genealogy

MDPI

Article

What Motivates Mixed Heritage People to Assert Their Ancestries?

Miri Song [1,*] and Carolyn Liebler [2]

[1] School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NF, UK
[2] Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA; liebler@umn.edu
* Correspondence: ams@kent.ac.uk

Abstract: Research on mixed heritage people has often focused on their reported race(s) and what these self-reports may reveal about their racial leanings. In the U.S., people are also asked: "What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin?" as a census fill-in-the-blank question. Existing research has analyzed the census data on race and ancestry and has uncovered meanings about ethnicity among White Americans, but little is known about the importance of ancestry in the case of mixed heritage people. In this paper, we draw on our interviews with 68 American-Indian-White, Black-White, and Asian-White mixed heritage people in the U.S. Given that many mixed heritage people's connections with their disparate ancestries can be hindered by generational distance, lack of cultural contact and exposure, and social rejection, what motivates mixed heritage people to report their disparate ancestries, and how do their ancestry claims relate to their racial identities? How may the differential histories and racialization of groups in the U.S. shape mixed heritage people's ability and inclination to assert either their White or minority ancestries? We found that mixed heritage individuals who were motivated to assert their ancestry claims did so for two main reasons: First, by claiming a specific ancestry (or ancestries), participants wished to assert a more individualistic sense of self than was typically allowed, given their racial treatment based upon their racial appearance; this could be especially meaningful if those individuals felt a mismatch between their racial assignment by others and their sense of self. Second, a claim to a specific ancestry was a way for individuals to forge connections with family, relatives, or an ancestry group that had not existed before. Overall, while most of our mixed heritage participants reported details of their European ancestries, it was their Black, American Indian, or Asian ancestries that were deemed to be most salient and/or meaningful to who they were.

Keywords: ancestry; mixed heritage; ethnic options; identity; race; census

Citation: Song, Miri, and Carolyn Liebler. 2022. What Motivates Mixed Heritage People to Assert Their Ancestries? *Genealogy* 6: 61. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6030061

Academic Editor: Dan Rodriguez-Garcia

Received: 23 October 2021
Accepted: 28 June 2022
Published: 5 July 2022

1. Introduction

Identities are complicated and layered. For people of mixed racial heritage, racial and ethnic identity can be experienced and expressed in a great variety of ways. In the U.S., there is now a sizeable amount of data collection about mixed heritage people's race and ancestries, but what do their responses tell us? We ask: What does the reporting of one or more ancestries tell us about their meaning and importance for mixed heritage people, and how is their reported ancestry related to their racial identities and their affiliations with others in contemporary society? Varied social forces encourage some racial and ethnic ancestries to be carried over from one generation to the next, while others are forgotten or disregarded (Hout and Goldstein 1994; Morning and Saperstein 2018; Liebler 2016).

In the U.S., a person's "observed race"—the race that strangers usually assume for them—is typically presumed to be of paramount importance, both in terms of how they identify and how they are treated by others (Roth 2016). Given the fundamental role of race and racial differentiation in the history of the U.S., theorists of race and ethnicity, such

as Cornell and Hartmann (2007), usually conceive of race as an 'assigned' and imposed master status.

A person's ancestry—their lineage from geographic regions around the world from whence people believe their ancestors originated—is theorized as more chosen or asserted, and perhaps as a secondary basis of identification (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Ancestry is often unknown or disregarded by observers. For example, many East Asian Americans are racialized as Asian, regardless of whether they are of Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, or Chinese ancestries (Tuan 1999). The same could be said for the lack of differentiation between a U.S.-born African American and Black Caribbean migrant who identifies with a specific ethnicity, such as Barbadian, Dominican, or Jamaican (Waters 1999). In these cases, we see that observed race can often eclipse ethnicity.

We know very little about what it means for mixed heritage people to report a certain set of ancestries, given that they have a range of ancestries from which to choose (often including White and non-White groups). Studies in disparate societies, such as among the ethnoracially mixed youth in Spain, found that there are real consequences for people whose ancestry is negatively minoritized in the country of residence; such experiences can affect how individuals report their race and ancestries (Rodríguez-García et al. 2021). Alternatively, some mixed heritage people look White to others, which may impede their identification with a minority ancestry (Song 2017; Campion 2019; Pilgrim 2021).

For two decades, respondents to the U.S. census have been able to mark multiple race categories. Most sociological studies of "the multiracial population" have defined the population as people who mark multiple races and/or people who are the children of disparate, single-race individuals, such as a Black parent and a White parent (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2007; Campbell and Eggerling-Boeck 2016; Sims and Njaka 2019; Strmic-Pawl 2016; Bratter 2007; Khanna 2004; Fhagen-Smith 2010; Gullickson and Morning 2011). Unfortunately, this formulation of multiracial status obscures the fact that racial mixture often goes further back in many people's family trees (Patten 2015). In fact, it is not uncommon for a person with known mixed ethnic ancestry to report a single race on a survey (Goldstein and Morning 2000; Patten 2015; Liebler et al. 2017). Instead of reporting multiple races, they express their mixed racial heritage by reporting "ancestry or ethnic origins" that contrast with their race response(s) (e.g., Gullickson and Morning 2011).

Since 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau has asked: "What is your ancestry or ethnic origin?" in the decennial census (1980–2000) and the American Community Survey (2000 to the present). In combination with the race question and the Hispanic origin question, this "ancestry question" offers an additional way for people to express their racial or ethnic identity. Without a way to provide details in the race question, White and Black Americans could only share details of their connections to these race categories through the ancestry question (this changed in 2020, but those results have not yet been released).

Researchers looking for information about people of mixed racial heritage sometimes use the ancestry question in combination with the race question[1] because people can report mixed racial heritage using the combination of the race question and the ancestry question, and this has continued even after the race question allowed multiple responses (Gullickson and Morning 2011; Gullickson 2016; Johfre et al. 2021; Liebler 2016; Roth 2018). People who are generationally removed from the 'original' interracial union (such as racially mixed children and their children) more often report a single race (Aspinall and Song 2013; Song 2017; Morning and Saperstein 2018; Patten 2015), though some people with generationally distant racial 'mixing' still claim a mixed heritage (Pilgrim 2021).

We know that some people regard their ancestry as a key component of their racial identities (Johfre et al. 2021). A 2021 Pew survey of Black, Hispanic, and White Americans found that about two-thirds of multiracial adults said they were very familiar with their origins (Cohn et al. 2021) About 37% of multiracial adults said that their origins were central to their identities, compared to 23% of White adults and about 55% for both Black and Hispanic adults. They found that, 'Black and Hispanic adults were more likely than White adults to say their origins are central to their identity and that they feel a strong connection

to their family's cultural roots.' Similar results have been found by other researchers studying Black, Asian, American Indian, and Hispanic people (Waters 1990; Frankenberg 1993; Cornell and Hartmann 2007).

Research has also shown that some other people regard their ancestry abstractly as distant family origins. Not all people know their family's ancestral origins, and knowledge does not necessarily equate with a connection to identity. White Americans, in particular, often have significant knowledge but do not feel a strong connection (Cohn et al. 2021; Waters 1990). Whether via family stories about distant ancestors and where they 'came from', or the growing popularity of genetic ancestry tests (GATs) (Nelson 2008), Americans' interest in their family ancestry has grown (Roth and Ivemark 2018). Various studies on GATs have found that some people who take these tests seemed to treat genetic ancestry as the basis for asserting various racial and ethnic identities, though many others do not (see Roth and Ivemark 2018). One recent study found that GAT-takers often translate reported ancestral diversity into multiracial self-identification (Johfre et al. 2021).

In this research, we use information gathered from 68 in-depth interviews with U.S. adults of mixed racial heritage (non-Hispanic American-Indian-White, Asian-White, or Black-White) who reported a variety of ancestries. We know relatively little about the attitudes and experiences of Asian-White and American-Indian-White people, whose histories, attributed stereotypes, and socioeconomic profiles differ from those of more-often-studied Black-White mixed heritage people (Strmic-Pawl 2016; Lee and Bean 2007; Tashiro 2011).

Using our participants' responses to an online pre-interview survey and the in-depth interview itself, we explored how mixed heritage people think and feel about their reported ancestries and how important these ancestries are in relation to their racial identities. Our research provides new insight into the meanings and motivations behind the responses to this ancestry question and how these can differ across disparate mixed heritage groups.

By exploring mixed heritage peoples' ancestries, we aimed to understand an overlooked aspect of identity that is tied to family tree, knowledge, and relationships. Ancestry is not socially constructed in the same way as race, which is imposed by others and constantly reinforced. Because people's ancestries can be 'hidden', i.e., not visible or discerned by others, especially in a society where a (monoracial) observed race tends to dictate one's social treatment, investigating mixed heritage peoples' ancestries provides a window into how they may (or may not) assert their known ancestries to make claims to group membership. Focusing on people who have both White and non-White ancestries enables us to explore what motivates a person to make claims to one type of ancestry, the other, or both.

