Enlistment of the foreign-born in the US military: US empire and transnational militarism

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Abstract

The foreign-born are an important source of labor for the US military and comprise 5 percent of active duty personnel. Enlistment takes place in a context of pervasive militarism, which extends well beyond US borders through the reach of the US empire. How do immigrants make sense of joining the US military as transnational actors, connected to multiple distinct political and cultural contexts and plural militarisms? I analyze 72 interviews conducted from 2015 to 2019 with non-citizens who enlisted in the US military. I trace the reach of the US empire and develop the concept of *transnational militarism*, showing how immigrants are able to draw on militarisms embedded in different national contexts to make sense of their enlistment in the US military. I demonstrate how the valorization of military technologies, disciplines, and cultures across the world, partially but not entirely driven by the US empire, helps explain why immigrants enlist in the US military. I contextualize the discussion of militarism and US empire within the poverty draft – the push to enlist given dearth of access to employment, benefits, and education outside the military – and the fast-track military route to citizenship, which are key to understanding how immigrants are channeled into US military.

Key words: immigrants, military, militarism, empire, transnationalism

As the US enters the third decade of the War on Terror, the foreign-born are an important source of labor for the US military. In 2019, there were over 200,000 US troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and other places where the US has one of its 800 overseas military bases (Gibbons-Neff and Schmitt 2019; Vine 2015). At the same time, the US government threatened

new wars with Iran and Venezuela. Under constant pressure to fulfill recruitment goals, the US military spends billions of dollars to market itself, including campaigns aimed specifically at immigrants (Garza 2015).

The US has an all-volunteer military that does not obligate anyone to enlist. Rather, there is a functional poverty draft, with young people enlisting due to a dearth of access to employment, benefits, and education outside the military (Brissette 2013; Mariscal 2005; Rempfer 2019). Empirical evidence supports a negative relationship between socioeconomic status and propensity to serve in the military (Kleykamp 2006; Lutz 2008). Pacleb (2009) notes that under "narrow opportunities for economic and social mobility, the poor and racialized youth are most vulnerable to becoming pliable laborers for the military" (p. 141). The conditions pushing youth into the military are likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and concomitant unemployment crisis. Around five percent of all active-duty US military personnel are foreign-born (Batalova 2008), as are three percent of all US military veterans (Zong and Batalova 2019). Immigrants are part of the poverty draft, and they may also seek to get on a fast-track to citizenship that the military promises, if not always delivers (Bergengruen 2018). Immigrant youth face additional pressures to enlist, such as uncertain immigration status in the context of criminalization of immigrants and mass deportations.

Enlistment in the US military takes place in an environment of pervasive militarism. Young people in the US grow up steeped in norms, attitudes, and practices that normalize, legitimate, and glorify endless war (Fogarty 2000; Kronsell 2012; Mann 1987). From schools to sporting events and the media, the ideal of military service is upheld as the utmost expression of patriotism (Gusterson and Besteman 2019). Militarism also promotes respect for hierarchy, obedience to authority, the use of force to solve conflicts, and excessive forms of masculinity

(Enloe 2016; Reardon 1996). Militarism, pushed along by a massive military marketing apparatus, works alongside the poverty draft to drive youth into the military (Perez 2009). US brand of militarism extends beyond its borders through the reach of the US empire. Many migrant flows to the US can be traced to direct or indirect involvement of the US military (e.g. refugees from Southeast Asia, Central America, or the Middle East). US cultural products glorifying the military are consumed well beyond its borders (Andersen and Mirrlees 2014). What is the role of militarism and US empire in the enlistment of immigrants in the US military? Moreover, while US military force is dominant, other places have their own militarisms and military systems. How do immigrants make sense of joining the US military as transnational actors, connected to multiple distinct political and cultural contexts and plural militarisms?

This study fills a unique place in the literature. Neither migration studies nor military sociology have adequately explored the contemporary enlistment of the foreign born in the US military. Existing research tends to focus on immigrants' superior performance in the military compared to US born service members, or the way that the military contributes to immigrant social mobility (Barry 2013; Chishti, Rose, and Yale-Loehr 2019; Lundquist, Strader, and Dominguez-Villegas 2019). Much of what we know about recruitment and enlistment of immigrants into the US military comes from journalistic accounts or the research arm of the military itself, which is concerned with meeting recruiting targets. This paper provides an analysis of recruitment from the perspective of the foreign born enlistees, and it does so through a critical military studies lens that departs from imperatives and norms of the military, and seeks to curtail militarism and imperialism (Rech 2014).

Drawing on interview data, I trace the reach of the US empire and develop the concept of *transnational militarism*, showing how immigrants draw on militarisms embedded in different

national contexts to make sense of their enlistment in the US military, despite tensions that this may present. I demonstrate how the valorization of military technologies, disciplines, and cultures across the world, partially but not entirely driven by the US empire, helps explain why immigrants enlist in the US military. I also contextualize the discussion of transnational militarism and US empire within the poverty draft and fast-track citizenship, which are key to understanding how immigrants are channeled into US military.

