



Who You Are is Always Enough

By Brian Lauritzen

“I was prepared for the criticism. I’d be lying to say it didn’t hurt at all. I’m Japanese — I stand up and bow when I answer the phone. But that criticism did give me extra motivation.”

The words of then 21-year-old Ariana Miyamoto, speaking with *Agence France Presse* in 2015 shortly after being crowned Miss Universe Japan. The reason for the criticism: in Japan, Ariana Miyamoto is known as *hāfu*, which is a Japanese language term used to refer to an individual born to one ethnic Japanese and one non-Japanese parent.

Miyamoto’s 2015 win sparked intense controversy throughout Japan about what it means to be Japanese. Many expressed the opinion that because her mother was Japanese and her father was African-American, she wasn’t Japanese enough to have won the Miss Universe Japan pageant.

Growing up in Nagasaki, Miyamoto recalls being the only multiracial student in her school. “Whenever the teacher told us to hold hands,” she said, “other children thought my black skin would rub off on them, so they said, ‘Don’t touch me.’” Other classmates would call Miyamoto names, using a Japanese racial slur which translates to the most offensive English equivalent.

The *hāfu* experience in Japan has been documented in great detail. *hāfu* individuals are well-represented in Japanese media. More than 20,000

multiracial children are born in Japan every year — nearly 1 in 30 babies in Japan are born to interracial couples. The 2013 documentary *Hāfu: The Mixed Race Experience in Japan* chronicles the stories of five *hāfu* individuals. The current No. 1 ranked women’s tennis player in the world is Naomi Osaka, born to a Haitian father and a Japanese mother. Despite being the reigning Australian and U.S. Open champion, Osaka faces the same kinds of prejudices today as Miyamoto did when she won Miss Universe Japan four years ago.

(M)iyamoto is Black Enough appears in performance at The Wallis under the auspices of National Sawdust — a Brooklyn-based music venue (located in an actual former sawdust warehouse/factory) and creative laboratory for new transgenre music experimentation. National Sawdust is in residence at The Wallis for multiple nights on two different occasions this season — these performances this month and later in May when the *Forward Music Project* visits.

(M)iyamoto is Black Enough is both a large-scale musical work and the name of the band that performs it. The band consists of composer and steel drummer Andy Akiho, cellist Jeffrey Ziegler (formerly of the Kronos

Quartet), drummer (and DJ and producer) Sean Dixon, and vocalist/poet/performance artist Roger Bonair-Agard. Collectively, *(M)iyamoto is Black Enough* tackles the issues surrounding Ariana Miyamoto’s story and the life experience of *hāfu* individuals by zooming out and presenting a searing, no-holds-barred societal critique that is even more universal. *(M)iyamoto is Black Enough* has been called “a revolution” which “speaks truth to power on subjects ranging on colonialism and slavery, police brutality, gentrification, gun violence, and being black in America.”

This is a performance that does not allow the audience to just sit back and listen. This is a performance which demands action from the audience. Roger Bonair-Agard’s poetry defiantly challenges apathy from all angles and, in an anthemic final exhortation, comes the command to “Begin again. Be alive. Be Black. Burn. Build.”

(M)iyamoto is Black Enough is, therefore, an answer to the racist question of whether Ariana Miyamoto was “Japanese enough” to have won the Miss Universe Pageant. When it comes to questions of identity, the answer, of course, is: who you are is always enough.

Join Brian Lauritzen and other guest moderators for free pre-concert conversations in the Bram Goldsmith Theater with the artists prior to select classical music performances, along with a complimentary glass of wine provided by The Henry Wine Group.