After providing some background on how "ancestry" is usually measured in the U.S., we introduce our in-depth interview study of 68 respondents and give context with national-level statistics. Then we turn to our interview study results. We found that mixed heritage individuals across all three groups were motivated to assert their ancestry claims for two main reasons: First, by claiming a specific ancestry (or ancestries), participants tried to assert a more individualistic sense of self than was typically allowed, given their racial treatment based upon their racial appearance; this could be especially meaningful if those individuals who felt a mismatch between their racial assignment by others and their sense of self. Second, a claim to a specific ancestry was a way for individuals to forge connections with family, relatives, or a minority ancestry group that had not existed before. Overall, most of our participants reported a wish to forge meaningful ties with their non-European ancestries, while they tended to see their European ancestries as effectively residual or somehow incorporated in their status as Americans. The wish to claim a connection with their minority ancestries could involve emotional experiences concerning the cultural survival of specific ancestral groups, and their identification with minority ancestries that had been historically subordinated or devalued in American society. We conclude by offering broader insights suggested by this research.

2. Background

From 1880 to 1970, U.S. censuses asked about the birthplace of the respondent's mother and father. In 1980, in acknowledgement of the lower immigration flows, the census dropped the parent birthplace questions and began asking an ancestry question;[2] the current version of this question is shown in Figure 1. When the American Community Survey (ACS, which is also a Census Bureau product) began in 2000, the question was moved to that vehicle. The ancestry question is open-ended and the Census Bureau codes the first two responses with hundreds of categories each. These are available in the public-use data as well as restricted versions of the data.

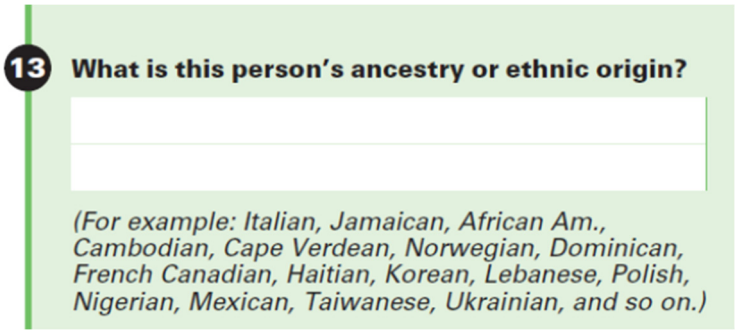

Figure 1. Ancestry question, as written in the 2021 American Community Survey.

The number and nature of race categories in the U.S. census is likely to influence how mixed heritage people report their race and ancestry (Gullickson and Morning 2011). For instance, the 2010 Census race question, shown below,[3] has 15 race categories, with 6 of these representing Asian countries. American Indian or Alaska Native people (shortened to "American Indian" in this text) were asked to write in their enrolled or principal tribe.

Much of the initial research about the census ancestry question was focused on disaggregating the previously-monolithic "White" race group.[4] Because White people are numerically dominant and immigration was limited to a relatively small number of countries for most of U.S. history, White sample sizes were high enough to allow detail on White ancestries to be available in the public-use census data as early as 1980. Research did not focus on other groups; non-Black racialized groups have had the opportunity to report some detail (e.g., Asian country of origin or American Indian tribe) in the race question, and the non-response to the ancestry question was high among Black census respondents (details were also suppressed for confidentiality).

This White-focused early research about ancestry found that White ancestry responses are often subjective representations of family memory, which can change and often do not carry much meaning: what Cornell and Hartmann (2007) would characterize as a 'thin' tie to ancestral identity. Alba and Chamlin (1983) studied U.S.-born White people in the General Social Survey who identified one ancestry and those who reported multiple ancestries. They found that people named multiple ancestries but identified primarily as one of those. Americans with European ancestries have been characterized as having symbolic ethnicities (Gans 1979; Alba 1990), which are optional and not imposed upon them by others (Waters 1990). White ancestry reports are also subjective; for example, some (e.g., Welsh) are usually 'forgotten', while others are more consistently reported (e.g., Irish or Italian—see Hout and Goldstein 1994). In other words, specific European ancestries may or may not be part of someone's identity (Waters 1990; Alba 1990).

Non-White Americans are not devoid of ethnic identity choices, though these are usually constrained (Song 2003). Mixed heritage people are likely to have knowledge of and lived experiences related to their disparate ancestries. Different types of mixed heritage people are likely to face a variety of barriers to recognition and membership in relation to their White and non-White minority ancestries. Mixed individuals' connections to their ancestries may be hindered by historical events, generational distance from ancestors,

the death or separation of family members, and racial and ethnic rejection by family and coethnic people, among other factors. Given these barriers to having their ancestries validated, many mixed heritage people may be deterred from reporting some of their ancestries, especially those that appear to counter their racial appearance. At the same time, mixed heritage people are variably motivated to make connections with their disparate ancestries; as Phinney and Ong (2007) have shown, some people actively engage in the exploration of and commitment to specific ancestries, becoming personally invested in an ancestral group, while others do not. Here, we focus on mixed heritage people who were able and motivated to report their ancestries.

3. Methods

To gain a deeper understanding of how individuals of disparate mixed racial heritages view their ancestries and how their ancestries relate to their racial identities, we conducted 68 in-depth interviews with U.S. adults (who were parents) between 2018–2020. To be invited into the study, a person had to be a non-Hispanic adult with American-Indian-White, Black-White, or Asian-White mixed heritage, have any biological children, and have ever been married to the other biological parent of the child. In our wider research, we discussed their responses to the race and ancestry questions in the context of a broader conversation about identity and family-related choices.[5] In this paper, we focus primarily upon their ancestry responses.

Our interview participants included: 21 American-Indian-White, 27 Asian-White, and 20 Black-White people of mixed racial heritage and varied racial identities. They are not a representative sample of people with mixed racial heritage. All 27 of our Asian-White interview respondents reported both races. Of the 20 Black-White respondents, 19 reported both races and one reported solely Black. A total of 15 of the 21 American-Indian-White respondents reported both races, 5 reported solely as American Indian race (with a specific tribal affiliation and White ancestry), and 1 as White race with American Indian ancestry. Our participants included 24 men and 44 women and they ranged in age from 28 to 60, with most in their 30s and 40s.

We relied upon a variety of social media and word of mouth methods for recruiting participants, e.g., through community organizations. We avoided recruitment channels that specifically catered to mixed heritage people and families, such as websites for mixed heritage people. While most of the participants were now college-educated, middle class professionals (or in such middle-class households), about half of these participants had grown up in working-class households with limited economic resources and associated cultural and human capital. To our knowledge, all of the participants were in heterosexual unions when they were married to the other parent.

As a screening tool and source of information to be probed in the interview, we sent an online pre-interview survey to our respondents in which we asked the census race question and the census ancestry question as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Potential interviewees were asked census-worded questions on race, ancestry, and Hispanic origin in relation to themselves, their child(ren), their spouse, and their birth parents. We found that many participants provided significant detail in their ancestry responses. The person's choice of which race(s) and ancestry to report was a subject of study and not used as an additional screening tool. Almost all interviews were conducted in person or by video call, but a few were conducted by telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and subsequently analyzed using traditional coding methods based upon thematic analyses drawn from repeated audio and written analyses of the interviews. All names and tribes reported here have been changed for confidentiality. We list the age and gender of each respondent in parentheses to provide context; for example, (64F) indicates that the person was a 64-year-old woman when she was interviewed.

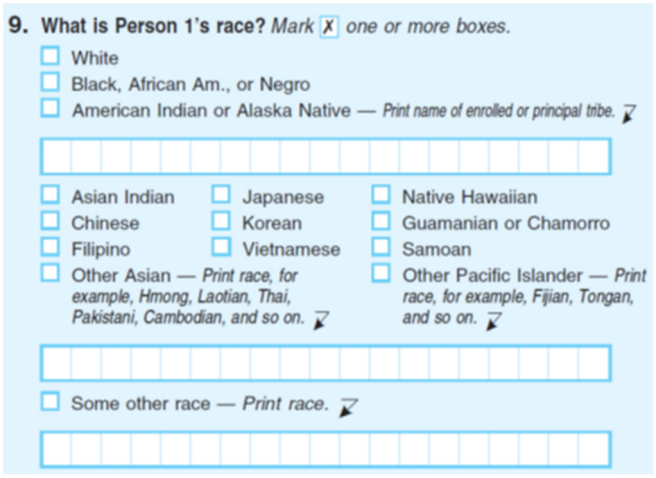

Figure 2. Race question, as written in the 2010 U.S. Census.

