

EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOUR

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

SHE SAID MY NAME RIGHT

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My name is Aisha. It's a Muslim name that means *alive* and *she who lives*, but growing up I used to want a white name. Something pretty and obviously feminine. Something easy to spell and could be found on tacky souvenirs. Something that just rolled off the tongue like common knowledge. Something like Ashley.

When I was in kindergarten, my friends asked me if I had an “English” name. At the age of five, I could barely write my own name, let alone any other name, so I was confused but intrigued as to what they meant. I was always shocked when my astute five-year-old friends could spell out what were considered to be difficult names like Vanessa and Katherine on our group sheet but, the marker was always handed to me so I could write mine out because my name was “just too hard” for them. My curiosity got the best of me and after ruminating over this lingering question, I decided to ask my teacher to elaborate. Looking back, her response was less than comforting as she justified my peers’ question by stating that my name was unusual. Unusual is what you would call a child who likes to fling their snot across the room, not a child wanting their name and their presence to be validated. Using the word “unusual,” was a way for my teacher to manipulate my confusion so that she and my peers would be comfortable with their actions. Her words left me feeling like the unreasonable one, the one who was at fault, the pariah. The word “unusual” meant advocacy to her. It meant alienation to me. I decided to call myself Ashley for a week and suddenly everyone felt comfortable calling upon me. Suddenly I wasn’t labeled as “unusual” simply because of my name. My mom even entertained the idea since she saw how happy it made me. That week, it felt like I was wearing a mask that didn’t fit perfectly, but everyone, even me, insisted it worked. Acting in a role that didn’t really belong to me, like I was borrowing this persona on stolen time. But for once, I was popular because people could say my new name; people would talk to me without hesitating, pick me by calling out my name, and even invite me to join them in group field games. The biggest flaw with this facade was that it was exhausting to keep up. The lingering question of who Ashley to Aisha was, and vice versa, kept me up. I kept the name for only one week. It just wasn’t me.

From grades one to six, there was a girl named Alicia in my class. While Alicia was a lovely girl, I hated how similar our names were and, by the luck of the draw, she was always in my class. As we progressed through the grades, I had become conditioned to responding to anything that sounded like my name. It was a learned response after having teachers, staring me down, waiting for an answer from me despite calling her name, not mine. My ears were constantly on alert, perking up whenever a variant of my name was called in class because that at least meant that somebody was paying attention to me. I was always ready to jump in, in case the teacher meant to call on me instead of Alicia. For once, I didn't have to fight to be noticed or worry that I had been forgotten. During the occasional year when Alicia and I didn't share a classroom, it would be days before the teacher would interact with me. Often, they didn't use my name or call upon me, and, as time progressed, my name seemed to feel too foreign on their lips; in their shame I was never the first to be picked. I told myself I had to work harder and smarter to be the best, to prove that I belonged and was worth listening to, worth being picked. Brilliance in my mind meant belonging. So, I poured myself into my academics, hoping to earn my place, just as my parents had when they immigrated. I'd learn the math rules ahead of time and even read the chapters we would read in class the night before, so I'd be prepared to have something to say if I was fortunate enough to get picked. If it wasn't my lucky day, I could at least be ahead of the curve and volunteer myself to be a helper. However, there were always enough hands being raised and plenty of willing helpers. Striving to be acknowledged and yet constantly being stifled by the people who determine your worth, people who are willing to ignore you because they feel uncomfortable calling your name, is toxic. Elementary school me, who would shoot her hand up at every chance, practically begging to be picked, didn't know better. For years I thought I was a nobody in the classroom, just a name on the attendance sheet, nothing more, but oftentimes, not even that.

As the only multiracial girl in my grade, with no ethnic clique to cling to, being cast aside by my teacher felt like being sentenced to exile. How could my friends see me as I truly was if my teachers didn't take the time to? As I grew older, it came to my attention that I wasn't Black, Brown or Chinese enough to truly fit in with my peers who found a sense of camaraderie in their groups. I craved to be included, to be seen by these minority groups who, in my eyes, should accept me. Groups who should want to claim me as one of their own. On paper, we faced nearly identical struggles and yet, I struggled harder because I bore them alone. I was the odd one out because I couldn't speak the languages that they would whisper to each other on the playground. Nobody wanted to taste my stinky spiced lunches when thermoses were passed around, no matter how many times I insisted they would like it. What I had to offer in the places where I was different wasn't enough. I was just a little too diverse or a little not enough. If I didn't truly belong in any friendship circle and I didn't belong in the classroom, where did I fit in? As a result, being ignored was the ultimate fear. Forsaking my identity to combat being left on the sidelines was a risk I was always willing to make, regardless of the harm and confusion that would inevitably catch up to me.

