

- ① Summarize the article in a complete 4+
- ② Compare LITE's attitude towards her ethnicity to yours. How similar? How different?

MY TURN

Please Ask Me Who, Not 'What,' I Am

My ethnicity isn't obvious on first glance. But why should it matter to people I've just met?

By JORDAN LITE

I'VE BEEN THINKING A LOT ABOUT that "Seinfeld" episode where Elaine is dating this guy and it's driving her nuts because she doesn't know "what" he is. They ultimately discover that neither is exotic enough for the other and they're so disappointed that they stop seeing each other.

It's the story of my life these days. Each new guy I meet, it seems, is fascinated by my ostensible failure to fall into an obvious racial category. Last year we could opt out of defining ourselves to the Census Bureau, but that option doesn't seem to have carried over into real life. I've lost track of how many flirty men have asked me what I am.

The first time, I was in Iowa and snobbishly dismissed the inquiry as rural provincialism. Then it happened again while I was on a date in San Francisco, a city that prides itself on its enlightenment.

Isn't it rude to ask "what" someone is when you've just met? Common courtesy would suggest so. But many people seem to feel uncomfortable if they can't immediately determine a new person's racial or ethnic background.

Of course, I've mused over "what" a stranger might be. But it's never occurred to me that asking "What are you?" of someone I've just met would elicit anything particularly revealing about him. I ask questions, but not that one.

So when a potential boyfriend asks me "What are you?" I feel like he wants to instantly categorize me. If he'd only let the answer come out naturally, he'd get a much better sense of what I'm about.

Perhaps acknowledging explicitly that race and ethnicity play a role in determining who we are is just being honest. But I'm not sure that such directness is always well intended. After I grouchily retorted "What do you mean, 'What am I?'" to one rather bewildered date, he told me his dad was African-American and his mom Japanese, and that he ruminated all the time over how to reconcile such



I resent being pressed to explain myself, as if telling a prospective date my ethnicity eliminates his need to participate in a real conversation

disparate influences. I realized then that he believed my being "different" would magically confer upon me an understanding of what it was like to be like him.

If you're looking for your soulmate, maybe it's only natural to want a person who has shared your experience. But for some people, "What are you?" is just a line. "You're exotic-looking," a man at a party explained when I asked him why he wanted to know. In retrospect, I think he probably meant his remark as a compliment. As a Hispanic friend pointed out, when all things Latin became the new craze, it's trendy to be exotic. But if someone wants

to get to know me, I wish he would at least pretend it's not because of my looks.

Still, this guy's willingness to discuss my discomfort was eye-opening. He told me that he was part Korean, part white. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, he wasn't the only biracial kid on the block. One could acknowledge race, he said, and still be casual about it.

Although I spent my childhood in a town lauded for its racial diversity, discussing race doesn't often feel easy to me. Maybe my Japanese classmate in the first grade could snack on seaweed without being hassled, but I can readily recall being 11 years old and watching a local TV news report about a pack of white boys who beat, then chased a terrified black teen onto a highway, where he was struck by a car and killed. The violence on TV silenced me. It seemed better not to risk asking questions that might offend.

Years after we graduated from our private high school, one of my good friends told me how out of place she felt as one of the few black students. Her guardedness had kept me from probing; but there's a part of me that wonders if talking with her then about her unease at school would have made me more comfortable now when people ask me about my place in the world.

But as it is, I resent being pressed to explain myself upfront, as if telling a prospective date my ethnicity eliminates his need to participate in a real conversation with me. "What are you?" I am asked, but the background check he's conducting won't show whether we share real interests that would bring us together in a genuine give-and-take.

In a way, I enjoy being unclassifiable. Though there are people who try to peg me to a particular ethnic stereotype, I like to think others take my ambiguous appearance as an opportunity to focus on who I am as a person. So I haven't figured out why being myself should kill any chance of a relationship. Not long ago, a man asked me about my background when we met for a drink.

"Just a Jewish girl from New Jersey," I said truthfully.

I never heard from him again.

LITE recently worked in Ghana as an AIDS educator.