"What Are You?": Addressing Racial Ambiguity

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Addressing Racial Ambiguity

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Abstract
"What are you?" This question, whether explicitly raised by another or implied in his gaze, is one with which many persons perceived to be racially ambiguous struggle. This article centers on encounters with this question. Its aim is twofold: first, to describe the phenomenology of a particular type of racializing encounter, one in which one of the parties is perceived to be racially ambiguous; second, to investigate how these often alienating encounters can be better negotiated. In the course of this investigation, this article examines the addressee's point of view and consider possible responses to the other's question. In addition, it discusses the addresser's perspective, both to probe the curiosity underlying the "What are you?" question and to explore alternatives to it. By describing the phenomenology of these encounters, this article hopes to show that racial ambiguity, as distinct from mixed-race, is a category of lived experience that calls for deeper philosophical scrutiny.

Keywords: racial ambiguity, racial identity, phenomenology of race, mixed-race

"What are you?" The question doesn't surprise me. I see the other looking at me, trying to decipher my racial features. I fully understand the meaning of the question. Yet, I struggle with my response. "What do you mean, 'What are you?'?!" "I am a human." "Are you asking me about my racial background?" "I'm mixed." The possible responses rattle in my head. None satisfy me. I am torn between challenging the question and simply acquiescing.

This article centers on the dreaded "What are you?" question, whether explicitly raised by another, or implied in his gaze. Why does the "What are you?" question strike a nerve? What exactly is wrong with it? Are there are alternatives to it? My aim in this article is twofold: first, to describe the phenomenology of a particular type racializing encounter, one in which one party is perceived to be racially ambiguous;[1] second, to investigate how these awkward, and often alienating, encounters can be better negotiated.

My article is in three parts. First, I describe the phenomenology of these encounters—at two levels: the visual register, when the "What are you?" question is implied in the other's gaze, and the verbal register, that is, when the question is verbalized. To preview, I argue that the "What are you?" question—either in its explicit or in its implicit form—*objectifies* the person of whom it is asked: it turns her into an object of curiosity. Encounters with the "What are you?" question can also be *alienating*: the racially ambiguous person is asked to speak of herself, but in the same moment she is treated as something foreign. Second, I examine the addressee's or staree's point of view and consider possible responses to the other's question or gaze. Third, I turn to the addresser's or starer's point of view, both to probe the curiosity underlying the "What are you?" question and explore alternatives to it. The second and third parts contribute to understanding how to navigate encounters with the "What are you?" question.

Before I consider these encounters, I should explain why I frame this article as an inquiry into racial ambiguity, rather than mixed-race experience. One could frame this inquiry as one about mixed-race experience since the question is one that mixed-race persons are likely to encounter.[2] And, of course, there is an abundant philosophical literature on the issues of identity mixed-race persons face. One need only think of the works of Naomi Zack, Linda Martín Alcoff, or Tina Fernandes Botts. Conversely, considerable literary and artistic attention has been paid to racial ambiguity. Think, for example, of Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* or of Adrian Piper's essays and visual art. However, the experience of racial ambiguity

itself and the type of racializing encounter I am interested in here, have garnered comparatively little philosophical attention.[3] Therefore, in framing this article about the phenomenology of encounters with those who are perceived to be racially ambiguous, I would like to make the case for focusing on racial ambiguity as a topic of phenomenological inquiry. Not all mixed-race individuals are faced with the "What are you?" question, and there are persons who do not identify as mixed who will face this question.

To set the stage, let me begin by describing one dominant trend in thinking about racializing encounters and racializing seeing. Many philosophers of race working in the phenomenological tradition take their cues from Frantz Fanon's descriptions, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, of the lived experience of Blacks encountering Whites in metropolitan France. What is manifest in Fanon's descriptions is the hostile and stereotyping character of the gaze: the Black man finds himself an "object among other objects" through the White gaze, which is said to "fix" him.[4] Likewise, later appropriations of Fanon's work focus on these features. This is evident, for example, in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, where George Yancy portrays the reductive character of the White gaze; speaking of his experience as a Black man, he says, "I feel that in their eyes I am this indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a rapist, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal incapable of delayed gratification."[5] Or consider Alia Al-Saji's discussion of racializing seeing in "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing." One of the main ideas in Al-Saji's article is that racializing seeing is essentializing: our perception of others is saturated with stereotypes.[6] But what can be said of racializing perception when the visual object confounds us, when we are not sure what we see?