RACE, EMPIRE, AND RECRUITMENT

Historically, US military was largely organized as a force for occupying indigenous territory, fighting indigenous nations, and suppressing slave insurrections. From the beginning, the foreign born were part of it: as many as half of the recruits by the 1840s were immigrants, primarily from Germany and Ireland (Lutz 2002; Lutz 2012; Wiegley 1967). Colonial and post-colonial populations were used – and continue to be used – as labor in the US military. For instance, until 1991, the US Navy recruited directly from the Philippines and continues to have a high percentage of Filipino immigrants in its ranks, even though the Philippines has not been an official colony of the US since its independence in 1946 (Lutz 2012). Heavy US military presence in its contemporary colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa is coupled with high levels of recruitment of their populations into the US military and high casualty rates (Fallows 2015).

At the same time, military service has long been seen – not least in the way the military promotes itself – as a route to inclusion and full citizenship for oppressed populations. This has been true for African Americans, who have used their contributions to the US military to fight for full citizenship rights, only to face violent repression by whites in response to their claims-making (Gusterson 1999; Parker 2009). Today, African American service members are

overrepresented, and the military holds itself up as a paragon of integration (Moskos and Butler 1997). But, as Ray (2018) points out, their overrepresentation is driven by the discrimination in the labor market. Another way to see the service of African Americans in the US military is as foot soldiers in the global racial project built by the US (Ray 2007). Groups that are treated as threats to the US nation have faced pressure to prove their loyalty and deservingness of full citizenship through military service. Today, this includes Latinxs and those racialized as Muslims, as they face exclusion and increasingly punitive and criminalizing immigration policies (Cacho 2012; Garza 2015b; Mariscal 1999; Pacleb 2009). During World War II, Japanese Americans fought to prove their loyalty through military service, even as their communities were imprisoned in internment camps (Cachola, Grandinetti, and Yamashiro 2019). Framing military service as a measure of moral worth helps obscure the material underpinnings of the poverty draft and the reality that military service is a job with a contract (Gusterson and Besteman 2019).

Recruitment patterns are correlated with unemployment rates and economic downturns, as well as the rising costs of college (Baldor 2018; Rempfer 2019). The foreign born population is a promising pool for recruiters because immigrant youth is considered to be "higher quality": less likely to have criminal records and exhibiting lower attrition rates. Immigrants often have language and cultural skills the US military needs in its many projects across the globe, including in places foreign-born recruits come from (McIntosh, Sayala, and Gregory 2011). In fact, between 2009 and 2017, the Department of Defense instituted a special program called Military Accessions of Vital National Importance (MAVNI), arguing that immigrants on temporary visas were vitally important to the mission because of their language and cultural skills (Chishti, Rose, and Yale-Loehr 2019).

The US military runs extensive marketing campaigns meant to entice youth to enlist, with the army alone spending around $400 million dollars each year on advertising (Coffee 2019). Some of the marketing campaigns have focused on specific racial groups, such as the army's Yo Soy El Army campaign, which targets Latinxs youth and their families (Garza 2015a). Recruiters have access to student contact information and target low-income neighborhood schools, where youth have limited career and college options (Aguirre and Johnson 2005; Anderson 2009; Bartlett and Lutz 1998; Cowen 2006, Garza 2015a). There are recruiters with specific ethnic and immigrant backgrounds and language skills that are dispatched to target immigrant communities (Alvarez 2006, Ma and Zhang 2017). The Department of Defense has been a supporter of the DREAM Act, seeing the proposal to tie a path to citizenship for childhood arrivals to college or military service as a way to expand the pool of potential recruits (Mariscal 2007).

Citizenship is not required for enlistment, and between 1999 and 2010, 80,000 non-citizens enlisted in the US military (McIntosh, Sayala, and Gregory 2011). Although all branches of the US military have rules requiring permanent legal residency or citizenship to enlist, undocumented immigrants have been recruited and enlisted (Davis 2007; Stevenson 2003). Like their documented peers, these immigrants can be granted citizenship in time of war based on their military service, and they become eligible for naturalization faster than civilians (Plascencia 2009). Even legal permanent residents who would otherwise eventually qualify for citizenship might want to get it faster and more affordably through the military in order to sponsor a family member's migration. Or, they may seek to access other benefits of citizenship, such as protection from deportation or expanded employment opportunities [blinded self-citation]. Naturalization for members of the military is – in theory, if no longer in practice (Bergengruen 2018) – expedited, but it not automatic. In fact, 20 percent of the 530,000 immigrant veterans are not US

citizens who can be, and have been, deported (Martinez 2016; Reynolds and Shendruk 2008; Zong and Batalova 2019).

"Immigrant" is a wide category that captures diverse migration pathways and processes, including those that connect the US to its empire in the form of military installations, multinational companies extracting resources and cheap labor, and political interference. Attention to these contexts helps expand the analysis of enlistment of immigrants beyond the boundaries of the US. While interactions with recruiters and military marketing campaigns no doubt play an important role in the enlistment of the foreign born, a wider analytic lens includes what happens to migrants before they migrate, as well as the impact of transnational ties. Moreover, migrant youth considering enlistment are embedded in families and communities. Parents, and others who the military considers to be "influencers" in recruitment, might have experiences serving in other nations' militaries and experiences with the US military in other countries, including through proximity to US military bases or US military incursions. They may even have served as contract labor for the US military. These experiences may incline the youth to enlist in the US military or to reject it. For instance, family histories of bearing the brunt of US military aggression may negatively impact immigrant youth's propensity to enlist. Proximity and interaction with US military bases abroad may leave people embittered or it may predispose them to admire the US military's image of modernity and might (Lutz and Enloe 2009; Reyes 2019).

