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# Latinx Veterans, Outsider Patriotism and the Motives Behind Minoritized Military Service

SPECIAL COLLECTION: PATRIOTISM

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

For many Americans, the figure of the veteran—usually imagined as a straight, white, native-born cisgender male—embodies a profoundly resonant patriotic ideal. However, although the working class and veterans of color who make up the majority of the US Armed Forces' enlisted ranks themselves generally acknowledge that a range of motives inspired the decision to enlist, the scholarship to date on veterans and patriotism, which focuses primarily on white former servicemembers, does not. As a first step toward filling this gap, this essay proposes a new scholarly conversation about the relationship between patriotism and military service for Latinx veterans. Using a "veteran-centric" methodology that brings together theoretical insights from critical race and ethnic studies, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and narrative inquiry, it analyzes the narratives of eighteen diverse Latinx veterans in order to offer preliminary reflections on why they decide to enlist and how they understand patriotism in relation to their service. Concluding that Latinx military service is simultaneously pragmatic, personal, and patriotic, this study also suggests that Latinx veterans articulate a particular form of "outsider patriotism" that reflects their uneasy location in the borderlands between idealized notions of white/U.S. born/cisgender male veterans as the highest embodiment of patriotism, and racialized notions of all Latinx people as "foreigners" and "illegals" who reject American values and threaten the nation's economy and security. Pointing toward the need for sustained future research on this topic, this essay seeks to inspire other military-connected scholars to think more critically about the relationship between minoritized military service and the political, social, and economic inequalities of contemporary US society, while challenging them to expand the ways we theorize patriotism to include the *voces perdidas* of BIPOC, immigrant, refugees, LGBTQ/Trans and other marginalized peoples.

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## INTRODUCTION

For many Americans, the figure of the veteran—usually imagined as a straight, white, native-born, cisgender male—embodies a resonant patriotic ideal. However, although the working class and servicemembers of color who make up the majority of the US Armed Forces enlisted ranks themselves, generally acknowledge that a range of motives inspired the decision to enlist, the scholarship to date on veterans and patriotism, which focuses primarily on white former servicemembers, does not.

As a first step toward filling this gap, this essay proposes a new scholarly conversation about the relationship between patriotism and military service for Latinx veterans.[1] Using a "veteran-centric" methodology that brings together theoretical insights from critical race and ethnic studies, interpretative phenomenological analysis and narrative inquiry, it places preliminary findings from a group of in-depth interviews with 18 diverse Latinx veterans in dialogue with an interdisciplinary body of literature on patriotism, race, citizenship, Latinx cultural identities, and veterans' experiences and perspectives. In concluding that Latinx military service is simultaneously pragmatic, personal, *and* patriotic, this study also suggests that Latinx veterans articulate a particular form of "outsider patriotism" that reflects their uneasy location in the boundaries between idealized notions of white/US born/cisgender male veterans as the highest embodiment of patriotism, and racialized notions of all Latinx people as "foreigners," "illegals," and a threat to the nation.

Pointing toward the need for sustained future research on this topic, this essay seeks to inspire other military-connected scholars and policy makers to think more critically about the relationship between minoritized military service and the political, economic, and social inequalities of contemporary American society. It also challenges them to expand the ways we theorize patriotism to include the *voces perdidas* (lost voices) of BIPOC, immigrant, refugees, LGBTQ/Trans, and other "outsiders," whose essential contributions to the nation's security and wellbeing are so often ignored.

### LATINX VETERANS AND THE MOTIVES BEHIND MINORITIZED MILITARY SERVICE

Since the colonial era, US and foreign-born Hispanic and Latinx people—together with Americans of all races and ethnicities—have served in the US military. They have done so freely and coerced, as volunteers and as conscripts, for more than two centuries, amassing 61 Medals of Honor in the period between the Civil War and the ongoing war in Afghanistan. (Beltrán Gonzales, 2002; Franqui-Rivera, 2018; Rivas-Rodriguez & Zamora, 2009; US Army Center of Military History, 2021). Others, most notably Chicano anti-war activists of the late 1960s, have actively resisted military service, condemning the raced and classed inequities of the draft and opposing Cold War military interventions in non-white and "third world" nations. (Appy, 1993; Oropeza, 2005; Mariscal, 2005; Pulido, 2006).