In the next few pages, I would like to unpack the nature of racializing seeing when it is confronted with racially ambiguous individuals and to motivate an expansion of the concepts that are typically used to describe racializing seeing. To accomplish this, I will draw primarily on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look*. Garland-Thomson's book offers a typology of modes of looking at others, with a special focus on our ways of looking at persons with physical disabilities.[7] Nonetheless, there is rich material to plumb in our effort to understand racializing seeing. In this regard, my work builds on Helen Ngo's *The Habits of Racism*, which also draws on Garland-Thomson's *Staring* in an effort to describe

the racializing gaze. Following Garland-Thomson, Ngo distinguishes between three types of staring: 1) "domination staring," which is prominent in Fanon's descriptions; 2) "ocular evasiveness," that is, the visual avoidance of another person;[8] and 3) "baroque staring," which is often motivated by curiosity.[9] Ngo explores the distinction between domination staring and ocular evasiveness to underscore the different forms racializing vision takes. She also notes that ocular evasiveness and baroque staring resemble each other in that both "articulate an attempt to navigate encounters with non-normative bodies."[10] I am in complete agreement with her on these points. However, since she does not examine baroque staring in the context of race at any length, there is a difference in emphasis between her argument and mine. Therefore, without further delay, I propose that we delve into *Staring*.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on Garland-Thomson's distinction between domination staring and baroque staring. On the one hand, "domination staring" refers to "[t]he kind of staring that 'fixes' a person in gender, race, disability, class, or sexuality systems" in "an attempt to control the other."[11] As I have intimated, such staring is present in Fanon's descriptions, in which Blacks are described as locked in the "suffocating reification" of the White gaze.[12] The Black man, Fanon says, is "fixed" in the presence of Whites, in the same way as "you fix a preparation with a dye."[13] Domination staring is also evident in Al-Saji's example of the hateful stare a French schoolteacher embodies when a veiled student enters her classroom.[14] Al-Saji characterizes the schoolteacher as affected with a visceral repulsion in the face of the schoolgirl.

On the other hand, "baroque staring" refers to the way we stare when confronted with an unusual object: the gaze is startled and lingers in its effort to absorb the novel into the familiar. As Garland-Thomson puts it, "The urgent question, 'What is that?' stirs baroque starers."[15] She details the scenes that can provoke baroque staring: unusual faces, such as those of burn victims, the absence of hands or limbs, or unusual bodily dimensions or shapes. We might call the staring at stake in this article "baroque staring": we stare at a racially ambiguous person because her appearance defies our everyday racial categories.

If we include "baroque staring" in the vocabulary we use to describe racializing seeing, this allows us to fill in the notion of "racial objectification" that is often used in conjunction with discussions of racialized encounters. What kind of object is the racially ambiguous person? The idea

of "baroque staring" suggests that the racially ambiguous person is not (at least primarily) an object of domination, but an *object of curiosity*.[16] This does not imply that there is no hierarchy between the starer and the staree, for, after all, the comfort with which we stare at the racially ambiguous other seems to stem from a place of power. This observation about the various forms of racial objectification should remind us of other types of objectifying gazes, such as fetishizing ways of looking at women of color. These ways of looking expand the paradigm of (pure) domination staring so prevalent in the Fanonian lineage.

So far, I have examined the visual register. I would now like turn to the verbal register. To this end, I propose that we adopt the concept of *alienation* as a means to conceptualizing the encounter. This is a concept that has garnered some attention in recent years, especially since the publication of Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation* in 2014. Jaeggi's aim in her work is to reconstruct the concept of alienation in a way that avoids the paternalistic trappings of some earlier deployments of the concept. For our purposes, her definition of alienation as a "relation of relationlessness" is of particular interest.[17] By this, she means that alienation consists in a deficient relationship with oneself or one's world. For example, while I might be said to be alienated from my family if my relationship with it breaks down, it does not make sense to say that I am alienated from the inhabitants of a distant planet, since there is no relation with them to begin with. In general, then, alienation characterizes deficiencies in relationships, and not merely the absence of relationships.