MILITARISM

In exploring the role of militarism in the enlistment of the foreign born in the US military, I draw on the anthropological study of militarism, with its focus on cultural practices and ideologies (Gusterson and Besteman 2019), rather than on political science definitions that use quantitative

measures, such as the amount of military funding and number of bases (Zafirovski 2020). Militarism connotes the normalization and glorification of war and the valorization of violent masculinity, obedience, and hierarchy (Fogarty 2000; Kronsell 2012; Mann 1987; Gusterson and Besteman 2019; Enloe 2016; Reardon 1996). Militarism pervades US society, with Americans "accultured to accept war as a reasonable or inevitable solution to conflicts" (Brissette 2013, p. 377). Furthermore, militarism means that military values infuse civilian life, where "civilian society organizes itself for the production of violence" (Geyer 1989, p. 79; Enloe 2016). Lutz (2002) points out the concomitant increase in labor and resources devoted to the military and that the goals of civilian institutions are reshaped in the image and in the service of the military.

Immigrant youth who largely grew up in the US are immersed in its militarist culture and a social order where a large share of resources is diverted to military uses. In contrast, those who arrive as older teens or young adults may be variably affected by the militarism that pervades their new environment. We can expect that the latter group might have different motivations and understandings around enlisting in the military than immigrants who arrived as children. Military service is tied to citizenship for non-citizens who enlist, and turns these foreign-born enlistees into what Pacleb (2009) identifies as the "new 'model minority' of the twenty-first century" (p. 136). So not only do immigrant youth enlist in a context of US militarism, but the immigration system itself is further militarized, in that it ties military service to immigration status adjustment even as border and internal enforcement is ever more dominated by military technologies and practices (Miller 2019). The militarization of the immigration system contributes to the entrenchment of the values of militarism in US society.

As a system of shared meanings and values, militarism is often, but not always, tied to nationalism. There are forms of militarism that don't necessarily engage with the idea of a

nation-state, such as that of military contractors and mercenaries. Kronsell (2012) notes that there are different versions of militarism across societies and that they may employ different forms of organized violence, even as they share the normalization of war. There is scholarship on militarism in distinct national contexts (e.g. Beinin 1998; Knorre 2016; Raffield et al 2019), but the relationships between different militarisms are complex. Gusterson and Besteman (2019) argue that militarism can be "simultaneously local and global" (p.S10), hiding the connections between systems of shared meanings around organized violence, including connections forged by global capitalism and colonialism. Cachola, Graninetti, and Yamashiro (2019) argue that militarism is a "transnational network entwined with colonialism, white supremacy, and toxic masculinity," (p. 70) and point out that post-colonial nations, e.g. Indonesia, reproduce militarized national structures that they inherited from colonial administrations. In this study, I depart from the premise of multiple militarisms with distinct "regimes of power and imaginations that take shape in different regions" (Rutherford 2019, p. S1), even as these militarisms are clearly connected to each other in ways that benefit global capitalist elites (Gusterson and Besteman 2019).

Transnational militarism has been used to denote the extension of US militarism beyond the borders of the US and to connect US interventions abroad to militarized violence against domestic populations (Ceretti 2016; Lee 2017; Pae 2009). I build on this descriptive use of the term by drawing on the theoretization of transnationalism in migration studies, examining the economic, political, social, and cultural ties connecting communities and institutions across borders (Vertovec 1999). Like many immigrants more generally, those who enlist in the US military have multiple identities connecting them to multiple nations (Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1992), and we can expect to see these immigrants making sense of US military service

by drawing on and constructing links across cultural, political, and social spaces. Considering immigrant engagement with militarisms is an opportunity to empirically observe transnational militarism as a form of recruitment into the US military, connecting individual meaning-making to macro-processes of empire building.

METHODS

I draw on 72 semi-structured interviews conducted from 2015 to 2019 to analyze decisions to enlist in the US military. I interviewed non-citizen immigrants who enlisted in the US military, primarily in the first two decades of the 21st century. Interviews are well suited to access nuanced meaning-making, narratives, identity, and emotion (Lamont and Swidler 2014). I conducted interviews in person or using video conferencing, which allowed me to gather data from a wide geographical range covering the US and two sites in northern Mexico. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 2 hours. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, personal networks, and outreach through community colleges, legal and health clinics, veterans' organizations, and online groups. Many outreach efforts were dead ends because gatekeepers of various groups and institutions either had not realized that non-citizen enlistees existed, or were sure that no such veterans were affiliated with them. The high ratio between outreach efforts and successful participant recruitment contributed to an extended period (five years) of data collection. Respondents received $20 for participation. All names are pseudonyms.