To give context to our participants' responses, we show patterns of ancestry responses for multiple-race Americans similar to the majority of our participants (i.e., they reported their mixed racial heritage by reporting two races).[6] Figure 3, below, shows the extent to which biracial respondents to the 2000 Census and the 2005–2016 American Community Survey elaborated on their race response within the ancestry question.[7] For example, the chart shows that 18% of people who reported both American Indian race and White race in 2000 did not report either of those groups in the ancestry question, while 35% of them reported both groups in the ancestry question.

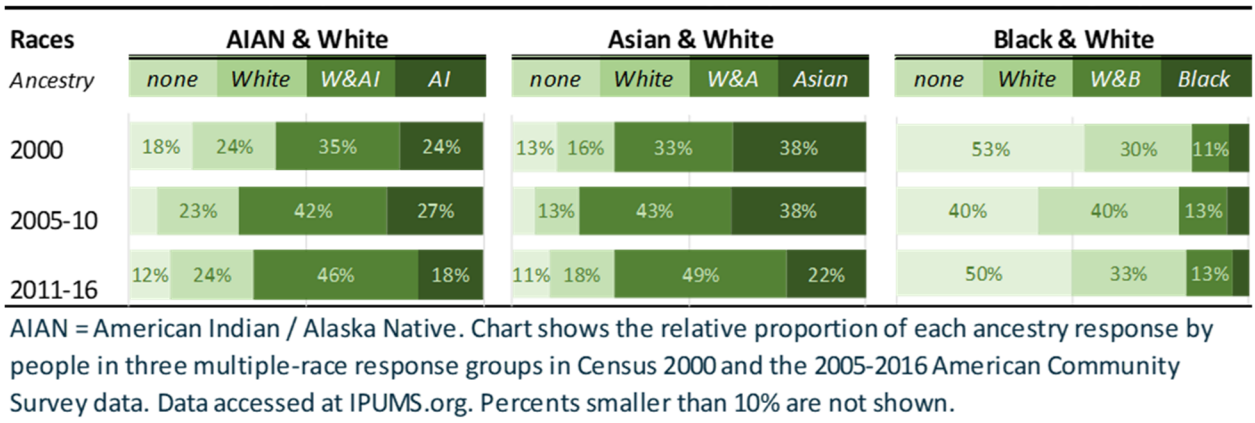

Figure 3. Distribution of ancestry responses in the U.S. among people in three biracial groups, 2000–2016.

The national data in Figure 3 shows that Asian-White and American-Indian-White biracial people usually report details about both of their reported race groups. Details about American Indian and Asian lineage were included by the majority of these respondents, and it was also modal for people in these groups to report White ancestry groups. Details of ancestry, lineage, or tribe may be more or less available for different reasons. White family trees are relatively well-documented. In part, this is related to the relatively high rates of literacy, connection to authorities who record events, and economic stability that allows for family records to be retained. Emphasis on racial purity and the ability to prove it when needed may also have influenced detailed recordkeeping. Among American Indian and Alaska Native people, ancestry knowledge may be supported by connections to tribes and the need to track family relationships to keep track of so-called "blood quantum" for tribal enrollment purposes. Many Asian cultures treat ancestors with a unique respect and lineages can be extensively traced for ceremonial purposes. In addition, many people

have personal connections to tribal homelands or non-U.S. countries and are answering the ancestry question using that information. Our interview participants expand on what those connections may mean.

In contrast to American-Indian-White and Asian-White census and ACS respondents, about half of the Black-White biracial people in the national data did not report either of these groups (and usually gave no response to the ancestry question; see Figure 3). Multiple historical factors reduce the availability of ancestry knowledge for many African Americans who are descendants of enslaved people. Because of the power of this history and the social construction of "Black" to include people of any African ancestry regardless of detailed knowledge, ancestry may have a different meaning and significance for people with Black heritage than for people in other groups. With the growing popularity of genetic ancestry tests among African Americans (Nelson 2008), however, it is possible that more people with African heritage will claim ancestries to particular African countries or regions in the future.

4. Results

The interviews provided a rich set of themes. We first discuss the extent to which interview respondents can name their ethnic ancestries and how they gained this knowledge. We next turn to two primary motivations for asserting a particular ancestry claim. We close by relating three reasons that our mixed heritage respondents find their minority ancestries more salient and meaningful than their White ancestries.

4.1. Interview Respondents' Knowledge of Their Ancestries

Our participants understood questions about ancestry to refer to specific ethnic (or tribal) ancestries, not the broader 'ethno-racial pentagram' that Hollinger (1995) has referred to: White, Asian, Latino, Black, and American Indian. The ancestry responses across all three mixed heritage groups suggest that, when given the opportunity, mixed heritage individuals report both of their parents' ethnic and racial ancestries if they think they know them, even when they are uncertain. Most people we interviewed listed all the ancestries they knew of (as opposed to dropping certain ancestries, as single-race White Americans are known to do (Hout and Goldstein 1994; Waters 1990).

Virtually all of our interview participants learned of their various ancestries from their parents, grandparents, or other relatives. For some participants, known ancestry was based on knowledge of or contact with relatives who were still alive, but for others, knowledge of ancestries (originating abroad) was limited because the participants' wider family had been in the U.S. for many generations. This was especially common if their ancestors had been 'involuntary' migrants such as African Americans' African ancestors (Ogbu 1990), or if they were Indigenous American Indian people.

Consistent with the census figures above, several Black-White interview participants reported that they did not know anything about their African ancestry (or very little of it), but as we discuss below, this did not mean that they were uninterested in their White or Black ancestries. In general, ancestry registered as a more distant unknown for our Black-White participants. For example, both Jacob (47M), and Ariel (30F) wrote 'African American' for their ancestry responses, while Andreas (28M), simply wrote 'American'. However, some Black-White participants listed an array of European ancestries. One Black-White woman, Kendra (30F), described her ancestry in this way: 'My dad is African American. My mom is English, Irish, and German, but her family has been in the U.S. for generations.' Most Black-White participants simply accepted the fact that it would be virtually impossible to trace Black ancestries prior to their ancestors' enslavement. However, a few participants sought out the histories of both Black and White ancestors who were intertwined through slavery. Vanessa (37F) had made a concerted effort to find out more about her African American father's ancestry, knowing that it could involve both enslaved people and White slave masters:

> ' . . . so, our multi-racialism goes far back in our family and one of the reasons I got interested in it is that on my father's side we are descended from a White man named [X] who had a common law marriage to a woman named [Y] whose mother was a slave and they ended up having seven children . . . this is you know basically just around emancipation Virginia . . . . and so anyway, so I've gone on my own whole historical journey trying to figure out how they ended up managing being together and that kind of thing.'

Most of our American-Indian-White participants wrote in a specific tribe as part of their American Indian race report, rather than just choosing White and American Indian categories to describe their race. Like the other interview participants, many of our American-Indian-White interviewees reported a variety of European backgrounds to describe their ancestries. For example, Skye (37F) described her ancestry as 'Leech Lake/Native, White/Scandinavian/mostly Danish'. Nina (40F) reported 'Ojibwe, Norwegian, German, Swedish, French' for her ancestry. Although virtually all the American-Indian-White participants knew of specific tribal ancestries, it was very common for them to report that their American Indian parents (or grandparents) had effectively suppressed this heritage, as many of these older relatives had been sent to violently assimilationist Indian boarding schools and been prohibited from speaking a Native language or participating in any form of Native practices. In fact, Sandy (64F) had no knowledge of her father's Native American heritage until her cousin did a family tree and learned that her paternal grandmother was American Indian. Sandy was astounded and excited and when she asked her father why he had completely hidden this information, he told her that he'd grown up with his American Indian heritage as a badge of shame. However, for Sandy, this newly found knowledge resulted in her identifying as a racially-mixed person who was both American Indian and White.

Knowledge of participants' parents' ancestries could be straightforward if their parents were relatively recent migrants to the U.S. (as in the case of some Asian-White respondents). Even though most Black-White and American-Indian-White people have longer histories in the U.S. than Asian-White people, there is some variation in the settlement histories of Asian groups in the U.S. (Tuan 1999). A number of Asian-White participants had Asian parents who were second- or third-generation U.S.-born, especially those from the West coast. This could mean that some participants' parents and/or even grandparents could have tenuous connections to an ancestral Asian homeland. Nevertheless, all of the 27 Asian-White participants reported a specific combination of Asian and European ancestries, such as Ray (46M), who described his ancestry as 'Half Japanese, quarter Irish, quarter French', and Kari (33F), who reported her ancestry as 'Chinese, European (mix of German, English, Scottish, Irish, we think)'.

