So, when my parents came from Nigeria about 19 years ago, they decided that for all the children, they are going to have Nigerian names. And by they, I mean my dad because, you see, my mom wanted to give me a chance at life and give me an English name. But no, my dad was all like in his accent, “You must have a typical Igbo Nigerian name.”

And so, since the beginning of my life, I have had a long, long name that people joke is a sentence. And, throughout the beginning of early education, a lot of times, whenever my teachers would try to pronounce my full name, they would look at it and they would say, “mmm.”

And I would always look at them, “Oh, that’s not how you pronounce it but ok.” And a lot of time they wouldn’t get it until June and by that time I’m just like, “I’m not gonna see you again in September so ok.”

I remember one time in Kindergarten I saw my report card. There’s this little category where it says whether or not you talk and pronounce their name correctly and I got a “needs improvement.” So, from the way they pronounce my name to the way my parents pronounce my name was very, very different, which is why I am sort of in this cultural rift. I was born in America but I have lineage in Nigeria. So, whenever I’m in America, I’m Nigerian or African while in Nigeria I am American, I’m just black. So, it was a really hard time for me to identify with either one. So, in middle school—beginning of sixth grade—I decided that I am not African. I am just American. I am black. That is all I am. I had like three different aliases, three different names: Victoria, Veronica, Vanessa. I was in love with the letter “V” for some reason. And everyone just called me either Victoria or Veronica. And I’m like, “Hey, what’s up, how you doing?” Nobody would call me by my name. When teachers tried to say it, I was like, “Oh, no, that’s not my name. My name is Victoria, and that’s what you call me.”

And that worked out for a little bit until one day in Latin class. Let me give you a little rundown on Latin Class. There are more students registered in the class than there are seats in the classroom. So, if you aren’t there on time, you do not get a seat. You either sit on the dirty floor or you stand up. And it’s hot, sticky, there’s no AC, it’s just like really uck. And one day, there was this boy who just decided, “Hey, I’m just gonna violate all the Africans today.” He was saying, “You African booty scratchers, go back to your country.” He was saying, “You African booty scratchers, go back to your country.” And he did that African click thing, which I really don’t understand why people still do that, like there are more cultures. And he continued doing it and nobody said anything: no student, no teacher said anything. He wasn’t violating me of course ’cause I already said I’m not African. I don’t have anybody whose from Nigeria or anything.

After a certain amount of time, I don’t know what was going on in my head. But suddenly, I was standing up. And I was saying—I don’t know what impels me to say this but I got up and I said, “Don’t violate my people!” But I didn’t mean to say that; I was trying to hide it.

And it was that moment—everyone looked at me—and it was that moment I knew I messed up so badly because it was just like, “Oh, she’s not—she’s African. Where’s she from? Let’s find her name!” They found my name and completely butchered it. And, you know, it’s very hard for me to be able to
accept—for me at the time to accept—that I am from Africa. And even, from my own parents, they would say I am American. They wouldn’t really say I am from Nigeria.

It was until one day in summer school my teacher, who was Ghanian, came up to me and said, “You know, you’re not American. You’re actually from Nigeria. You have a beautiful culture. You have a beautiful name. Accept it and love who you are.” And I heard him and it was actually the first time I really heard somebody from the same continent as me telling me, “You are from where I am from.” And though I heard him, I didn’t want to hear him.

And it wasn’t until 9th grade, again. That the same idea came about and... It was 9th grade, same situation, different boy, same African jokes, but this time—before anybody could interfere—I stood up and I looked at him and said the same words again, “Don’t violate my people.” It was that moment that I knew I was strong. That I am powerful. That I am able to say my name and be able to accept who I am. And though it’s a little bit of a struggle at times, like I still have a hard time saying it. And you guys, you don’t have to get it tonight, it’s ok. But the first step to accepting my true culture is saying my name. Here it goes: My full name is Mmachi Dimoriaku. Thank you.