[Insert Table 1]

Table 1 shows selected characteristics of the study participants. I interviewed people who were born in 27 countries, with the largest group being born in Asia. Most of these respondents enlisted in the US military through the MAVNI program for temporary visa holders that targeted

international college students. I interviewed 14 people from Latin America, mostly from Mexico, and 4 from the Caribbean. There were 9 European respondents, 3 African respondents, and one white respondent from Canada. Reflecting the low representation of women in the military more generally, 11 respondents were female. Most respondents enlisted in the Army or Army Reserve, with fewer enlisting in the Navy and the Marines. I interviewed three respondents who enlisted as undocumented.

In interviewing members of the military and veterans, I presented myself as a college professor interested in immigrants in the military, and one who was not intimately familiar with the institution. I also shared that I am a first-generation immigrant. Interviews were transcribed by me and graduate research assistants, and all were thematically analyzed by me using AtlasTi. I developed the initial coding scheme based on broad topics in the early versions of the interview guide and respondent characteristics. Additional themes emerged during ongoing interviewing and initial rounds of analysis, leading to more nuanced coding themes that I then used for additional rounds of data collection and analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

RESULTS

Analysis of interviews with immigrants who enlisted in the US military reveals the widespread reality of the poverty draft. Those who arrived to the US as young adults are more likely to be attracted by the promise of a fast-track citizenship, while this matters less for childhood arrivals. The poverty draft and the draw of citizenship serve as context for the analysis of militarism. I examine how US militarism within the US and the global reach of the US empire shape immigrant pathways into the US military and their understandings of their own enlistment. Finally, I present evidence for transnational militarism: showing how immigrants draw on

militarisms embedded in different national contexts in making sense of their enlistment, despite tensions in the content, goals, and meanings that this may present. I note the strains that my respondents reported with their families, which provide further insight into the tensions embedded in militarism as a framework for enlistment among the foreign born.

Poverty draft and fast-track citizenship

The structure of the economy, the lack of affordable educational opportunities, and the dearth of a social safety net all work to provide a supply of workers for the US military. Immigrants are a part of that supply. Their job opportunities can be limited by lack of citizenship and lack of access to social networks. Luis's enlistment story illustrates the way that the poverty draft operates among immigrant youth. Luis was born in Mexico, and moved to Texas with his family at age 8. The family survived on Luis's father's earnings as a dairy farm worker. As a teen, Luis milked cows alongside his father during school breaks, to help pay off family debts. Luis did well in school and attended college, but even with loans, he routinely ran out of money for food:

> So I remember being hungry. I would have like a dollar and I would buy a Kit Kat, the king size because it was bigger. But my head… would start hurting, so much sugar rush… And I'd be like nah, I can't be going through this. I would see my parents struggling with my fees from the university and I said no. I got to be a man, I got to step up. I don't want to milk cows for the rest of my life. I just said, you know what? I want to join the Army.

Luis dropped out of college before completing his first semester. Enlisting in the military was an alternative to becoming an exploited migrant laborer like his father. Like other study participants whose migrant parents labored in agriculture, construction, and food preparation, Luis framed

military service as not only being easier than what his parents did, but also imbued with more respect. Military work also connoted independent manhood:

> To help my parents, I knew that the military, without even knowing exactly, I had not one single shred of doubt that they would take care of me. It was not only financially. They'd help me become a man, help me become independent, help me in doing something. And I really felt that in return, I was willing to sign a blank check with my life, payable to whatever if it was necessary.

As a soldier Luis could help support his parents in a way unavailable to him through other types of employment. In return for the opportunity to be a military worker, Luis offered his life.

One way to understand Luis's story is to hold him up as a hard-working immigrant who overcame his tough environment to vindicate the choice of his parents to migrate. But that telling is incomplete. Luis's parents were part of a long-term migration system from Mexico to the US, which relied on recruitment by US businesses seeking cheap workers with few rights. Their economic precarity in Mexico is a result of US dominance in the region, its penetration into and disruption of the local economies to extract resources and profit. Luis recounted elementary school years in East Texas filled with physical and verbal abuse from white teachers. From seventh grade on, he lived in a less racist environment in El Paso, in the shadow of Fort Bliss, a massive Army base. Luis's pathway into the military took place within this larger structural context driving Mexican labor migration into the US and the white supremacist capitalist system that offered few living wage, non-stigmatized alternatives to a working class teenager.

Luis's proximity to Fort Bliss while growing up is consistent with quantitative scholarship that shows a positive correlation between living close to military installations and enlistment (Kleykamp 2006). But even when not growing up in proximity to military bases,

some immigrant veterans were channeled into enlistment while attending military academies – one of thousands of public schools that tend to be located in poor neighborhoods of color and instill students with the culture of militarism (Aguirre and Johnson 2005). Many others attended regular high schools where military recruiters had a heavy presence, pulling them from class, driving them around, taking them out for meals, and visiting their homes.

Luis's enlistment exemplifies the immigrant variety of the poverty draft, but poverty and lack of economic opportunities were not the only reasons he enlisted. Luis also spoke of his attraction to the adventure and honor of the military, for instance. Like most of my respondents, the reasons for enlistment are complex and cannot be reduced to the poverty draft alone. Yet the structural conditions that drive enlistment in the contemporary US cannot be ignored and were clearly evident in my interview data. Even those who did not come from families as desperately poor as Luis's were pushed into the military by the prohibitive costs of college. The military subsidizes college education for service members to attract volunteers in the absence of a draft. Not surprisingly then, many enlist in order to pay for college, immigrants included. Without drastic measures to forgive student debt and cut college costs, the COVID-19 crisis promises to push even more youth into the military.

