prophetess and army general of Israel. I was intrigued by King David dancing ecstatically before the Ark and by Samuel hearing G-d calling to him in his sleep. I knew pride and devastation, hearing dangerously anti-British, secret stories of our Demerara slave rebellions of 1823. That massacre of hundreds of slaves haunted me. Ten leaders were tortured, hanged and beheaded, and had their heads mounted on spikes as a warning. Tales of other slave uprisings singed my soul. For the success of my international storytelling career from the 1980s onward, I read and memorised Norse legends of snow, clan rivalry, rune writing and sailing in long boats. Irish heroic tales of Finn McCool, or of Switzerland's William Tell, also touched me deeply.

As my New Zealand storytelling reputation grew, so did the invitations to perform in

Australia, Scotland, England, Holland, Israel, Norfolk Island, Tasmania, Irian Jaya, Canada, the Solomon Islands and other countries. Invitations arrived from the Red Cross, yacht clubs, Auckland Teachers' Training College, the TAFE in Canberra, the A&P fairs in Waipukurau, and kindergarten conferences. Only then did it dawn on me that I was being treated consistently as an honoured guest at every venue. This had evolved unobtrusively because I had been operating under the auspices of the New Zealand Book Council. Its imprimatur guaranteed that I would receive the dignity my people had hoped for, from the day I was born in the Black section of Mackenzie Hospital. Who could have foreseen that in giving storytelling, I would receive a profound sense of identity and purpose in my adopted homeland? As a descendant of slavery survivors, words prove inadequate in thanking the New Zealand Book Council, now Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, for this priceless gift of living with dignity in my Black skin. Wonderful memories, piled as high and mountainous as our Kawarau range, surface:

'*Mrs Williams, what do you think of New Zealand?*'

'I'll tell you, but how much time have you got?'

'*Mrs Williams, tell us a story out of your own mouth.*'

From the moment of that schoolgirl's invitation, storytelling and reading have danced together.

For the joy of community, the gift of diversity and the vision of harmony, I give thanks.

Acknowledgements

Mona Williams

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We thank Mona Williams for a journey of over forty years together and for a brave, evocative and generous pānui: a story told out of her own mouth.

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