The panic that crosses a teacher's face when they stumble upon my name on the attendance sheet on the first day of school is a sight I'll never forget. If you've never been privy to this experience, let me walk you through it. First, their face scrunches as they do a casual

glance over your name. Then, they bite their lip as they mentally try to phonetically piece sounds together that “sound right”. My favourite part is when they say, “oh I’m going to butcher this,” and then proceed to slaughter my name with the most cacophonous pronunciation that, mind you, sounds nothing like how it’s supposed to. And then, there’s the pregnant pause where it’s expected that you laugh at their feeble attempts and correct them with a smile plastered on your face. Sometimes, you might offer a funny joke or mnemonic device to help guide their fumbling tongue, but a name isn’t something that should be reduced to a joke. Occasionally a teacher will reassure themselves by saying “oh I was close” or “give me a bit of time to get used to it.” Nobody’s first interaction with anyone, especially their educator, should be anything like this, yet me and many of my peers have frequently been victims of this phenomenon. These are words that still echo in my head when I step into a new classroom and haunt me when I introduce myself to somebody new. While you might condone their efforts and perceive this action as trying, a step in the right direction, you haven’t had your name butchered enough and I am equally happy for and jealous of you.

As I grew older, I’d memorize where my name would be in the attendance sheet so that I could interrupt the teacher before they could utter my name. I had become too tired of being framed as the “Other,” too jaded to entertain their ignorance, too tired of pretending to be anything but who I was. For a while, I used to hold teachers accountable for being the ones to educate the class on diversity; however, I now realize that the onus is on the student to learn as well. It’s ironic how the students, teachers and professors who claimed that they were *allies* and “meant no harm” were the ones who consistently altered your name to suit a Western vocabulary. No amount of correction could cure the ignorance and microaggressions that persisted over the terms and semesters. Gradually, I ignored these harmful signs and let the frustration fester and consume me. What was the point of speaking out if these individuals, who were here to support me, always fell flat? These feelings only amplified in my undergraduate years, where school was less personal. In a sea of a thousand names and faces, I always had to reintroduce myself to my professors and make a joke about my name before we could discuss what I initially came to them for. Unfortunately, jokes can be the most harmful coping tool of all. The only professor of colour I had prior to attending my Bachelors of Education program was nicknamed the N-word due to its “similarity” to his given name. I don’t know if he’s blissfully unaware or chooses to overlook this derogatory jab, but to this day I don’t know how to act or respond to this. A political science professor, who preaches justice and equality, being reduced to a slur. How do I unpack this moment knowing that these experiences could be part of my future as an educator knowing the potential of my education and abilities could easily be overshadowed by the origin and ethnicity of my name? I untrained myself to stop making jokes about my name that semester.

This cloud of negativity followed me to Teacher Education, until I reached my second class on the first day in my cohort. In the midst of introductions, my teacher said my name correctly. My Muslim name rolled off her tongue effortlessly, and all that pent-up anger and anxiety dissipated. She then proceeded to state to all of my peers that it was important to learn the names of our students because not only is it respectful, but we also need to make our spaces feel inclusive and our Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOCs) peers feel seen. While I

was listening to this empowering speech, all that was racing through my mind was “she said my name right” over and over again. After all this time, my rage felt justified but now became a burden that I no longer wanted to carry. Soon after, my colleagues and friends learned to say my name and would apologize and correct themselves when they got it wrong. Despite professors, who mind you are well established teachers, insisting that my name was something else, I now had friends who would step in and step up for me, to call them out on their ignorance. I had allies. And yes, in the grand scheme of things, being able to say my name is not revolutionary nor is it the cure all for systemic racism in education, but it means something to me. It’s a start. It makes me know what it feels like to have people who will rally and fight the fight I had given up on a long time ago.

Sometimes I wonder what difference it would have made if I were called Ashley. Who would that girl be? Would she be more confident than me? Would she have felt more seen? Would she have a better sense of self? But as my mind begins to indulge in these fantasies, I realize that I’m just undoing all the healing I’ve accomplished. I’m learning to be comfortable in my own skin. Learning to be proud of who I am and what I have accomplished without needing to don a mask to feel like I belong. Learning to love my name. My name is Aisha, not Alicia, not Elisha, not Alyssa, nor all the other variants uncultured mouths can justify. It’s not Ashley, no matter how many times I wished it was when I was younger. My name is Aisha. It’s an Arabic word that means *alive* or *she who lives*.

It’s five letters, and frankly not hard to say. My name is Aisha.

Get it fucking right.