Since enlistment comes with a promise of a fast-track path to citizenship, we might expect it to play a role in attracting the foreign-born to the US military. This was, in fact, the case for some of my respondents, primarily for those who arrived as young adults and held temporary student or employment visas. For them, service in the military was the most viable and fastest way to get citizenship. For someone on a student or employment visa, the best case scenario is finding an employer who will sponsor them or marrying a US citizen. More likely, immigrants on temporary visas live for many years from one visa renewal to the next, falling out of status in

between, a substantial number never getting to legal permanent residency (Kretsedemas 2012). The military route to citizenship provided a tremendous shortcut until the latest security requirements made naturalization through the military more onerous than civilian naturalization (Bergengruen 2018).

Most non-citizens who enlist in the US military have legal permanent residency, not temporary visas. As legal permanent residents, they have a civilian pathway to citizenship after a waiting period of three years for those married to a US citizen and five years for others. Nevertheless, a few still said they enlisted because of the fast track to citizenship. For instance, Truda's permanent resident status was still in its conditional stage, tied to her troubled marriage to a US citizen. The military offered a way to leave that marriage and secure citizenship for herself, no longer having to worry about deportation to Poland.

Truda arrived to the US as a young adult. In contrast, immigrants who grew up in the US with legal permanent residency were often less focused on and less aware of immigration processes. Many had not even realized that service in the military qualified them for naturalization. Some were informed of the fast path to citizenship by their recruiters and others were not. This evidence that immigrants join the military not caring about citizenship benefits is less of a talking point in defense of the exemplary loyalty of immigrants but rather an indicator of a double vulnerability of immigrants in the military. While all veterans contend with the mental and physical consequences of their service, the high rates of substance abuse, and disproportionate incarceration (Barton 2014; Hagopian and Barker 2011), non-citizen veterans are also vulnerable to deportation. The deported veterans I spoke were, in fact, those who did not know about the citizenship eligibility through military service, were misinformed about how it worked (e.g. some thought it happened automatically), or did not understand that veteran status

would not protect them from deportation. In all, the poverty draft was a strong factor in the enlistment of the foreign-born in the US military while citizenship was more important for those who arrived as young adults rather than children, especially if they were on temporary visas.

US Militarism and the US empire

My data show that immigrant youth growing up in the US are clearly influenced by the US brand of militarism that surrounds them. But US militarism is a powerful force that transcends US borders, influencing even those immigrants who come to the US as older teens or adults through exposure to US cultural products and US military presence. Immigrants who grew up in the US are affected by the pervasive images of the US military as honorable service and viable career path. Gilberto migrated from Mexico with his parents and grew up in California. Even as a child, he knew that he wanted to be in the military:

> I've always wanted to be in the military, since I was a young kid. I think I've been wearing dog tags since I was in 8th grade. I used to go to the surplus store and I had my own custom tags made, and... You know, watched all the war movies, read all the books. I knew almost everything there was to know about the Marine Corps already when I went into boot camp, so... It was just always a dream for me.

Gilberto enlisted as soon as he obtained legal permanent residency after high school graduation. His quote illustrates the strong pull of militarism for a child growing up in the US. But even immigrants who grew up in other countries and migrated as young adults were affected. For example, Rabindra did not think of military as an option for himself when he was growing up in Nepal, but was drawn to it after he came to the US for college:

> Whenever I watched the NFL games a lot, like football and stuff, whenever the game starts, how they always thank the military for the service…that always fascinated me. I never thought about it back home because I don't think we have that concept, appreciating military during the times like that. But when I came to the US, how always the military service is being appreciated here, that kind of fascinated me. And everybody is quite appreciative of their service and it's quite recognized everywhere.

As a college student in the US, Rabindra consumed cultural products laced with US militarism. The ceremonies of the National Football League that honor service members and veterans are actually part of a costly marketing campaign: a congressional report revealed 10 million dollars spent by the Department of Defense on marketing contracts with professional sports teams between 2012 and 2015 alone (Thorp and Schuppe 2015). After enlisting in the Army Reserve, Rabindra recounted wearing his uniform in public and feeling good when people thanked him for his service. Another international college student, Daniel, from China, was drawn to enlist in the military after admiring Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets he saw on his college campus. He even started following their Facebook page: "At least the pictures they posted were awesome, and I thought that I want to try it outside the university."

Gilberto, Rabindra, and Daniel were influenced by exposure to militarism while in the US. However, immigrants' path to enlistment can start before immigration. Some admire the heroic representations of the US military that they see in exported US cultural products. For example, Anildo, who grew up in Cape Verde, recalled always liking the US military from watching US movies. Watching Hollywood movies was not the only reason he enlisted in the army after migrating, of course, but it was part of his explanation for how enlistment came to seem as an option, alongside with needing to pay for college. Amitabh said he formed a positive

impression of the US military in India: "My favorite book is *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer. Since childhood, I have this opinion or impression that U.S. has always sided with the good people, downtrodden people. I had nice feeling about joining US Army."