The notion of a "relation of relationlessness" is apt to characterize "What are you?" encounters. On the one hand, in addressing the racially ambiguous person, there is an attempt to establish a relationship from one person to another. I want to learn from the person I address: Is she mixed? Where are her parents from? On the other hand, the turn of phrase "*What* are you?" turns the person addressed into a thing. She becomes a *what*—not a *who*. If any communication comes of this question, the person addressed must bypass the implication that she is a thing inherent in the formulation of the question. She must know that the person who addresses her means to inquire about her race or ethnicity. And as I will later impress, the imagined retort "I am a human" attempts to subvert the question: if there is any *what* that I am, being human would fit the bill.

With alienation, Jaeggi asserts, come a sense of being dominated and a sense of disconnectedness.[18] This seems to hold of the encounters at

issue here. First, the way of looking at the other or posing the question at stake here implies an asymmetry between the addresser and the addressee: the speaker is a *who*, whereas the other is a *what*, an object of curiosity.[19] I find myself scrutinized, examined, by the other, not properly addressed. Second, the sense of disconnectedness in these encounters stems from the following tension: I become connected to the questioner when I hear the question as a question about me, whether I respond to it or not, but I am at the same time distanced by its reifying character. These considerations signal a failure of *recognition*: the addresser is so confounded by the other's appearance that he cannot properly recognize her as another *person*.

Indeed, I should elaborate on the form of misrecognition at stake in this essay, so that we can better appreciate its alienating character. To focus this discussion, I would like to contrast two conceptions of recognition: the first is drawn from Axel Honneth's account of recognition in his work *Reification*; the second is Fanon's account of recognition at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*. My point will be to show that Fanon's account makes better sense of the form of misrecognition under consideration.

Although Honneth's stated aim in *Reification* is to offer an account of the phenomenon of *reification*, there are lessons to take from this account concerning the nature of recognition. The heart of Honneth's account of reification is the claim that reification is a "forgetfulness of recognition."[20] He observes that not all "neutralizations of recognition" are "opposed to antecedent recognition."[21] For instance, there are times when a detached, observational approach to others is required for the purposes of problem-solving (the work of a developmental psychologist observing another human might fit the bill). So, rather than merely oppose detached observation and recognition, Honneth proposes that we should oppose reification and the "forgetfulness of recognition," by which he means "the process by which we lose consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition of other persons to an *antecedent stance of empathetic engagement and recognition*."[22] On this reconstruction of the phenomenon of reification, Honneth takes himself to foreground the idea that reification does not amount to the mere elimination of an antecedent recognition, but to a concealment of this recognition. Honneth's interpretation of reification as misrecognition would seem relevant to understanding the encounters at stake in this article. We could interpret these encounters as ones in which

there is a *loss* of recognition vis-à-vis the racially ambiguous person, where there is a *slippage* from the recognition of the other as a person to the perception of the other as curious and worthy of scrutiny. In short, there is a certain "forgetfulness" in our relation to the other. The stance of recognition that I would ordinarily bear to the other is occluded in the moment in which I find myself intrigued by her appearance.

Yet, I worry about Honneth's claim that we bear a stance of "antecedent empathetic engagement and recognition" to all persons. Don't phenomena such as racism, sexism, and homophobia speak to the contrary, namely, that we do not bear a stance of antecedent empathetic recognition toward all persons? Don't struggles for recognition, such as those led by groups oppressed on the basis of their race, gender, or sexual orientation, tell us that we do not necessarily bear an antecedent stance of recognition toward others? To address this worry, I propose that we explore Fanon's account of recognition.