Although we did not query people specifically about genetic ancestry tests, some participants told us that they had taken a GAT to find out more about their ancestries. Notably, a detailed list of ancestries cannot reveal the generational recency of these ancestries, or which of these ancestries were most prominent or deemed most meaningful; this was instead revealed in our interviews.

4.2. Motivations for Asserting an Ancestry

What motivates mixed heritage people to report their disparate ancestries, and how do their ancestry claims relate to their racial identities? As shown below, our participants were motivated to claim ancestries for a variety of reasons. However, gaining acceptance and navigating membership in ancestral groups could involve various barriers and social rejection. Mixed heritage people's racial appearance (their observed race) was commonly reported as a barrier to gaining recognition and acceptance into specific ancestral groups. Nevertheless, the two main motivations for asserting an ancestral claim involved (a) a wish to assert a more individualistic sense of self, which countered an experience of being racially homogenized; or (b) a wish to forge connections and relationships with family, relatives, or members of an ancestral group or tribe that had been closed off to them.

Asserting a More Individualistic Sense of Self and Addressing Racial Mis-Match

Reporting specific ancestries in addition to their race reports enabled our participants to claim what they saw as the distinctive and appealing ancestral characteristics that were resonant or meaningful to them. Ancestry reports could give mixed heritage people an opportunity to present themselves as individuals with unique characteristics and experiences in ways that went beyond a broad and reductive notion of race and racial assignment, based upon someone's racial appearance. This could enable them to address a perceived mismatch between how they saw themselves and their racial assignment by others.

Mindful of the historical legacy of the one drop rule of hypodescent that limited their identifications as solely Black, some Black-White participants highlighted that *all* their ancestries were important aspects of who they (and their families) were. In some cases, reporting details of their European ancestries represented not only more knowledge of European ancestries, but also a means of de-emphasizing a seemingly monolithic minority race. For instance, Saskia (26F), who reported that she was usually seen as Latina or part Black, described her ancestry as 'French, Italian, Norwegian, English, African American'. While Saskia had contact with both her White and Black relatives, she reported that she felt less welcomed by her father's Black family, who seemed to disapprove of the fact that her father had married a White woman. In the interview, Saskia revealed that she did not identify strongly with her Black race and she did not want to be defined solely in racial terms:

> 'Um, I prefer to identify as mixed. I don't like using race as an identifier because I feel like there's so much more to a person than . . . within being mixed what I wanted most of all was a cultural heritage than a racial heritage so I found that I gravitate more toward strong cultures. Like we have . . . out here, we are part of a diverse church, and we have a friend who's Sri Lankan. And I have a good friend from Mexico and I like listening to her stories.'

Saskia also spoke of her wish to emphasize a 'cultural heritage' in how she is raising her son with her White husband:

> 'My desire is that [my son] will acknowledge his heritages. I am not wanting to push him toward identifying by a race, but I want him to know that he had ancestors who came from Italy, Ireland, Africa, England, and other countries.'

Saskia bristled at the idea that she should adhere to certain racial scripts of behavior, or that she should be expected to speak a certain way, for instance, on the basis of her racial appearance:

> 'I don't feel comfortable around . . . slang. Especially as an English minor . . . there were times when we went to events with my dad's [Black] family and they would speak to me, and I would respond and they would think I was being uppity and I was just being . . . I speak in complete sentences [laughs].'

The assertion of specific European ancestries by people like Saskia is motivated by a wish to be seen as an individual with an array of attributes that cannot be reduced to broad and homogenizing racial labels attributed to them. This assertion of specific ancestries by mixed heritage people is distinct from the exercising of ethnic options by White Americans, which is conceptualized as optional and unlikely to be refuted or challenged by others (Waters 1990). Saskia's assertion of her European ancestries was not easily achieved, though their validation was important to her. Saskia reported that she had to regularly 'let people know' that she also had a variety of European ancestries; this required effort and her ability to convey her European ancestries to others was aided by the fact that although she grew up in a relatively modest household, she was now an articulate, highly educated person who possessed an array of types of cultural capital.

In comparison to Saskia, who talked about the importance of recognizing her European ancestries in addition to her Black ancestry, some American-Indian-White participants revealed the importance of asserting a tribal ancestry. For American-Indian-White participants who had not grown up on or near an American Indian reservation, gaining access

to learn about their tribal ancestry was not easy, especially if their American Indian side of the family had not raised them in relation to that heritage. Yet, for some, the assertion of a tribal ancestry was central to how they saw themselves, even if they did not possess externally-obvious markers of being American Indian. Jonas (33M) described his ancestry solely as 'Ojibwe'. He looked White to the interviewer and he grew up without much exposure to his mother's American Indian heritage. Unlike his mother, he was not a tribal member, though he did see himself as a 'descendant' who did not meet enrollment criteria. During his teen years, he became increasingly interested in his mother's American Indian ancestry.

> 'I know about sageing and the four medicines . . . We lived in a trailer park at the time. When I was 14, 15, I got more interested in my Native ancestry and my mom supplied me with more information about it. This influenced where I went to college—a place where there was a sizeable Native student population . . . Almost my entire professional life has been spent working with the Native community. You could say I'm an urban Native . . . I don't have a reservation to go back to. But I'm also connected to the urban community here in this [city] . . . I was able to find a community that is able to accept me for who, and what I am . . . You gotta just keep carrying on with the cultural artefacts you have, or that you're lucky enough to carry with you, even if you don't have the whole picture.'

Although Jonas accepted that he would be unlikely to achieve tribal membership for himself or his young children, his tribal connection and ancestry was central to how he saw himself, even when he realized that other people did not usually see him that way. However, his commitment to working with American Indian people (albeit a different tribe) allowed him to feel like a part of that community. He was grateful to have been able to have his assertion of being Ojibwe validated, at least by some American Indian people in his work with the Native community and his social network. He was constantly educating himself about Ojibwe culture. As in Saskia's case above, Jonas' assertion of his Native ancestry was not like that of White Americans exercising an optional European ancestry.

Wanting to Connect with a Lost Family or Gain Entry into an Ancestral Group

It was not uncommon for our participants to report that they had had more contact with one side of the family than the other, a disparity that was often founded upon histories of prejudice, racism, and segregated networks and communities. As a result, some participants grew up with little or no contact with parts of their family trees. Some of them wished to learn about or meet unknown family members. Yetta's (60F) father was a racially mixed Black-White man from the Caribbean and her (late) mother was Italian American. Her parents married at a time when interracial unions were still uncommon and certainly regarded by many as problematic. Yetta, who described her ancestry as 'Caribbean (Barbados)-Italian', was always interested in her mother's Italian ancestry and relatives, but because her mother's Italian-American family had cut her mother off upon her marriage to Yetta's father, she was resigned to her Italian ancestry being largely unacknowledged. Although Yetta identified as a Black woman, she reported that for much of her life, she had also felt a genuine interest in her mother's Italian heritage, which had effectively been denied her by her mother's wider family.

Yetta's daughter, Adriana (37F), was also a participant in this study. Adriana identified as a racially mixed person with both White and Black races and described her ancestry as 'Italian, Bajan, African American'. She reported that she was very interested in finding out more about her Italian and Bajan ancestries and had taken a GAT a few years ago:

> 'It turned out that my [maternal] grandfather [from Barbados] actually had a White father! . . . I did my DNA—I was 51% European, which was like . . . My whole life . . . I did everything like I [was] like 25% European, because I didn't think my dad was at all European. I was just thinking that only my [White Italian] grandmother was . . . [But] my mom is like 79% European! That must have rocked her world; that her whole life, you're like, oh, I'm Black.'

Adriana was clearly intrigued by the results of her GAT test, especially her realization that she was '51% European'. She appeared to take this GAT result at face value, and her belief that she was half European galvanized her to reach out to the Italian American relatives who were unknown to her (other than one aunt). According to her mother Yetta:

> 'Adriana found some cousins on '23 and me' after she got her results and she tried reaching out but that never went anywhere either. I have pretty much resigned myself to let that all go.'