Over the past three decades, the numbers of Latinx men and women servicemembers have increased significantly, with a 30% increase during the 1990s alone. The fastest growing minority population in the armed services as of 2017, Hispanics had achieved parity with Blacks, each representing 16% of active-duty personnel (Barroso, 2019). In addition, since 2001, Latinx men have been overrepresented in combat arms and other physically demanding and dangerous military occupations; for example, they make up almost 18% of the Army's Infantry, although they would not reach that same percent of the nation's population until 2019 (Mariscal, 2003; Leal et al., 2011; Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). Together, with their significantly higher enlistment rates, these Latinx contributions to the nation's defense have led military leaders to proclaim that the future of the armed forces is Hispanic (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009). At the same time, the number of Latinx veterans (including both US and foreign-born as well as non-citizen servicemembers) are expected to double from 8% to 16% over the next 25 years (Schaeffer, 2021; Sohoni & Turcios, 2021).

In an attempt to explain the recent demographic transformation of the US Armed Forces, scholars have argued that Latinx men and women join the military to gain technical training, secure a steady income, and obtain health insurance (Leal et al., 2010; Mariscal, 2003; Martinez & Huerta, 2018). Others have documented the positive impact of the federal GI and Post-9/11 GI Bills on the socioeconomic mobility of Latinx, African American, and working-class white servicemembers; these benefits provide veterans with generous funding for post-secondary education and training as well as low interest and zero-percent-down mortgages (Leal et al., 2010; Murray, 2008; Phillips et al., 1992; Sampson & Laub, 1996; Xie, 1992). Still others have considered how military service provides some young Latinx men with a "way out" of precarious or violent homes and neighborhoods or gang involvement (Huerta, 2015).

On the other hand, scholars have decried the aggressive and sometimes duplicitous military recruitment campaigns directed at low-income youth of color in underserved high schools (Ayers 2006; Pérez 2015). Offering a complex counterpoint, Tengan (2002) points out the ways that military service can function in contradictory ways to both blunt minoritized people's resistance to their marginalization and oppression, and allow poor men

of color to achieve dominant ideals of heteronormative masculinity by providing for their families, demonstrating evidence of their fitness for political citizenship, and showcasing their physical strength and courage.

Historians and legal scholars have noted that executive actions dating back to the 19th century have provided foreign-born veterans access to citizenship as a reward for military service (Salyer, 2004). Along similar lines, Mariscal (2003) has argued that the 2001 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act—which created an expedited pathway to naturalization for immigrants in the military and authorized pardons for undocumented servicemembers who had used falsified papers to join the Armed Forces—contributed to the Post-9/11 surge of Latinx men and women enlisting in order to apply for "fast-track" citizenship (Mariscal, 2003). In fact, between 2001 and 2013, 67,781 permanent resident and unauthorized immigrants, the majority of them Latinx, *did* take advantage of this military pathway to citizenship (Plascencia, 2015). But others caution that military service has never provided automatic or guaranteed access to citizenship, analyzing the ways that structural racism in general, and the differential legal and bureaucratic treatment of foreign-born veterans more specifically, facilitated both the denial of promised naturalization rights to Asian-American veterans in the first half of the 20th century, and the deportation of up to several thousand post-9/11 Latinx veterans (Sohoni & Turcios, 2021). Notwithstanding these important contributions, scholars have yet to interrogate the complex range of individual motives and structural forces that underly the recent "browning" of the US military.

## PATRIOTISM, RACE, AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

Scholars have long grappled with the multiple competing notions of patriotism that characterize a vast and heterogenous nation like the United States. More than 70 years ago, historian Merle Curti (1946) attempted to trace the gradual development of American patriotism from the colonial period through World War II, only to conclude that ever-evolving notions of national identity, loyalty, and pride during war and peace and across regional, ideological, racial, and class boundaries were too varied to assume any singular understanding of the term. Curti also recognized the persistent tension between idealism, altruism, and self-interest in shaping when and where Americans expressed their patriotism, as well as the ways it had been deployed in the name of xenophobic and white supremacist agendas.