For Fanon, recognition is important to Blacks' fight for freedom. According to him, Blacks neither ask for recognition to simply be bestowed upon them by Whites nor demand to be recognized if that means being subjected to the categories through which Whites view them.[23] Rather, the type of recognition that Blacks might desire is one in which they are recognized in their difference. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asserts that the "black man *knows* there is a difference [between whites and blacks]" and that he "wants" this difference.[24] Moreover, the struggle for recognition requires that Blacks assert themselves in the face of Whites.[25] In fact, in "Exceeding Recognition," Anita Chari disputes the claim that Fanon embraces a "politics of recognition" à la Honneth, according to which subordinated groups primarily desire their identities be recognized by members of dominant groups as part of their liberation.[26] As Chari emphasizes, members of dominant groups typically grant recognition to the subordinated on the basis of identity categories that are not of their own choosing.[27] In short, it is clear from Fanon's account that recognition does not consist in the return to an antecedent empathetic connection; rather, what is at stake is the possibility of a form of social recognition that is founded on the recognition of difference.

In this spirit, I believe that the racially ambiguous person does not desire a form of recognition that would depend on subsuming her appearance under preexisting racial identity categories. An authentic form of recognition would bear witness to her appearance in its very

singularity—against the grain of a certain logic of racial perception, according to which we must all fit under a determinate racial category or small set of categories. As Linda Martín Alcoff observes in her discussion of mixed-race in *Visible Identities*, "[M]any people believe that (a) there exists a fact of the matter about one's racial identity, usually determined by ancestry, and (b) that identity is discernible if one peers long enough at, or observes carefully enough, the person's physical features and practiced mannerisms."[28] Staring at a racially ambiguous person could thus be interpreted as an effort to get the "right answer"; staring is required because a cursory glance is insufficient to determine the other's race, and when staring fails, verbalizing the "What are you?" question comes to be felt as necessary.[29] Accordingly, I think we should construe "What are you?" encounters not as ones in which an antecedent form of recognition is concealed, but as ones in which recognition is only granted if one's appearance conforms to a certain logic of racial seeing. On my view, the reification or objectification at issue does consist not in a mere "forgetfulness of recognition," but in the incapacity to fit the other in the terms of this logic. Conversely, authentically recognizing a racially ambiguous person would consist neither in reconnecting with an antecedent form of empathetic connection (as if such connections were shared equally across all other persons and unmediated by social categories) nor in subsuming her appearance under a racial category. Such an authentic recognition would depend on *forging* an empathetic connection to the other while acknowledging the difference in her appearance.

In discussing the topic of recognition, it is important to note that there is a long tradition, extending as far back as Hegel, of conceiving of recognition as vital to the constitution of the self. Indeed, Hegel declares, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself…only in being acknowledged."[30] Likewise, if we take into account the importance of recognition to the constitution of the self for our inquiry, then we can surmise that "What are you?" encounters pose obstacles to the constitution of the self.[31] This observation finds support in the following descriptions of the lived experience of racially ambiguous persons. In *The Huffington Post*, Andromeda Turre underscores the intrusive and insulting aspects of the "What are you?" question: "The only thing that is more annoying than the question itself is both the frequency—and the freedom and authority—with which people feel they can ask it."[32] She goes on to elaborate that her racial identity has been a vexed issue for her and that being confronted with the "What are

you?" question only adds to the pain she has experienced in grappling with her racial identity:

> For me, my identity has caused a lot of arguments and pain in my life. So I might not want to answer "What are you?" because I might be apprehensive as to how you, a total stranger, are going to judge me and possibly react to the choice of identity that took me years to accept and understand.[33]

On a similar note, in an interview with NPR, Angela Nissel, the author of *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*, says that the "What are you?" question "used to upset me."[34] But, as we will come to, Nissel recovers from these emotional lows and later uses the "What are you?" question to "play with" her interlocutor.

My analysis of the visual and verbal registers suggests that I am an object of curiosity for the person looking at or addressing me. This form of objectification spells alienation: in the moment, I am rendered something other than myself—no longer a person, a *who*, but an object of curiosity, a *what*. But the story need not end here. More can be said if we shift our focus to the encounter as one in which the racially ambiguous person can return the gaze or respond to the "What are you?" question.