The meaningfulness of Adriana's Italian ancestry stemmed not from cultural exposure or contact with her Italian American relatives, but rather its direct opposite: the absence of her European relatives from her mother's and her lives. While Adriana did not distance herself from her Black heritage and identified as a racially mixed Black-White woman (even after the results of her GAT), she was eager to learn more about her maternal Italian heritage and her Barbadian father's previously unknown European ancestry. She was frustrated by her inability to forge real connections with her Italian relatives:

> 'So there's the rejection from that [Italian] side of the family. We moved in these heavily Italian American neighborhoods where there was also rejection. So, it's like a recurring theme . . . '

Adriana said that she and her mother considered a trip to Italy, as they had never gone there, but their interest in their maternal Italian ancestry was tinged with sadness and regret. In fact, Adriana's rejection by her Italian-American relatives was understood to have stemmed from her Blackness; just as others tended to disregard her White ancestry, her Italian-American relatives could not really embrace her or her mother Yetta as one of them. Prior research has shown that Black-White people's claims to their European ancestries are often refuted if the person is deemed to look Black (Khanna 2010; Song 2017). However, when Black-White people garner more detailed information about their European ancestries, they may be more able to assert a White ancestry (at least in limited contexts), especially if (like Adriana) they can refer to a specific, and not too distant, ancestor, such as an Italian-American grandmother.

As in Yetta's (and Adriana's) case, participants' ability to access specific ancestries were fundamentally shaped by factors that were beyond their control, such as the death of a parent. Jane (38F) described her ancestry as: 'Korean, Swedish, Polish, Norwegian, German, French.' After her Korean mother's death when she was 10 years old, she had very little contact with her mother's Korean family, most of whom were thousands of miles away. Her father had raised her in a mostly White community. Jane reported that while she had been curious about making contact with her Korean relatives at various points in her life, because her father had maintained only the most cursory ties with her Korean relatives, Jane felt that she had no real access to cultivating her Korean ancestry. With the death of her mother, it was if there was no trace of her Korean ancestry, other than in her racially ambiguous appearance:

> 'I feel like I may be an outlier on some things because I'm more [sic] closer to somebody who was adopted and then raised completely White than somebody who had an actual parent that they lived with that was Korean.'

Jane implied that it was effectively too late to establish a real relationship with her Korean relatives. While she reported and acknowledged her Korean ancestry as part of her make-up, she did not feel able to claim a meaningful connection to her Korean ancestry.

Asian-White participants often reported that other monoracial Asian people (including their Asian relatives) would not treat them as authentically Asian (Mengel 2001; Aspinall and Song 2013). This is somewhat parallel (but the obverse) to some Black-White participants' experiences, where their European ancestries were not recognized or validated by White people. An Asian-White participant, Andrew (43M), described his ancestry as 'Korean, British, German Jewish'. Central to his identity was his sense of being a racially mixed person who was marginal:

> 'The way I see myself is neither . . . I hate the term White but I don't know another term for it. I don't see myself as White. I don't identify as White. I also don't identify as Asian.'

Andrew's description of himself stemmed from a lifetime of being seen as not belonging to any one race, especially on the basis of his appearance, which he described as racially ambiguous ('I was the Asian guy with my White friends and I was the White guy with my Asian friends.'). Despite his sense of racial marginality, Andrew felt a strong attachment to his Korean ancestry:

> 'I felt conscious of looking different . . . I was identified when I was younger more strongly with my mother's heritage. I identified as . . . I wouldn't say I identified as Korean, but I felt like a stronger cultural affinity towards Korean things and Korean culture and Korean history and learning about family history was my way of being connected to that side of the family and I was like very interested in her family history. I was really not as interested in my father's history.'

Although he was deeply interested in his Korean ancestry, it pained Andrew that other Koreans, including many of his Korean relatives, did not see him as 'one of them':

> 'I feel like when we go to Korea we're just . . . I don't know I don't feel like fully part of the family, you know. Part of it is we just don't see them very often but another part there's an element where we're just . . . we're not part of the club.'

Andrew's unvalidated acceptance as someone with Korean ancestry was infused with feelings of hurt, insecurity, and rejection:

> 'I think yeah [I feel] a deep deep insecurity from feeling different, not looking like anybody. Not having, not being part of something, you know, not being part of a tribe.'

Like Andrew above, Donna (48F) identified as a racially mixed Asian-White woman, but she was especially attached to her Japanese ancestry via her mother. When asked if her mother was born in the U.S., Donna, who described her ancestry as 'Japanese American', replied,

> 'Yes. She is . . . she's actually unusual in that her . . . she's almost like third, fourth generation herself. Her family on both her parent's sides came very early to, and settled in, the Los Angeles area. And then she grew up in Los Angeles for the first three years of her life and then was in an internment camp [during World War II].'

Donna grew up having more contact with and feeling closer to her Japanese relatives than her White American relatives and she reported that feeling accepted into the Japanese American community was important to her. She had grown up in predominantly White areas where she and her family stood out as a racially mixed family. Despite the fact that her mother and grandparents were U.S.-born, Donna felt a strong resonance with being Asian and Japanese, especially given her mother's Japanese American imprint in their home life. Yet when she was at college, she was not deemed to be authentically Japanese (or Asian) by her Asian American peers, in part because she was not seen as looking Asian. Nevertheless, Donna worked to cultivate a connection to her Japanese heritage:

> 'As an adult I proactively chose it [cultivating her Japanese heritage] after graduate school. I worked at a museum in [X] and then I left to start an archives at a community center collecting Japanese American history in [Y].'

However, Donna felt resigned to the fact that her claims to Japanese ancestry were only occasionally validated. She hoped that by the time her son was an adult, societal norms about ethnic membership would be more porous.

Therefore, while Black-White participants were more likely to encounter rejection from their White relatives and coethnic people, Asian-White people more often reported rejection from their Asian counterparts. Asian-White participants' treatment as not authentically

Asian by other (usually monoracial) Asian people, was strikingly consistent in our interviews. As these cases reveal, it took a great deal of emotional energy and determination to assert ancestral ties to groups that consistently rejected them; as such, some mixed heritage people will simply 'not bother' to report certain ancestries that are unlikely to be validated. The ethnic options and lived experiences of Black-White and Asian-White people who were seen as racially Black and/or racially ambiguous (or even White) could pose major barriers in forging relationships with family and relatives, as well as acceptance into both European and minority ancestry groups.

4.3. Minority Ancestries Are More Salient and Meaningful for Many Mixed Heritage People

Different mixed heritage groups' histories in the U.S. shape their knowledge and reporting of their parents' lineages. In all three mixed heritage groups, but especially among those with American Indian or Black heritages, there was a strong awareness of the historical discrimination and trauma experienced by participants' parents, grandparents, and even more distant ancestors. Therefore, claims to a specific minority ancestry sometimes involved emotional connections with a collective identity and experience that was associated with being a racialized minority. As illustrated above, claims to a White ancestry were of a different nature; they were about making connections with estranged or lost family and relatives or about recognizing the multiplicity of mixed heritage people's identities and experiences, especially if such individuals did not feel strongly affiliated with their minority race and ancestry.

Mixed heritage participants who went beyond simply reporting their ancestries, and who tried to forge real connections with their ancestries, more commonly valued their minority ancestries. With some exceptions, most participants tended to see their European ancestries as effectively residual or somehow incorporated into their status as Americans. Most of our mixed heritage participants had some relationships with their White relatives (though with varying degrees of closeness); however, it was those relationships, not European ancestries per se, that mattered to them. For these participants, their White ancestries were largely regarded as incidental, especially if their lived experiences were based on their identifications and societal treatment as non-White minoritized people or if they actively sought membership in minority ancestry groups.

Our participants expanded on three themes: (1) for some, a specific ancestry is central to lived experience and reinforces racial identity; (2) for others, racialized experiences are so powerful that the importance of ancestry is diminished; and (3) concerns about cultural survival, particularly among American-Indian-White participants.

A Specific Ancestry Is Central to Lived Experience and Reinforces Racial Identity

Mixed heritage people's ancestries could be meaningful not only because they may have been emphasized in a family's upbringing and culture, but also because they could be intertwined with their race and their experiences as racialized minorities. Despite the common tendency to report all of their known ancestries, our Asian-White interviewees varied significantly in terms of their knowledge of and attachment to their respective ancestries. The dutiful reporting of a known European ancestry or ancestries was common, but none of our Asian-White participants reported evidence of exploration or commitment in relation to a European heritage (Phinney and Ong 2007).

Jacqui (39F) described her ancestry as 'Korean, Scottish-Irish, German, Welsh, Finnish.' She reported that while her father's Finnish (and other European) ancestry was known to her, she had had little contact with her father's relatives of Finnish heritage, partly because they lived far away and because her father's mother made it clear that she wasn't happy about having an Asian daughter-in-law. According to Jacqui, 'I've always felt much closer to my mom's side of the family and more accepted and loved than on my dad's side.' As such, Jacqui identified strongly with her mother's Korean heritage, which had been dominant in her and her siblings' upbringing. She grew up speaking Korean and eating Korean food (as did her White father, who had been a solider stationed in Korea). Jacqui's European ancestry also did not resonate with her because she was racially 'othered'

throughout her life. Jacqui saw herself as a woman of color, who did not look White to others:

> 'I had this, for example . . . I was in middle school . . . I was in the locker, for gym, and there were some girls who decided that they were going to call me some Asian racial slur and I was a bit smart alec back. So I corrected them and said actually the correct slur is this.' Jacqui was quite used to being seen as a racial other, even now: 'I mean people still say ridiculous things to me now like regularly in [northeastern city] people come up to me and say 'Do you speak English?'