The reach of US militarism extends beyond national borders not only through the export of US culture but through the physical presence of almost 800 US military bases in 70 countries (Vine 2015). People across the world have engaged in resisting the presence of US military, whether as part of anti-imperial struggles or focused on specific abuses perpetrated by US military workers on these bases (Lutz and Enloe 2009). However, as Victoria Reyes (2019) shows in the case of the Philippines, US military bases can become wrapped up in narratives of modernity and aspirations of progress. In such cases, immigrants to the US may draw on these positive associations with US military bases as they make sense of their own enlistment in the US military. For example, one of my South Korean respondents was attracted to the US military after visiting a US military base in South Korea. George was born and grew up in South Korea, where he performed military duty that South Korea requires of its male citizens. The transformative visit to the US military base occurred during a demoralizing stretch of his South Korean military service, setting him on a future path of enlistment in the US Army Reserves:

> I was in Korea, I was having so much miserable time, and my office captain [in the Korean military] brought me to the US base when he was visiting… I was really impressed with all of the facilities, really top-notch. This is what the military is supposed to be. I had a lot of respect for the US military and if given the opportunity, I would like to be part of it or work for it or whatever. That experience really transformed the way I viewed the US military… And to me, I saw the US military when I was at the lowest point in my life, literally. I was throwing up in the middle of the day and all that and I

> was just so miserable that even my office captain had to bring me out of the [Korean] base to visit US Army base… It was like a shining light at the end of a tunnel, literally.

Later, as an international student in the US, George enlisted in the army reserves through the MAVNI program. Like a few other immigrants I spoke to, George admired the power and technology of the US military. The US has had a heavy presence in South Korea since the 1950s, with, most recently, 28,000 US service members on 83 bases (Gibbons-Neff and Schmitt 2019; Vine 2015). For George, suffering from poor living conditions and a loss of class status as a middle class man serving in a working class Korean military unit, the US military base became a symbol of military superiority. Of course, US military bases do not always provoke admiration.

In addition to military bases, US military employs a large number of contractors in its warfare. Private contractor personnel actually outnumbered US service members in Iraq and Afghanistan after 2003 (Avant and de Nevers 2011). The exposure that these contractors have to the US military can also play a role in immigrant enlistment. For example, Jung-soo, another Korean respondent, said that his parents loved the idea of him being in the US military. His mother, a nurse, worked as a US contractor during the first Gulf War. In fact, Jung-soo left Korea before doing his mandatory military service, and he did not want to serve in the Korean military, preferring to enlist in the US Army. He thought that the South Korean military treated its soldiers much worse, “like dirt pretty much,” and that soldiers got more respect in the US.

The global reach of the US military can influence the enlistment of immigrants before they even move to the US. Since I interviewed those who did enlist, I was less likely to learn about how US imperialism predisposes immigrants to reject the US military as an employment option. However, some of my participants recalled strain with their families precipitated by their enlistment – precisely because family members viewed US empire negatively. For example,

Muhammed kept his enlistment from his family as long as he could, anticipating their disapproval: “I am a Pakistani who’s joining an Army for a foreign country. Worldwide, the connotation for the US military is not good.” One of Muhammed’s sisters opposed his enlistment because “she doesn’t really like what the US military does as an institution… The negative perception and the negative acts that the military has done in pursing the US foreign policy.” Muhammed’s brother opposed it from “a very ethical, moral, or even I’d say a political and religious point of view.” Muhammed’s family viewed his enlistment in the US military as an unwelcome embrace of the US empire. Muhammed did not explicitly connect his family’s dislike of US empire to Pakistani nationalism, although polls show that most Pakistanis view the US as an enemy (Heimlich 2010). Muhammed said he was enlisting for “a lot of the same reasons that other people join the military, for normal, regular born citizens”, namely as a job with benefits, as well as a way to prove himself and establish independence from his family.

Another respondent, Russell, had a grandfather living in China who “strongly disagreed” with Russell’s choice to join the US Army. This grandfather had served as a regiment commander in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army and fought in the Korean War against the US. In fact, Russell’s grandfather led a cannon regiment, and Russell’s goal was to become a cannon crew member. Russell saw his grandfather’s style of militarism as patriotic and outdated. He thought there was nothing wrong with enlisting in a foreign military, citing Chinese citizens joining the French Legion as his model and insisting that the Chinese government did not consider it illegal. In a way, Russell was modeling his life on his grandfather’s, down to the type of military job he wanted, yet he bracketed the Chinese nationalism that came with his grandfather’s militarism. Russell did so by embracing a cosmopolitan, de-nationalized militarism: “right now it's like globalism. It's pretty much like an open world right now as long

as you don't break the law." Russell's explanations of his enlistment point to the operations of transnational militarism, which I address next.

Transnational militarism

In addition to the way US militarism influences enlistment among immigrants in the US and beyond its borders, it is important to consider other varieties of militarism. The US empire may be powerful and US military's reach unprecedented, but militarism is not unique to the US. Other nations have their own varieties of militarism, with their own sets of shared meanings, values, and constructions of the enemy. How do different militarisms affect enlistment of immigrants in the US military? My interviews revealed that many immigrants, particularly those who arrived to the US as young adults, make sense of their service by drawing on militarism from different cultural contexts. Transnational militarism de-emphasizes the objectives of specific conflicts or identification of specific enemies in favor of shared or overlapping valorization of military technologies and disciplines.