Contemporary scholars have also struggled to disentangle more aspirational and civic-minded notions of US patriotism from more particularistic and racially and ethnically exclusive variants (Anderson, 1991; Greenfield, 1992; Ignatieff, 1993). Scholars continue to grapple with how to distinguish patriotism from various forms of nationalism and chauvinism (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016; Citrin et. al., 1994; Lieven, 2004; Smith, 1997; Waldstreicher, 1997). They make distinctions between "blind" patriotism, defined as uncritical support for one's country, and "constructive" patriotism, understood as including a commitment to positive change through critiquing and challenging national practices (Spry & Hornsey, 2007, p. 152; see also Schatz et al., 1999).

Others have sought to define the line between patriotism, understood as a "deeply felt affective attachment to the nation"—including feelings of pride and belonging—and nationalism, defined as "a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance" (Kosterman & Feschbach 1989, p. 271). Those who have challenged these distinctions argue that notions of American exceptionalism and the belief that the United States represents a model for the world in how to live out the ideals of democracy, equality, and opportunity, are deeply embedded in popular US notions of patriotism (Kammen, 1993). Still others have argued that patriotism, to the extent that it provides a powerful ideological justification for the maintenance of existing political, economic, and social structures, is deeply intertwined with majority (white) identities (Staerkle et al., 2005).

Contemporary historians have similarly argued that notions of patriotism, often imagined as timeless and consensual, are actually produced through the ongoing negotiation between competing constituencies and interests, as well as widely divergent understandings of the nation, the proper role of the state, and the boundaries of national belonging (Bodnar, 1996). Indeed, as Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary (1996) notes, patriotic traditions are themselves "invented," through an ongoing struggle between social forces over "which historical memories, symbols and rituals will dominate national discourse" (p. 53). In her insightful examination of the radical post-Civil War redefinition of patriotism, O' Leary argues that the increasing glorification of male military valor (deliberately severed from the cause which inspired it) undergirded a national (white) reunification, facilitating the gradual reintegration of white southern men as "loyal sons rather than traitors," at the expense of the values of freedom and universal citizenship that had inspired the war to end slavery (p. 62). By the 1890s, surging southern military enlistments for service in the Indian and Spanish American wars, together with Civil War veteran organizations' efforts to reunify a bitterly divided nation through the explicitly martial "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm, 1983) of flag veneration and pledges of allegiance, would further reinforce a deeply racialized vision of US imperial power

articulated through narratives of a "white man's burden" to impose order and progress (and advance US interests) in backwards non-white nations.

By the turn of the century, Anglo-Saxon protestant anxieties about the identities and allegiances of a rapidly expanding immigrant population, dating back at least to the post-1820s wave of German and Irish immigration to the US (Ignatiev, 2009), also became more explicitly linked to patriotic discourses. With the onset of World War I, immigrants' decisions to preserve their home languages, cultural practices, and practice Catholicism or other "foreign" religions, would be increasingly condemned as disloyalty to the United States. Demands for "100% Americanism" fueled educational programs and campaigns to "Americanize" working-class immigrants, targeting both legally-white southern and Eastern Europeans who were seen as racially inferior, as well as Mexican and other Latin American immigrants (Frye Jacobson, 1999; Roediger, 2005; Sánchez 1993). They also provided discursive cover for a resurgence of KKK terror against both non-white and "un-American" people, trade unionists, and Catholics—including mixed race and Afro-Cuban Americans in Florida (Gómez, 2017).

At the same time, however, within the hyper-patriotic context of wartime, the growing numbers of foreign-born men in the US military (representing approximately 16% of those registered with the Selective Service system, and including Asian immigrants deemed racially ineligible for citizenship), created new conflicts between racially exclusive definitions of citizenship and post-Civil War notions of (white) military valor as the ultimate measure of patriotic Americanness (Salyer, 2004, p. 851; see also O'Leary, 1999).