Furthermore, Jacqui's identification as a Korean-American woman and a racially-mixed person of color was deepened by her marriage to a Latino man who did not look White. Their relationship with each other, and their roles as parents, were centrally based upon seeing themselves as non-White people of color who were committed to raising their children with both Korean and Puerto Rican cultural practices. In Jacqui's case, her Korean ancestry was not more or less important than her identity as a 'biracial person of color'. Rather, that ancestry simply meshed with the other aspects of her identity, none of which resonated with her White ancestries.

Lived Race Cumulatively Displaces Ancestry, Diminishing the Importance of Ancestry

As discussed above, racial appearance was often key to how mixed heritage people were seen by others, and the assertion of a 'hidden' ancestry (and one that appeared at odds with observed race) could require significant effort and commitment to gain validation (Phinney and Ong 2007). While they did not make a concerted effort to assert a White ancestry, some mixed heritage people grew up relating to their Whiteness, especially if they grew up with only a White parent and relatives. However, the salience of that White ancestry could diminish over time in light of their lived experiences as non-White others (Waters 1999). This was especially true in the case of some of our Black-White participants.

Those who had grown up with only their White mothers were especially likely to report little or no knowledge of their Black ancestry. For example, Wendy (32F), who grew up with her White mother, and who had had very limited contact with her Black father and his family growing up, wrote 'American (and unknown)' to describe her ancestry. Similarly, Corey (28F), who grew up with only her White mother and White grandparents, wrote 'unknown' for her ancestry in the pre-interview survey. However, both Wendy and Corey had grown up feeling like a part of their mothers' White families, despite some racist undercurrents in those relationships. In the interview, Corey revealed that her initial identification as 'biracial', growing up, was shaped by the fact that she had a close relationship with her White grandmother.

> 'I went to majority White schools. So, growing up I identified as biracial because it felt accepted and comfortable for me. And that's what other people would call me a lot [biracial] . . . Everyone who raised me was White.'

But when Corey went to college in a large metropolitan area with many other Black people, her racial assignment as Black became increasingly salient for her, while her sense of her White ancestry receded.

> 'There was a strong base of cultural blackness. And there were a lot of mixed people like me. At first I felt uncomfortable and I didn't get all the cultural references [like seeing the same movies that people had watched] but after meeting so many mixed people who identified as Black I felt more comfortable. Also, lots of other people started to label me as Black.'

As such, a deep knowledge and connection with her White ancestries seemed unimportant in relation to her lived experience as a Black woman. For Corey, a racial consciousness and solidarity with Black people were more meaningful than a distant European (and even African) ancestry that was unknown to her. Rather than an attachment to a specific ancestry, being racially mixed was still important to Corey, in light of her largely White upbringing:

> 'So Black is the first thing I say and mixed race is later in the conversation . . . Like if I'm having a conversation with someone I'll tell them I'm mixed. Like I wouldn't want them to feel that I'm hiding it.'

Thus, while her 'unknown' ancestries in her family tree seemed largely inconsequential to her, Corey felt that her upbringing by her White family was still an important part of who she was, even as she increasingly saw herself as a Black woman whose race was central to who she was.

Concerns about Cultural Survival: Tribal Affiliation for American Indian People

As shown in the census reporting of ancestries for American-Indian-White people who report both races, it was not uncommon to report both White and American Indian ancestries. However, it should be noted that, unlike the cases discussed here, national data show that many American-Indian-White people report only a White race in the census and do not report their AIAN ancestries. Many are not deemed to be authentically American Indian, especially if they look phenotypically White, and do not have tribal membership (Liebler 2001). For such individuals, claims to a tribal ancestry can be easily challenged and many people will not feel able to claim an American Indian identity or ancestry even if they value it.

However, American-Indian-White participants who pointed to the importance of an ancestry did so in relation to their tribal connections, not European ancestries. Tribal affiliations could be very important, including for those people who did not live on tribal land (e.g., a reservation), reflecting the historically distinctive experiences of American Indian people and treatment by the federal government. American-Indian-White participants who reported that their American Indian tribe was important to them often expressed a strong awareness of and concern about the potential for the gradual demise of American Indian practices and cultures. Nina (40F), who described her ancestry as 'Ojibwe, Norwegian, German, Swedish, French', felt a strong attachment to her American Indian heritage. Nina was almost always seen as White and she did not have tribal membership because she did not meet the tribal enrollment criterion. However, she was more committed to participating in aspects of Native American culture and collective gatherings than some people who did have tribal membership, like her father. Nina spoke of the need to protect against the gradual loss of distinctive languages and practices and she believed that enrollment criteria based on blood quantum was only likely to quicken this gradual loss:

> ' . . . blood is thinned every generation because most American Indian people don't have children with other American Indian people; they have children with non-Indian so then it's . . . over time the population of the tribe is declining . . . '

When asked about not being an enrolled member of her tribe, Nina said:

> 'Well, it's probably a little bit of a point of tension because I'm not tribally enrolled and my dad is tribally enrolled. And that's sort of a . . . little bit of a signifier of how much you really are Indian, if you are enrolled or not . . . I don't have enough blood to get enrolled but in terms of tribal affiliation . . . . I certainly didn't grow up in a really traditional way . . . and I wish I had had more access to it but it's important to me just in the sense of . . . kind of understanding that it's like a culture that's about to disappear, right, and unless people maintain that through some way, through maintaining the language and maintaining the cultural practices and traditions, it's just going to be gone.'

Thus, a commonly addressed theme in these interviews was a concern about the potential for erosion and weakening of American Indian culture, practices, and ways of living, and how rules about 'blood quantum' and tribal membership impacted the survival of American Indian tribes and communities.

Another participant, Alex (38M), who described his ancestry as 'Hopi and Dutch', grew up in a community with many other American Indian people, but he always felt disconnected from them because his 'full-blooded' father had not cultivated American Indian practices or languages. However, as he entered young adulthood, he felt compelled

to engage with his Native heritage and married an American Indian woman. As he was tribally enrolled, he was able to claim membership to his tribe:

> 'I always wanted to live on the reservation. Growing up I always felt a kind of hole, an absence . . . that pride of being half Native, like when I went to school in [midwestern state] . . . even though we live in the modern world, I always like to see the Native Americans and their history as a strong people . . . I always wanted to be a part of that.'

Alex was very concerned about the gradual loss of Indigenous languages and practices. He felt very passionately about his Hopi ancestry and his efforts to live with and in the Hopi community that he defended blood quantum regulations:

> ' . . . most people who claim they're Cherokee don't have a deep care for being Cherokee [note that Cherokee is a large tribal nation with no blood quantum requirement] . . . . There should be a sense of care and pride and understanding of who you are . . . I would even say that it [minimum blood quantum required for tribal membership] should be one half instead of 1/4.'

Without explicitly saying so, Alex implied that tribal membership could be driven for instrumental reasons, as tribal enrollment (depending on the wealth of a tribe) could come with economic resources. Indeed, many participants acknowledged the valuable material resources associated with tribal enrollment.

Nevertheless, other participants believed that, rather than defending blood quantum regulations, which seemed overly strict or even arbitrary, tribal membership should be based on ancestral descent and that membership based on descent would better ensure the survival of American Indian people, identity, and their distinctive practices. For example, Benjamin (60M), who described his ancestry as 'Irish, Scotch, Dutch, Native American (White Earth)', grew up with very little exposure to his Native ancestry:

> 'We always knew we were Native, there was no shame. But he [his maternal grandfather] brought nothing to her [his American Indian mother] in terms of culture, and she brought nothing to us in terms of culture. We were never brought to our reservation. We knew what our ancestry was . . . so there was no shame. I know some people whose families shamed them about being Native. My dad was Irish, so that was his thing, but we always knew we were part Native.'

Benjamin only came to learn more about his tribal background in middle age when he started working with the Native community. Even though he was not very culturally knowledgeable about American Indian practices and did not speak a Native language, he realized how invested he felt in the well-being and survival of Native American people: 'They are literally invisible and forgotten in this country.'

> 'Around the time I was in high school, my mom enrolled me. Between that and my younger brother, they changed the blood quantum percentage so he couldn't enroll . . . I think blood quantum should be done away with. The reason blood quantum exists is to make sure that Natives didn't exist any longer, legally, and I think tribes should move away from it and go back to descendancy [determining enrollment eligibility through descent only]. The entire point of blood quantum is to be able to say "There are no Native Americans left. And we can reclaim all this land that we gave [them]."'