To discuss the visual register, I would like to return to Garland-Thomson's work. *Staring* analyzes several ways in which starees can navigate situations in which they find themselves stared at. Some starees simply will stare back;[35] others will turn away;[36] yet others will use their own gaze to redirect the starer's attention away from the bodily feature upon which the stare is focused.[37] While Garland-Thomson has physically disabled starees in mind in this portion of her work, we can apply these findings to the case of racial ambiguity. What might the staree do when confronted with the staring of those perplexed by her racial features? First, there is the option to simply return the stare. But resistance could also take the form of looking away; such an act could signify that the staree does not care about the other's gaze and will not indulge his questioning of her racial background. In addition, the racially ambiguous individual, like the physically disabled person, might consider redirecting the other's gaze to something else besides her physical features. The thrust of Garland-Thomson's discussion of starees' responses is that staring can be a "teachable moment." Referring to the work of David Roche, who has an unusual face, Garland-Thomson

writes, "[His] on-stage performances hasten his starers from the initial grip of his face toward engaged staring by encouraging them to keep staring and then revealing himself as a person like them, a nice guy."[38] Roche's performances help his audience transition from "separated staring," which pits the "normal" person versus the person with "stareable" features, to "engaged staring," where starer and staree meet eye-to-eye.[39] Of course, I should hasten to say that it is not incumbent on the staree to turn the stare into a productive moment, but Garland-Thomson's work invites us to consider how such productive moments might unfold.[40]

To analyze the verbal register, I wish to appeal to the sociologist Jillian Paragg's research on the experience of racially ambiguous individuals living in Western Canada. In "'What Are You?': Mixed Race Responses to the Racial Gaze," Paragg probes the narratives of the mixed-race Canadians, gleaned from interviews with nineteen adults in Edmonton, Alberta. She points out that the narratives racially ambiguous persons craft in response to the "What are you?" question can be sites of agency. Whereas many of the "ready" identity narratives of her interviewees simply refer to the races or national origins of their parents, others choose to challenge the question.[41] One interviewee used humor to deflect probing questions, while another says that she "[has] recently enjoyed dabbling in being really vague."[42] And Angela Nissel, mentioned earlier, adds that while she initially found the "What are you?" question upsetting, she also resists it through avoidance and humor:

> I'd use [the "What are you?" question] as an opportunity to practice my fiction skills. When a businessman with argyle socks asked what I was, I replied, Argylian. I ended up having a long conversation about how unspoiled the Isle of Argyle was, and how there was even undiscovered gold in the rainforest.[43]

In my own experience, depending on my mood, I have also enjoyed such avoidance. Although my father is a White Frenchman and my mother is African-American, I have often simply responded to the "What are you?" question by stating that "my dad's French and my mom's American," thereby foisting the burden of explaining my *racial* features back onto the questioner.

The upshot of this discussion is that the racially ambiguous individual need not conform to the expectation that she will produce a narrative

that isolates and explains the origin of her racial features. Moreover, as the opening of this article suggests, there are other ways to play with the "What are you?" question, such as drawing explicit attention to the fact that the question is at best poorly phrased, at worst demeaning, in its employment of the word "what." The addressee could ask the addresser, "What do you mean 'WHAT are you?'?!" or "Are you asking me about my racial background?" Or she could subversively retort, "I am a human."

I hope to have shown that the encounters at stake in this article can be sites of resistance, where the "What are you?" question can be subverted, or where the gaze of the starer can be returned. But the reader may rightly wonder: How did we get here? Should I ever inquire into another person's race? If so, how should I go about it? The final pages of this article are devoted to the issue of questioning the racial appearance of others. I will begin by discussing the desire that motivates such questioning, before proposing some conditions on asking someone about her race. Last but not least, I will broach the far thornier question of how reframing the "What are you?" question might unfold at the visual register.

Why are we often curious about another's race? In my opinion, what is at issue is not merely a factual matter (Is she Black? Or Middle Eastern? Or mixed?), but a practical question (How should I address her? Is she one of my own? Or not?). Discussions of the phenomenon of passing support the claim that racial ambiguity disrupts norms of engagement. In her classic essay "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Adrian Piper depicts the feeling of familiarity Whites evinced around her when they took her to be White, as well as the sense of betrayal some felt when they learned she was not, in fact, White.[44] Conversely, Piper captures the sense of mistrust some Blacks expressed toward her because of her physical appearance and speech. If we take these insights into account, then we can imagine the practical questions that lurk behind what might seem like benign curiosity. In questioning the other's appearance, I might be taken to satisfy my intellectual curiosity (what racial type to fit the other in), but, really, I resolve practical matters (how to be around this person and what measure of common understanding or solidarity I might claim to have with her).