Racialized notions of citizenship and patriotism would nonetheless persist after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which finally abolished racial restrictions on immigration and naturalization as lower middle-class whites in both the North and South drew upon patriotic symbols and discourses to resist the court-ordered integration of their schools and neighborhoods (Bodnar 1996, pp. 4, 10). Popular associations between military service and racialized notions of patriotism would similarly endure into the second half of the 20th century. Belew (2018) and Darda (2021) have examined how the elevation of working-class white Vietnam veterans' narratives of patriotism (and a corresponding disinterest in the voices of women and people of color, including southeast refugees, whose lives were equally or more impacted by the war), played into the rise of white supremacist and paramilitary "survivalist" movements after the 1980s, while also serving as a bulwark against the civil rights and feminist movements. Others have drawn attention to the ways that the post-Vietnam glorification of the military has rested upon the celebration of white heterosexual warriors and their faithful, supportive wives, thus serving as a vehicle for airing conversative anxieties about feminist and LGBTQ challenges to traditional gender roles and demands for marriage equality (Boose, 1994).

In subsequent decades, these white, masculine, and heteronormative strands of what George Lipsitz (1996) has called the "new patriotism" have been accompanied by a renewed conservative commitment to the projection of American power overseas, along with increasingly strident defenses of American national honor and demands for public expressions of support for the nation's troops (p. 255–58). They have also found expression in new iterations of turn of the century "100% Americanism," including the 1980s English-Only movement and a proliferation of popular and scholarly critiques of multiculturalism beginning in the 1990s. These included the conservative political scientist Samuel Huntington, who lambasted a "cult of ethnicity" among minorities (as if white Americans had no ethnicity of their own), that he argued represented a threat to national unity and the ideals of democracy, and historian Samuel Huntington, who explicitly singled out Hispanic immigrants for rejecting the "Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream" (Huntington, 2009; Schlesinger, 1992).[2] These discourses remain in circulation today, as both Latin American immigrants and US born Latinx people continue to be lambasted for everything from taking jobs away from white American citizens to laziness and reliance on state-funded education, healthcare, and welfare benefits, as well as for their hyper-fertility, criminality, and supposed refusal to assimilate or learn English (Chávez, 2013). As of 2012—even before the reinvigorated xenophobia of the Trump era inspired demands to "build the wall" and "make America great again"—as many as 33% of white Americans incorrectly believed that the majority of US Latinx people are "illegal" immigrants (Willis-Esqueda et al., 2017).

Offering a counterpoint to scholarship on the persistent links between the multiple variants of US patriotism, racism, and xenophobia, other scholars have highlighted the many ways that people of color, women, and other "outsiders" have attempted to deploy patriotic narratives in the service of a more inclusive vision of American democracy. From the black and white abolitionists of the 19th century to a growing multiracial coalition of 21st century professional athlete-activists, a broad range of constituents including women, racialized minorities, workers, and LGBTQ people have called on the language and symbols of American democracy and freedom to demand equal access to the rights and benefits of citizenship (Jensen, 1996; Samuel, 1996). Prominent among these have been minoritized veterans, including Black, Latinx, and Asian-American

servicemembers who saw their service as a way of proving their Americanness and, after their return to civilian life, as the basis for claims to civil rights, federal benefits, and social acceptance (Bodnar, 1996; Koikari, 2010; Parker, 2009; Ramos, 1998). However, "outsider patriots" have always been met with resistance, both from more radical activists who have decried patriotism as an unhealthy allegiance toward a state that has shored up white (male) power (MacKinnon, 1989), as well as from conservatives who have condemned their efforts as subversive and un-American (Burkey, 2019). By the late 1960s, this long-simmering struggle over who and what was patriotic (and unpatriotic) finally boiled over, as supporters of the war in Southeast Asia squared off against anti-war activists, among them significant numbers of the working class and veterans of color who were disproportionately drafted for service (Oropeza, 2005; Pulido, 2006).

Competing collective memories of this deeply divisive moment in US history have continued to fuel deepening partisan divides in contemporary US society, gaining force following the 9/11 attack and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as calls to "support the troops" have been accompanied by increasingly prescriptive and illiberal forms of patriotism. As numerous scholars have noted, this "rally around the flag" effect has paired growing xenophobia with conservative demands for public expressions of support for the nation and its symbols (Feinstein, 2016; O'Leary & Platt, 2001; Perrin & Smolek, 2009; Willer, 2004. Along these lines, Carmen Lugo-Lugo (2012) has argued that after September 11, 2001, many Americans' understandings of who is or isn't American became increasingly tied to ideas about patriotism—understood as uncritical support for President Bush and his administration—and native-born status—at the same time the "non- and un-American bodies" of immigrants, Muslims, and same-sex couples were treated with growing distrust. In this context, historic notions of Latinx people as foreigners and "illegals," and therefore as threats, were further reinforced. This framing has included Puerto Ricans, whose legal citizenship remains "invisible" to many non-Latinx Americans (Lugo-Lugo, 2012). Put more directly: despite widespread acknowledgement of the US's multiracial and immigrant history, a majority of the nation's people continue to see whites as more American than Latinx and other citizens of color (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Huyhn et al., 2015).