Although Benjamin acknowledged the material benefits of tribal citizenship, he believed that a wish to benefit from those material resources did not mean that people with American Indian ancestry did not value their tribal affiliations. Benjamin's ties to his Native community were now very important to him and he saw himself working to support a community and people who were vulnerable in many ways.

Susie (47F), who reported her ancestry as 'Native American and Norwegian', felt her American Indian ancestry was absolutely central to who she was and she pointed to the importance of maintaining distinctive cultural practices that could easily be lost:

> ' . . . when I would go out in the woods with my biological father and he would show me . . . teach me when he was hunting how you respect the animal after you shoot an animal; you put down tobacco; bury their insides and you say a prayer. When you gathered food out in the woods like we would always go berry picking in the fall you always put tobacco as an offering, just those things.'

Susie had grown up on a reservation, but she and her husband, who was also American-Indian-White, decided to move away to enroll their daughter in what they believed was a better school. However, in doing so, Susie and her husband were conscious of the importance of exposing their daughter to Native practices and beliefs. Susie pointed to the importance of schools teaching the Potawatomi language, since her grandmother had not taught her own mother the language, having been sent to one of the infamous boarding schools.

In sum, themes of concern about American Indian cultural and population loss, as well as the importance of reclaiming culture, arose frequently in the interviews with American-Indian-White participants. However, it was not easy for many urban American Indian people to maintain active ties with their tribes, especially if they lived some distance from their tribal reservations. Nevertheless, many participants who reported that their tribal affiliations were meaningful to them felt some responsibility to cultivate and maintain tribal practices in order to counteract the generational decline in knowledge and connection they had witnessed with their parents or grandparents.

5. Conclusions

Existing research on ancestry and the exercising of ethnic options has focused mostly on White Americans. Many scholars have assumed that, for mixed heritage people, race is the primary basis of societal treatment and identification, and that specific ancestries are secondary to race. The increase in the number of mixed heritage (usually part White) people in the U.S. and the option to choose multiple races in the census has enabled scholars to investigate the racial choices of people of mixed racial heritage, as well as what these choices may tell us about their feelings and experiences. Meanwhile, mixed ethnic ancestry has remained relatively unexplored.

While data gathered by the Census Bureau provide information about how disparate mixed heritage people report their ancestries, the salience and meanings behind reported ancestries have been unclear. Given that many mixed heritage people's connections with their disparate ancestries can be hindered by various factors, including generational distance, lack of cultural contact and exposure, and social rejection, what motivates mixed heritage people to assert specific ancestries? What does the reporting and assertion of specific ancestries mean for them? Through online pre-interview surveys and in-depth interviews with 68 American-Indian-White, Black-White, and Asian-White mixed heritage people, we explored the meanings and significance of such ancestry reports.

In national data gathered by the Census Bureau, the most common pattern for biracial American-Indian-White and Asian-White people is to report ancestries that reflect both their European and non-European ancestries, and the great majority report at least one. In contrast, the modal pattern for biracial Black-White people in the census has been to either not answer the question or to report only details of their European ancestors, which is a pattern that probably reflects the destructive power of slavery as well as Black adaptations to racism since then.

Our participants' ancestry reports on the pre-interview survey provided an opportunity for them to add more detail about their lineage, and these reports often supplemented their descriptions of their race. Many of our mixed heritage participants were able to report their White and non-White ancestries in some detail. Given the relative recency of much Asian migration to the U.S., all of our Asian-White participants reported specific ancestral backgrounds. Almost all the American-Indian-White participants (whether they were enrolled or not) reported a tribal affiliation, which is a version of ethnic ancestry. In general, and perhaps not surprisingly, a smaller proportion of our Black-White participants

reported detailed ancestry information, especially in relation to their Black lineage; most of them did report their White ancestries. However, as illustrated above, reporting, then claiming, a specific ethnic or tribal ancestry could involve push-back and rejection for all three mixed heritage groups, typically founded upon powerful and persistent discourses of authenticity.

With the in-depth interviews, we were able to understand why the reporting of specific ancestries in the online surveys could be meaningful for some mixed heritage people, and how such ancestry reports could be manifest in how mixed heritage people forged connections with their ancestry groups. We found that the assertion of specific ancestries could be (a) a means of asserting a more individualistic sense of self, thus resisting their racial assignment (which was experienced as a form of racial mismatch); or (b) a means of forging connections with family or relatives and ancestry groups that had been denied to them in the past. Our participants asserted either White or minority ancestries in their attempts to identify themselves as individuals with a multiplicity of ethnic and racial backgrounds, or in their efforts to gain recognition and membership in families and ethnic groups to which they had been previously barred. They consistently reported that their racial appearance posed a barrier to their desired memberships in relation to families and social groups.

We found that, in general, our participants reported a greater attachment to minority ancestries, especially in comparison with how they related to their White ancestries. The overriding experience of being racially assigned to a minority race could diminish the significance of any known White ancestry, especially for Black-White, but also Asian-White participants. For American-Indian-White participants, an attachment to their tribe was especially meaningful, often stemming from concerns about American Indian marginalization and cultural survival. In contemporary U.S. society, the social and political resonance of minority struggles and histories, especially in relation to American Indian conquest and genocide and African American enslavement and its aftermath, is not lost upon mixed heritage people with minority ancestries.

With a few exceptions and in all three mixed heritage groups, European ancestries tended to be treated as not only more distant, but as less 'relevant' or devoid of distinctive cultural content, very much like the way Mary Waters (1990) described the views of many White Americans about their generationally distant European ancestries. Most of our participants reported a wish to forge meaningful ties with their non-European ancestries, while they tended to see their European ancestries as effectively residual or somehow incorporated into their status as Americans. Mixed heritage participants with good relationships with their White family and relatives valued those connections *as family ties*, but they did not specifically value the European ancestries underlying those family ties, unless they had parents or close family members that had 'active' ties or connections with that ancestry. However, some of our Black-White participants wished to forge connections with their White relatives and ancestries. Importantly, this was in the context of their inability to forge connections with their African-origin ancestors or country-specific ethnic ancestry.

Our research gives evidence about three ways in which ancestry and race intersect for people of mixed racial heritage. First, racial appearance (how others see the person in racial terms) remains extremely important in limiting the identity options of mixed heritage people. While many with Black and White heritage are still subject to the 'one drop rule' and assumed to be 'just Black' based on their racial appearance, there is little recognition of the significant phenotypical variation found among other mixed heritage people, such as Asian-White and American-Indian-White people, so that while some may be seen as White, others are seen as racially ambiguous or definitely non-White. Thus, ancestry claims, whether in relation to White or minority groups, could be refuted because of various criteria, but especially their racial appearance.

Second, our interviews demonstrate that, even when drawing upon specific known ancestries, mixed heritage people are often unable to assert their desired identity options,

whether in relation to White or minority ancestries. Disparate types of mixed heritage people face different kinds of barriers to the validation of their desired identities and group membership. While Black-White mixed heritage people are often denied recognition of their White ancestries, American-Indian-White and Asian-White participants often report a lack of recognition of their American Indian and Asian ancestries, respectively. Asian-White participants reported feeling excluded by single-race Asian people and Asian Americans. American-Indian-White participants who were not tribally enrolled also faced social barriers to developing and asserting their Indigenous identities. This finding contrasts with arguments that non-Black mixed heritage people can exert a wide range of ethnic options (e.g., Lee and Bean 2007; Strmic-Pawl 2016).

Third, mixed heritage people (especially those without Black ancestry) have been characterized by some analysts as quasi-White people who wish to capitalize on their Whiteness (see Yancey 2003; Gans 2012). There is considerable diversity among mixed heritage people and some can feel a strong sense of attachment and identification with their minority ancestries, even when they are ultimately unsuccessful in achieving recognition and perceived membership in specific ancestral groups. Rather than seeing some part-White mixed heritage people as aspiring to Whiteness (Saperstein and Penner 2012; Yancey 2003), much more investigation is needed to understand the diverse experiences and treatment of disparate mixed heritage groups in different geographical settings (Song 2021).

