Interview with Serii Hattori
By Katie Cunningham
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Serii Hattori (20) lives in Seattle, Washington, and attends Seattle Central Community College. Her mother is black, and her father is Japanese.

How would you describe yourself? When people ask, “What are you?” what do you say?

Serii: My initial reaction to this question of “What am I?” is—I’m human. Asking me “What am I?” makes it sound like I am from another planet or another species. But to answer the question of “What are you?,” I would say that I am Serii. I love to laugh and make other people laugh, I don’t have much of a filter when I talk about things, I have a passion for my family and makeup, and I am a huge video game nerd. Oh, and did I mention that I am half Japanese and half black?

Are there any things that you find particularly difficult about being multiracial?

Serii: Growing up, the most difficult thing I dealt with was feeling like I had to prove to others who I was. My mother is black, and my father is Japanese. Both my brother and I look more Asian than we do black, so no one would believe that our mother was—well, our mother. I was constantly questioning, “Why don’t people believe me? Why is it so hard for people to see that I am what I say I am?” I struggled a lot as a child, constantly having to prove to people that I was black and that I wasn’t lying, and I was angry for a very long time. It took me a very long time to realize that even though I know that I am black, from an outside perspective I don’t look like I am. It was that realization that made me better understand people’s reactions to what my ethnicity is and to not be so angry. I know who I am, and there is no need for me to persuade anyone. Yet, it still makes me wonder why knowing what “I am” is so important to people.
Are there any things that you find particularly exciting or invigorating or rewarding about being multiracial?

Serii: I would like to think that being multiracial has allowed me to be more open-minded with trying new things—whether it may be foods, cultures, music, arts, etc.—and not judge people off of appearances. I take pleasure and interest in finding out about as many different cultures as I can and experiencing what each culture has to offer.

I also find being multiracial rewarding in the aspect of experiencing two different cultures at once, and it makes me happy to see two people who come from different backgrounds and races come together to create a family. I think it’s beautiful to see them going past the racial barriers and stereotypes to make a family that represents unity and love.

Do you feel like being multiracial changes the ways that you relate to your communities and your parents’ communities? Does being multiracial ever make you feel like you are out of place?

Serii: I never really felt truly recognized in the African-American community. I grew up, for the majority of my life, raised around the Japanese community. So I felt more comfortable within the Japanese community. However, there have been times when I felt out of place. You could almost say I felt “too black” when it came to being around the Asian community, and when I was around the African-American community I felt “too Asian.” It is a battle to find a happy medium where I am comfortable and at peace within both communities.

What is your family story?

Serii: My grandparents on my Japanese side were both born in the United States but were raised in Japan. My grandfather, Gigi, was born in Toppenish, Washington, and my grandmother, Grandma Betty, was born in Douglas, Alaska. Gigi was raised in Okayama, Japan, and Grandma Betty was raised in Kobe, Japan. They met after moving back to Seattle, Washington, where my father and uncle were born.

My grandparents on my black side were also both born in the U.S. My grandfather, Papa, was born in Monroe, Louisiana, and my grandmother, Nana, was born in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. They both moved to Seattle, Washington, where my mother and uncle were born. My mom and dad met in high school and started dating their junior
year. My grandfather, Gigi, did not approve of my mother because she was black, and it wasn’t until my brother was a year and a half (eleven years later) that my grandfather finally accepted my mother. I couldn’t imagine my grandfather being like that because by the time I was born everyone was happy, and there were no quarrels.

Tell me about your family traditions. How are all of your cultures represented (or not represented) in your traditions? Are there any ways that your traditions “blend” or change to adapt to your family?

Serii: My family doesn’t really have any specific tradition that we do. For the most part we spend holidays with my mother’s side. I’m not very close to my father’s side and so every Christmas and Thanksgiving we would go to Nana and Papa’s house. We did, however, have a tradition of going to Gigi’s house on New Year’s Day. He would always buy a huge platter of sushi and make this mochi/kamaboko soup. I’m sure it has a name, but I don’t know what it is.

What do you want people to know about those who are multiracial?

Serii: I want people to know—both multiracial and non-multiracial—that we are all human, and it shouldn’t matter what we are. I think people like to categorize and label others to make them feel better or comfortable, and when it comes to being multiracial I don’t like being labelled or feeling like I have to be put into a category. I identify with whatever and whomever I feel embodies who I am. I identify with both my Japanese and black side. I identify with all human beings. I identify with me.

You know, growing up multiracial really does open up your eyes to things you thought you might not experience. I have people come up to me talking about Asian or black people, not realizing that I am both, making some kind of discriminating or inappropriate remark. It astounds me especially when they talk about Asian people, because I look and am Asian. I think people need to take discretion when making any type of remark about any race/ethnicity.