## (LATINX) VETERANS AND PATRIOTISM

Americans also continue to idealize the (straight, white/native-born, cisgender male) warrior as the highest symbolic realization of patriotism. Today, Americans of diverse political beliefs continue to imagine servicemembers as both more disciplined and patriotic than those who have not served (Igielnik, 2019). However, popular narratives linking white/nationalist/heteronormative notions of patriotism to military service fail to account for the complex and varied motives behind diverse individuals' decisions to enlist or commission into the Armed Forces. They also assume rather than interrogate how these veterans understand the relationship between patriotism and their military service.

This is also largely true of the scholarly literature on veterans' political beliefs and behaviors that has emerged in the last several decades (Flores, 2017). Richard H. Kohn (2002) has traced how Post-Vietnam partisan divisions, the end of the draft, and the pronounced acrimony between the Clinton administration and the military, have all contributed to a rightward shift amongst the US officer corps. Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) similarly document the growing conservatism of military veterans in the last several decades, finding that members of veterans organizations are more likely than civilians to express strong loyalty and pride in the US, as well as to define US born, native-English speaking Christians as the "truest" Americans (p. 959). Conversely, the limited research on Black and Latinx military veterans reveals that they tend to be less supportive of conservative politicians and of decisions to go to war (Barreto & Leal, 2007; Ellison, 1992; Leal, 1999). Other studies have provided more nuanced explorations of how distinct experiences of military service affect male and female veterans and combat versus non-combat-deployed veterans' political views (Flores, 2006; Parker, 2012; Rohall et al., 2006), but most fail to address the nature and implications of veterans' patriotism in these processes.

A handful of more qualitative studies have fruitfully considered the ways that activist Iraq war veterans have constructed and deployed patriotic narratives about their service to advance both "pro-mission" and anti-war agendas (Flores, 2006; Heaney & Rojas, 2006; Gutmann & Lutz, 2010; Leitz, 2011; Schrader, 2019). Notwithstanding these few exceptions, scholars to date have paid surprisingly little attention to how diverse veterans articulate their patriotism and the extent to which it motivated their decision to enlist or commission, or to the impact of military service on veterans' affective bonds or loyalties to the United States. Nor do they sufficiently address the ways that issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, immigration and/or citizenship status may inflect the patriotism of the military's ever-more diverse enlisted ranks. Indeed, despite evidence that white and Latinx Americans demonstrate similarly high levels of patriotic sentiment and behavior while holding distinct views about issues related to multiculturalism, immigration, and English-language use (de la Garza et al., 1996; Gershon &

Pantoja, 2011; Telles & Ortiz, 2009); only David Leal (2003) has directly addressed the impact of military socialization on Latinx veterans' identities and beliefs. But no scholar to date has asked explicit questions about how Latinx veterans understand patriotism and its relationship to their service—a glaring omission in light of the growing numbers of Latinx servicemembers in some of the most difficult and dangerous roles within the US Armed Forces.

By choosing to directly pose these questions to Latinx veterans, I respond to veteran scholar Charles Warner's (2021) call to both, "problematize and disrupt static and homogenized understandings of veterans" and to "amplify new or ignored" veterans' voices (para. 3). As a military-affiliated historian and member of a Chicano Latino Studies department, the fields which inform my research and teaching—including critical race theory, ethnic and cultural studies, critical immigration and refugee studies, feminisms of color and transformative pedagogies—provide a unique foundation from which to develop a more critical and inclusive approach to the emerging field of veterans studies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1986; Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Hernández-Avila, 1995; hooks, 1986). These scholarly traditions remind me of the need to constantly challenge simplistic and often ideologically motivated representations of minoritized communities, among which the hyper-visible but frequently misunderstood veteran population might fruitfully be located. They also undergird my commitment to push back against forms of epistemological racism in the academy (Scheurich & Young, 1997) that frequently frame veterans as a homogenous (white/citizen/heterosexual/cisgender male) population, thereby making invisible the contributions of diverse servicemembers and reinforcing dominant notions of who counts as "patriotic" and "American."