While I have sought to criticize the "What are you?" question by highlighting its objectifying and alienating character, I have also just suggested that questioning racial appearance can be personally significant for the inquirer insofar as placing someone on the racial map can be a source of kinship and understanding. Given this, I think that it is acceptable in

certain contexts to ask about someone's racial background. The missing ingredient in the "What are you question?" is that the racial identity of the inquirer is not at stake. If we are not to objectify the other in our questioning, we must be willing to be questioned too. Solidarity does not entail abstractly recognizing the personhood of another, but also making oneself open to the other. Thus, to ask about someone's racial identity in a nonalienating manner would require that one first puts one's own experience forward. I say this because such a gesture would collapse the relation of domination between the questioner and the questioned that is typical of inquiries into another's race. I would go so far as to say it is insufficient to simply transform the question into a less offensive form ("What is your racial background?" or "What is your ethnicity?") for it to not objectify the other. Without foregrounding one's own racial identity, these questions are bound to produce a hierarchy between the questioner and the questioned.

Learning to speak to others differently, while it might be no small task, seems a less daunting one than learning how to look at others otherwise, given how deeply entrenched perceptual habits can be. Although the appearance of racially ambiguous persons might destabilize habitual patterns of looking by challenging a certain norm, at least in our culture, of "civil inattention," what remains to be seen is how to move beyond the moment when my gaze lingers.[45] I catch myself staring at the other. What next? Here again I believe that Garland-Thomson's work suggests a response. Appealing to Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Garland-Thomson distinguishes between "bad staring," which posits a difference between self and other, and "good staring," which "reaches out."[46] The difference between such staring turns on the capacity to identify with the other: "If starers can identify with starees enough to jumpstart a sympathetic response . . . staring turns the corner toward the ethical."[47] The crux of the matter, then, resides in how the curious starer can begin to identify with the staree. I do not think that there is an easy answer to this question, and this may be where the staree's agency can come into play. Still, I want to suggest that reeducating the gaze does not necessarily mean returning to our habitual ocular evasiveness but might mean staring at the other in an "engaged" manner.[48]

Others might disagree that it is ever appropriate to ask someone about her racial background and might find any such curiosity inappropriate. For my part, given the salience of race in our culture, I understand the curiosity to fit others into racial categories and am accepting of it when

it first comes from a place of mutual recognition, one where the other recognizes me as another in my very difference. As we have seen, recognizing someone in her difference would mean simultaneously recognizing the other and bearing witness to the differences in her appearance. Not only that, but in asking about another's race we must also be open to being speaking of ourselves. This is a tight rope to walk, but, I hope, not an impossible one.

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NOTES

1. I use "racializing" to describe the gaze or encounters that cast persons as *other* based on their racial features. I do not use the term "racist" to describe the gaze or the encounters at issue here, since this term might suggest that they involve explicit racial dislike or hatred.
2. I should specify that the type of racializing encounter at stake is one likely to occur in a geographical context like the United States, which has a different and less fluid understanding of racial mixing than that of other locales, such as Latin America.
3. One notable exception to this characterization is Piper's autobiographical and philosophical essay "Passing for White, Passing for Black," which I will later discuss.
4. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. R. Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.
5. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 2.
6. Alia Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 136ff.
7. Although I will adopt some of the concepts that Garland-Thomson deploys in her characterization of the gaze, I do not mean to imply that the experiences of racially ambiguous persons resemble those of persons with disabilities, or that racially ambiguous persons encounter staring with the same frequency as persons with disabilities.
8. Among other references, Ngo has Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in mind.

9. Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 144–45.
10. Ibid., 144.
11. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.
12. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89. I should note that the reification portrayed in *Black Skin, White Masks* and the reification of racially ambiguous persons resemble one another. On the one hand, Whites reify Blacks by reducing them to their appearance. So too, when we ask of another "What are you?" we reduce that person to her appearance.
13. Ibid. The dominating character of the gaze is echoed in the speech of Whites that Fanon reports: the chapter on the lived experience of Blacks famously begins with the words "'Dirty nigger! or simply 'Look! A Negro!'" (89).
14. Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation," 134. Note that the student was not wearing a hijab during this encounter because of the prohibition against wearing at her school. Instead, she is wearing a "high-necked sweater" and has "wrapped her hair in a bandana or scarf tied at the back of the neck" (134).
15. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 50.
16. It is worth mentioning a disanalogy between the cases Garland-Thomson has in mind and the example of racial ambiguity. In Garland-Thomson's cases, in the background of our curiosity lies the question of *why* a person has certain bodily features (Why is she missing a limb?) or *how* she copes with it (How does she use utensils?). By contrast, we might stare at a person who appears racially ambiguous, because we want to know *why* she looks a certain way (Is she mixed? What are the races of her biological parents?), but we are unlikely to wonder *how* she navigates the world.
17. Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 1.
18. Ibid., 22–23.
19. Although I have made it clear that I do not conceive of the "What are you?" gaze purely in terms of domination, this does not imply that the racially ambiguous other may not feel dominated by another's inquiry.
20. Axel Honneth, *Reification*, ed. Martin Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., emphasis mine.
23. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 191ff.
24. Ibid., 196.
25. Ibid., 195.
26. Anita Chari, "Exceeding Recognition," *Sartre Studies International* 10, no. 2 (2004): 110–22.
27. Chari, "Exceeding Recognition," 113.
28. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 196.
29. This analysis dovetails with Garland-Thomson's account of staring at physically disabled persons. The gaze is arrested as we grapple with our failure to imagine the full range of human embodiment.

30. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111.
31. In chapter 7 of *Black Skin, White Masks* ("The Black Man and Recognition"), Fanon draws on this Hegelian insight in arguing for the importance of recognition for Blacks. Of course, as we have seen, he is clear that Blacks do not desire to be recognized on White terms. Likewise, Linda Martín Alcoff applies this insight to the case of mixed-race. In *Visible Identities*, she remarks that "[t]he mixed race person has been denied that social recognition of self which Hegel understood as necessarily constitutive of self-consciousness and full self-development." See Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 279.
32. Andromeda Turre, "PSA: 'What Are You?' Is Not an Icebreaker," *Huffington Post*, May 6, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/andromeda-turre/what-are-you-is-not-an-icebreaker_b_4891424.html.
33. Ibid.
34. Angela Nissel, "What Are You? Life as a Bi-racial American," interview with Renee Montagne, NPR, May 10, 2006, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5395390.
35. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 84–86.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 86.
38. Ibid., 117.
39. Ibid., 115ff.
40. Here I should return to Ngo's discussion of the gaze in *The Habits of Racism*, which includes a discussion of the reversibility of the gaze. There Ngo faults Fanon's descriptions of Black experience for relying too heavily on Jean-Paul Sartre's subject-object ontology, and as such, for failing to recognize that the racialized other is never "wholly constituted" by the objectifier's gaze (154) and that there is room to resist the racializing gaze. In light of this criticism, Ngo revisits Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* and uses his concept of reversibility to claim that the reversibility of the gaze in racialized interactions is not merely a possibility, but constitutive of racialized patterns of interaction. While Sartre's account leaves open the possibility that the racialized other turns his or her gaze back at the objectifier, Merleau-Ponty's ontology implies that the racialized other is necessarily called on to respond to this gaze, to negotiate it. Whether Ngo is correct in her interpretation of Sartre and Fanon, I think that she is right to underscore the reversibility of the gaze, which I have illustrated by envisaging various responses to the "What are you?" stare.
41. Jillian Paragg, "'What Are You?': Mixed Race Responses to the Racial Gaze," *Ethnicities* 17, no. 3 (2017): 292.
42. This is from an interview quoted in ibid.
43. Nissel, "What Are You? Life as a Bi-Racial American."

44. Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Essays in Meta-Art 1968–1992* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996).
45. By "civil inattention," I, following Erving Goffman and Garland-Thomson, refer to the norm, in the United States and other societies, of not staring at others in social settings (see Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 34ff).
46. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 186
47. Ibid.
48. Garland-Thomson also develops the notion of "engaged" staring in her discussion of David Roche, mentioned above. See Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 117.