To conclude, our participants were highly aware of the contested nature of gaining group membership concerning their White and minority ancestries (Morning 2018; Song 2003), and that cumulative experiences of rejection or invalidation of their ancestry claims could result in a resigned acceptance of their failed bids to gain recognition and acceptance. Nevertheless, claims to an ancestry (even when rebuffed) could be latent, and some mixed heritage participants could harbor ancestry aspirations and attachments that could readily come to the fore. In the future, it may become more common for people to report multiple races and ancestries. Not only is the mixed heritage population growing through interracial unions but past lineage is becoming easier to access (through GATs and resources like ancestry.com), and the U.S. censuses are making room for this detail in the race question. Though it does not necessarily imply attachment to an ethnicity, national origin, or tribe, reporting an ancestry is at least minimally meaningful. It indicates some knowledge of details and this may point to identity aspirations or meaningful attachments to these reported ancestries.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed equally to all aspects of this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Russell Sage Foundation Presidential Authority Grant 4443.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota (protocol code STUDY00002141, approved December 2017). It was also approved by the research ethics review panel at the University of Kent in November 2017.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Decennial census and ACS data can be accessed at usa.ipums.org/usa (Ruggles et al. 2022). Interview data are not publicly available.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the editor of this special issue, Dan Rodriguez-Garcia, for his work in putting together this volume, and his helpful advice along the way. We also thank the anonymous referees of our article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Johfre et al. (2021): We create a count of what we call *race-unique ancestries* by mapping respondents' reported ancestries to the race response(s) that would be expected based on the Office of Management and Budget's geographic origin and ancestry definitions for U.S. official racial categories.

2 See https://www.census.gov/topics/population/ancestry/about.html (accessed on 1 June 2022) for the Census Bureau's overview of the ancestry question.

3 Source: https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/2010questionnaire.pdf (accessed on 1 June 2022).

4 Until the 2020 Census, the White group and the Black group could not be disaggregated using the race question. This opportunity was available in 2020, but the 2020 Census detailed race results have not yet been released.

5 This is a wider project funded by The Russell Sage Foundation Presidential Authority grant 4443.

6 Note that our interview respondents also include people who reported a single race and a contrasting ancestry.

7 The three groups shown are non-Hispanic biracial people who reported American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) and White, Asian and White, or Black and White. We coded ancestry responses into race groups following Liebler 2016. Data are weighted to be nationally representative in the stated years.

References

Alba, Richard D. 1990. *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Alba, Richard D., and Mitchell B. Chamlin. 1983. A preliminary examination of ethnic identification among whites. *American Sociological Review* 48: 240–47. [CrossRef]

Aspinall, Peter, and Miri Song. 2013. *Mixed Race Identities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bratter, Jenifer. 2007. Will "multiracial" survive to the next generation? The racial classification of children of multiracial parents. *Social Forces* 86: 821–49. [CrossRef]

Campbell, Mary E., and Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck. 2016. What about the children? *The Sociological Quarterly* 47: 147–73. [CrossRef]

Campion, Karis. 2019. You think you're Black? *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42: 196–213. [CrossRef]

Cohn, D'Vera, Anna Brown, and Mark Hugo Lopez. 2021. *Black and Hispanic Americans See Their Origins as Central to Who They Are, Less So For White Adults*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Cornell, Stephen, and Douglas Hartmann. 2007. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identity in a Changing World*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Fhagen-Smith, Peony. 2010. Social class, racial/ethnic identity, and the psychology of choice. In *Multiracial Americans and Social Class: The Influence of Social Class on Racial Identity*. Edited by Kathleen Odell Korgen. New York: Routledge, pp. 30–38.

Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gans, Herbert J. 1979. Symbolic ethnicity: The future of ethnic groups and cultures in America. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2: 1–20. [CrossRef]

Gans, Herbert J. 2012. 'Whitening' and the changing American racial hierarchy. *Du Bois Review* 9: 267–79. [CrossRef]

Goldstein, Joshua R., and Ann J. Morning. 2000. The multiple-race population of the United States: Issues and estimates. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 97: 6230–35. [CrossRef]

Gullickson, Aaron. 2016. Essential measures: Ancestry, race, and social difference. *American Behavioral Scientist* 60: 498–518. [CrossRef]

Gullickson, Aaron, and Ann Morning. 2011. Choosing race: Multiracial ancestry and identification. *Social Science Research* 40: 498–512. [CrossRef]

Hollinger, David A. 1995. *Postethnic America*. New York: Basic Books.

Hout, Michael, and Joshua R. Goldstein. 1994. How 4.5 million Irish immigrants became 40 million Irish Americans: Demographic and subjective aspects of the ethnic composition of White Americans. *American Sociological Review* 59: 64–82. [CrossRef]

Johfre, Sasha Shen, Aliya Saperstein, and Jill A. Hollenbach. 2021. Measuring race and ancestry in the age of genetic testing. *Demography* 58: 785–810. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Khanna, Nikki. 2004. Role of reflected appraisals in racial identity: The case of multiracial Asians. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67: 115–31. [CrossRef]

Khanna, Nikki. 2010. 'If you're half black, you're just black': Reflected appraisals and the persistence of the one-drop rule. *The Sociological Quarterly* 51: 96–121. [CrossRef]

Lee, Jennifer, and Frank D. Bean. 2007. Reinventing the color line: Immigration and America's new racial/ethnic divide. *Social Forces* 86: 561–86. [CrossRef]

Liebler, Carolyn. 2001. The Fringes of American Indian Identity. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA.

Liebler, Carolyn. 2016. On the boundaries of race: Identification of mixed-race children in the United States, 1960–2010. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2: 548–68. [CrossRef]

Liebler, Carolyn, Sonya Porter, Leticia Fernandez, James Noon, and Sharon Ennis. 2017. America's churning races: Race and ethnicity response changes between Census 2000 and the 2010 Census. *Demography* 54: 259–84. [CrossRef]

Mengel, Laurie M. 2001. Triples: The social evolution of a multiracial panethnicity. In *Rethinking 'Mixed Race'*. Edited by David Parker and Miri Song. London: Pluto Press, pp. 99–116.
Morning, Ann. 2018. Kaleidoscope: Contested identities and new forms of race membership. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41: 1055–73. [CrossRef]
Morning, Ann, and Aliya Saperstein. 2018. The generational locus of multiraciality and its implications for racial self-identification. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 677: 57–68. [CrossRef]
Nelson, Alondra. 2008. Bioscience: Genetic genealogy testing and the pursuit of African ancestry. *Social Studies of Science* 38: 759–83. [CrossRef]
Ogbu, John U. 1990. Minority status and literacy in comparative perspective. *Daedalus* 119: 141–68.
Patten, Eileen. 2015. *Who is Multiracial? Depends on How You Ask: A Comparison of Six Survey Methods to Capture Racial Identity*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
Phinney, Jean S., and Anthony D. Ong. 2007. Conceptualization and measurement of ethnic identity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 54: 271–81. [CrossRef]
Pilgrim, Haley. 2021. 'I wish I didn't look so White'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44: 2551–73. [CrossRef]
Rockquemore, Kerry Ann, and David L. Brunsma. 2007. *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America*. Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers.
Rodríguez-García, Dan, Miguel Solana, Anna Ortiz, and Beatriz Ballestín. 2021. Blurring the colour lines? Ethnoracially mixed youth in Spain navigating identity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47: 838–60.
Roth, Wendy D. 2016. The multiple dimensions of race. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39: 1310–38. [CrossRef]
Roth, Wendy D. 2018. Unsettled identities amid settled classifications? Toward a sociology of racial appraisals. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41: 1093–112. [CrossRef]
Roth, Wendy D., and Biorn Ivemark. 2018. Genetic options: The impact of genetic ancestry testing on consumers' racial and ethnic identities. *American Journal of Sociology* 124: 150–84. [CrossRef]
Ruggles, Steven, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Megan Schouweiler, and Matthew Sobek. 2022. *IPUMS USA: Version 12.0 [Dataset]*. Minneapolis: IPUMS.
Saperstein, Aliya, and Andrew M. Penner. 2012. Racial fluidity and inequality in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology* 118: 676–727. [CrossRef]
Sims, Jennifer Patrice, and Chinelo L. Njaka. 2019. *Mixed-Race in the US and UK*. Bingley: Emerald.
Song, Miri. 2003. *Choosing Ethnic Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Song, Miri. 2017. *Multiracial Parents: Mixed Families, Generational Change, and the Future of Race*. New York: NYU Press.
Song, Miri. 2021. Who counts as multiracial? *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44: 1296–323. [CrossRef]
Strmic-Pawl, Hephzibah V. 2016. *Multiracialism and Its Discontents: A Comparative Analysis of Asian-White and Black-White Multiracials*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
Tashiro, Cathy J. 2011. *Standing on Both Feet: Voices of Older Mixed-Race Americans*. Boulder: Paradigm.
Tuan, Mia. 1999. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
Waters, Mary C. 1990. *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Waters, Mary. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Yancey, George A. 2003. *Who Is White? Latinos, Asians, and the New Black/Nonblack Divide*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.