## DATA AND METHODS

This study's critical and veteran-centric approach draws on methods from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et. al, 2009; Van Manen, 2016) as well as narrative inquiry, a cross-disciplinary research methodology that emphasizes the importance of oral narrative research in uncovering the stories of marginalized subjects (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Delgado, 1989, 1995; Hurwitz et al., 2004). While sensitive to the ways that race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, and citizenship status inflect individual's identities, values, aspirations, and ways of communicating (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1989; Hurtado, 1989; Pesquera & Segura, 1993), narrative inquirers avoid discounting study participants' agency or reducing their narratives to "ideological artifacts" (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 2) that support their own intellectual and political views. Instead, they trust that marginalized people are as capable as others of accurately interpreting their lived experiences and of drawing meaningful insights from them.

These methodological approaches create space for veterans to be simultaneously understood as diverse and multifaceted individuals *and* as members of a distinct and tightly bounded cultural community—as well as, in many cases, members of particular veterans' subcultures organized around factors such as branch of service, military occupation/specialization (MOS), and generation/theater of war. They also harmonize with my belief that Latinx veterans' motives for service and their ideas about patriotism must be understood both in their own terms and considered within the context of Latinx peoples' individual and collective history of marginalization in the United States. Finally, both IPA and narrative inquiry are consistent with what I consider to be one of the ethical foundations of a veteran-centric methodology: the commitment to acknowledging the profound and life-changing character of many veterans' experiences of military service, particularly those who have survived extreme conditions and traumatic events unfamiliar to most researchers. This kind of epistemological humility further recognizes that academic research on veterans' experiences, particularly when conducted by non-veteran scholars, will of necessity be incomplete and selective, its findings necessarily tentative. When carefully conducted, however, it may nonetheless contribute to the important work of elevating the *voces perdidas* (Salinas, 2017) of Latinx veterans and others seen as "outsiders."

To that end, this study is based upon 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews I conducted with a diverse group of Latinx veterans between March and May 2021.[3] All interviews were conducted via one-on-one recorded Zoom calls. Interview length varied from 50 to 90 minutes. Participants were recruited through a call for interview participants that was circulated through my own nationwide networks of military-affiliated individuals and by the UC Irvine Veteran Services Center, which forwarded it to its military affiliated student email list, contacts at Orange County veterans' organizations, and Veteran Services center at other California institutions of higher education. Several participants also asked for permission to forward the call to peers. Interviewees were not compensated for their participation in the study.

To determine their eligibility for this study, participants were asked in advance of their interviews to affirm in writing that they identified as Hispanic and/or Latinx. In order to mirror the varied forms of self-ascription among US Latinx people while also signaling inclusivity, I used both of these "umbrella" terms, widely understood to refer to people of Spanish and Latin American origin or heritage

in the call for interview participants and in subsequent communications with potential interviewees. However, recognizing that these pan-ethnic and multi-national terms can obscure the specific identities and experiences of a vastly diverse population, I also asked participants to describe their ethnicity and citizenship or immigration status in their own terms. All 18 participants confirmed their Hispanic or Latino/a/x/e identities. Thirteen also described their ethnicity as Mexican-American or Chicano; two as Guatemalan; two as Salvadoran; and one as Colombian. Seven also identified as bicultural/mixed, of two Hispanic/Latinx ethnicities, Hispanic/Latinx/white, or Hispanic/Latinx/Native American.

In terms of nationality and immigration status, 15 reported being US born, in the states of California, Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico, whereas two reported Mexico as their nation of birth; both came to the US before the age of 10. One additional Mexican American reported being born in the US, but spent his childhood in Mexico before returning to the US at the age of 13. In addition to the three who were themselves immigrants (one of whom was undocumented when they entered the US), 12 more reported that one or more of their parents or grandparents were immigrants to the US; and of these, six had one or more parent who entered the US undocumented.