In general, family legacies of military service are correlated with enlistment (Kleykamp 2006). This was true of some of my respondents, even though their family members served in militaries outside of the US. My respondents made various connections between their own interest in the US military and military service of their family members. For Heena, an immigrant from Nepal and an Army veteran who was pushed to enlist by severe economic hardships, her brother's military career in Nepal was a point of reference because her brother, too, had joined as a response to the family's economic hardship, highlighting how the poverty draft is hardly unique to the US. Often, respondents had grown up with family members who were in the military and learned positive valuations of military disciplines and modes of being.

Thus, another Nepalese immigrant, Kiran, recounted looking up to his maternal uncles, who were in the Nepalese army: “They were fit, smart, dressed up really nice and neat, everything, and I was always jealous. I look at my body and I'm like "I won't be able to do that" because I was a little bulky and chunky.” When Kiran came to the US as an international college student, he similarly admired sharply dressed ROTC cadets on campus, and thought aspirationally about their fitness and body types. Thus, respondents made sense of their enlistment in the US military by drawing on military service of their family members – in other militaries.

Associations of the military with discipline and masculinity were common. For instance, Miguel talked about admiring his grandfather, who was in the Peruvian military: “He was this grizzled, hardcore man with a lot of faults. Very old school male, macho. But I looked up to that… I felt I was too soft.. I figure this [enlisting] would also toughen me up, make me a man.” Miguel wanted to emulate his grandfather by joining the US military, understanding it to provide similar experiences. Hope’s Chinese parents had not served in the Chinese military, but they were glad she enlisted after moving to the US. In fact, she said that her father had wanted her to be a soldier in China and thought it was “the same thing” for Hope to enlist in the US military because it would provide her with discipline. Hope’s example demonstrates how transnational militarism transposes militarist values across borders even when there is antogonism between the nationalist content of the militarisms involved – when others, like Russell’s grandfather (mentioned above) are aghast that their Chinese grandchild would join the military of an enemy force.

Beyond family legacies, a few respondents drew on ethnic legacies to make sense of their own enlistment. One of the Russian respondents, Sergei, argued that Eastern Europeans were particularly disposed to combat in the US military and the French Legion, unlike Chinese and

Indian soldiers. Daler, a respondent from India framed his enlistment in the US military by referencing inherent warrior properties of his ethnic group, which he requested I do not name: "My community has fought for the British… As part of the British Army they have been to different wars in Europe, Africa, so in continuation to the same legacy, I continue to make a name for our community by fighting for the US side." The way Daler explained his enlistment clearly evokes Cachola et al (2019) point about militarism as a "transnational network entwined with colonialism" (p. 70). Another Indian immigrant, Amitabh, linked his physical fitness and daredevil fearlessness to his caste: "in 16th and 17th century, Brahmins have served in the military and they have helped the kings to win wars. They have been a warrior... I think that's in me, so sometimes I like to brag… I'm never afraid of deployment."

As mentioned, a few of my respondents served in other militaries. In addition to those who had done mandatory military duty in South Korea, another respondent, Jorge, voluntarily served in the Ecuadoran military for a year and tried, unsuccessfully, to become an officer in the Ecuadoran air force. Jorge longed for military life and thought he was good at it, which contributed to his determination to enlist in the US Army. Many of the respondents who migrated as young adults had first tried to join the military in the country where they grew up. For example, Rohit failed the exam for Indian officer school, but this did not squelch his motivation to be in the military. When he came to the US as an international college student, Rohit saw the MAVNI program as "the same opportunity" and easily translated his interest in the military to a new national context: "As I said, [I had a] passion, I had the chance to join army. I mean Indian Army or US army, it's the same thing for me." Immigrants like Rohit wanted to be in the military first and foremost, and the nation the military served was negotiable.

The study is focused on immigrants who enlisted in the US military and does not include a comparison with those who did not. Yet, it is reasonable to expect that opposition to or reservations about militarism grounded in military experience abroad would also play a role in immigrant enlistment in the US. As with the role of US imperialism, this can be glimpsed through the respondents' accounts of arguments with their families. Family members make sense of their youth's enlistment through their understandings of other militaries. This was the case with Vaclav's father, who tried to convince Vaclav not to join because of the physical and psychological danger of military work:

> They[parents] tried to talk me out of it, of course. My dad was telling me like, "You know, this ain't going to be a videogame, you know, it's going to be real bullets flying." Because obviously my dad has real experience because he was in the Slovakian Army back during Communism and everybody was drafted, you know, so he knew what he was talking about. He told me, 'Look, people going to pick on you, people going to mess with you, it's going to be rough, you're going to be completely changed person, and right now United States is waging two wars, so you're going to probably see some shit.' And I'm like, 'Well, you know, I guess we all going to die one day so, you know, I might as well do something.'

Like many other immigrant youth I spoke to, Vaclav dismissed his parents' concerns for his safety that were based on military experience elsewhere. Immigrants' decisions to enlist can also take place in tension with the ethnic community's rejection of militarism that is grounded in the experience of the military in the home country. This was the case with Emmanuel, who came to the US from Haiti and explained that "Haitians generally do not have a good opinion about the military life, or military personnel, based on their experience. Because they always think military

means war, killing, and all that." He thought this too at first, but growing up poor and being persistently courted by a military recruiter in high school, he ended up changing his mind and becoming a career sailor. I include Vaclav and Emmanuel's experiences with family and community to hint at a concurrent process of transnational anti-militarism. A few respondents had parents who were pacifists as a matter of religious or ethical belief, not tied to specific experiences with the military.

The US culture of militarism is a powerful force that shapes immigrant participation in the US military, and it even extends beyond the US borders. However, immigrants who come to the US as older teenagers or adults also draw on militarism from the countries where they grew up in the process of transnational militarism. These other militarisms may overlap with US militarism, yet accounts of tensions between immigrant youth and their families reveal that militarisms have distinct national characteristics, such as particular constructions of enemy.

CONCLUSION

In the era of an all-volunteer force, immigrants are recruited with the promise of a steady paycheck with health, education, and housing benefits. In many communities across the US, for immigrants and the US born alike, the military provides a job and a way to pay for college that are difficult to match. Aside from this poverty draft, some immigrants, particularly those who migrated as young adults on temporary education or work visas, enlist because of the promised fast track to citizenship.

The foreign born provide a unique opportunity to examine how militarism operates in the US, beyond it, and across borders. I trace the impact of pervasive US militarism on immigrant enlistment within the US, not least due to massive military marketing campaigns in schools and

the media, as well as cultural scripts that valorize military service as honorable and normalize US's endless wars. I demonstrate how the reach of the US empire through cultural products and military bases extends recruitment well beyond the borders of the US, although not without tensions around the nature of US imperialism, revealed in conflicts with respondents' family members.

My interview data allows an investigation of transnational militarism, showing how immigrants draw on different militarisms to make sense of their enlistment. They do so by downplaying the nationalist content that often comes with militarism, and emphasizing the association of the military with respectful careers, physical fitness, fearlessness, valorized masculinity, and discipline. Some also draw on militarist narratives specific to ethnic, religious, and caste groups and identities. Many of those who arrived to the US young adults have served in other militaries, tried to join other militaries, or grew up interested in joining other militaries. In constructing their identities as enlistees in the US, these immigrants continued to reference their attraction to these other militaries, whether they were those of US allies or not. Again, tensions with loved ones and communities over enlistment revealed how anti-militarism can also be transnational, as when family members or co-ethnics referenced the violent and destructive nature of other militaries they experienced.

The US military is the largest employer in the world (Chang 2015), and military workers carry out myriad duties that maintain the US empire outside and within the US borders. This work can be deadly: over 7,000 US troops have been killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, and some of the earliest casualties were soldiers born outside of the US (Department of Defense 2019; Plascencia 2009). The toll of the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq had resulted in at least half a million civilian casualties, millions of refugees, and widespread

destruction of physical and social infrastructure (Crawford 2018). Many scholars have written about the recent criminalization of immigrants, but fewer have considered the concomitant militarization of immigration beyond the militarization of the border and immigration enforcement. A combination of economic polarization, racist exclusion, and erosion of immigrant rights serves to increase the flow of immigrant workers into the US military. Even as they are promised a fast track to citizenship, immigrants in the military face the risk of death and injury, as well as the moral injury of participating in unjust wars of imperialism and inflicting death and injury on others. "For those living with little or no rights, the possibility of dying on the front lines is transformed into an 'opportunity' for legal recognition" (Cacho 2012, p. 108).

The paper bridges the study of migrants and the military, which rarely intersect except to examine immigrant performance in the military or to examine the military's role in immigrant adaptation. Rather, this paper is positioned within a critique of US imperialism and militarism, providing a rare qualitative account of the complex ways in which immigrants understand and navigate their decisions to enlist. It is in the interest of the US military to better understand why immigrants enlist. Such information serves to strengthen and better target the recruitment campaigns (though the economic devastation wrought by the COVID-19 crisis might channel more youth into the military anyway). Instead of adding to this body of military research, I provide an alternative, critical examination of immigrant enlistment, premised on the belief that immigrant enlistment is a social problem because of the risk of death and (moral and physical) injury to the migrant workers, militarization of immigration and citizenship, entrenchment of militarism, and the terrible human costs of the US empire. I contribute a sociological analysis of interview data with enlistees to the existing body of critical scholarship on militarism (Rech 2014), and I push the scope of counter-recruitment research to embrace the full reach of US

empire. Further research should investigate transnational anti-militarism and its connections to anti-colonial and anti-war social movements, immigrant resistance to recruitment into the US military, and immigrant participation in anti-war organizing.

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Table 1. Study participant characteristics

Region of origin	
Latin America	14 (Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru)
Caribbean	4 (Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad)
South Asia	17 (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka)

East and Southeast Asia	24 (Taiwan, China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines)
Africa	3 (Cape Verde, Kenya)
Europe	9 (Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine)
Canada	1
Male	61
Female	11
Army	26
Army Reserve	31
Navy	6
Marines	8
Enlisted before 9/11	15
Enlisted after 9/11	57
Enlisted as undocumented	3
Enlisted into the MAVNI program	39