Eight of the participants served in the US Army, seven in the Marine Corps, two in the Navy, and one in the Air Force; their active-duty service ranged from two to 30 years. Nine were junior enlisted, seven senior enlisted/non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and two more were commissioned officers—a percentage roughly equivalent to the national average. Similarly, the number of women (two) corresponds approximately to the percentage of women among military veterans, which the Service Women's Action Network (2019) reports at 9.8%. Fifteen completed at least one deployment to a combat zone/area, with most reporting multiple combat deployments. All reported honorable discharges from the military, with two reporting mandatory medical separations as a result of combat-related injury; one was designated as permanently disabled.

In order to elicit these veterans' motives for serving, their views of patriotism and its relationship to their service, interviews included three sets of open-ended questions. First, I invited participants to reflect on where they were born and grew up; their families' citizenship/immigration and socioeconomic status; as well as their pre-service understanding of their ethnic identities and how Latinx people are treated in the US. I then asked participants to discuss how, when, and where they decided to enlist; their motives for serving; why and how they chose their branch of service and, if they were able to choose, their military occupation/specialization (MOS); and how they felt now about their service. The third set of questions asked participants to articulate their own definitions of who and what is "patriotic;" discuss how they and others express patriotism in their daily lives; and to reflect on the impact of military service and their Latinx identities on their relationship to the United States. I also used probe questions when appropriate to encourage participants to explain their responses in greater depth. At the end, participants were given the opportunity to add any final comments on their answers.

In designing this study, I have relied on overlapping funds of "cultural intuition" (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Malagón et al., 2009) accrued through my own life experience as a bicultural Latina, daughter of a Korean War US Army Airborne combat veteran and prisoner of war, and spouse of a Marine Corps officer and fighter pilot who has completed multiple combat deployments to the Middle East and Asia. A lifetime living with and among Latinx and non-Latinx military veterans has equipped me to frame veteran-centric questions that recognized military culture and norms and interrogated distinctions between branches of service, MOSs, combat versus non-combat-deployed experiences, and generation/theater of war that are important to many veterans. I also used cultural intuition to frame questions accounting for the importance of experiences related to migration, immigration, and citizenship status, Spanish and English language fluency, socioeconomic status, and skin color, etc. that influence Latinx veterans' military experiences just as they do their interactions in "civilian" spaces. Cultural intuition also played a role during interview process, guiding my efforts to establish rapport and trust, and to decide when to press for more information and when to let a question go.

Cultural intuition(s) also informed my decision *not* to ask participants to disclose their political identity or partisan affiliation, or give their opinion on the justifiability (or lack thereof) of US engagement in any specific armed conflict. In today's hyper-partisan and divisive political context, I felt that asking these kinds of questions might create an adversarial climate or exert unspoken pressure on participants to provide answers consistent with their stated political identity rather than freely expressing their thoughts and feelings. I also felt that asking veterans to explicitly affirm or deny the legitimacy of any given military intervention—conflicts in which some of them had served in combat, been injured, and/or lost friends—might similarly inhibit our discussion, or unnecessarily trigger painful memories or emotions. Instead, I decided to trust that participants, provided with a respectful and non-judgmental space in which to share their thoughts, would voluntarily bring up their perspectives on politics, the nation's foreign policy, and its conduct of armed

conflict when they felt these things were central to their own experiences or perspectives. Many participants did in fact choose to discuss these things, sharing stories and thoughts that were accompanied by tears and other visible signs of pain—confirming for me the scholarly and ethical imperative to allow veterans to retain control of when and how these topics entered their narratives.

At the same time, however, I am sensitive to the limitations of cultural intuition. Since I am not a veteran, I have no direct knowledge of veterans' experiences; moreover, as a bicultural person, I am aware that Latinx identities, experiences, and worldviews are extraordinarily diverse. I have consciously sought to counteract any tendency to assume that I know more than I do by: engaging in active, open-minded, and empathic listening during the interview process; by consulting participants afterwards for clarification; and by soliciting additional context and input from other veterans. Recognizing that cultural intuition should complement rather than substitute for a comprehensive and rigorous research methodology, I adhered closely to the tenets of narrative inquiry during my analysis and interpretation of data. After transcribing the interviews, I read and compared the transcripts with one another, with selected excerpts from interview videos, and with my interview notes, engaging in a close and self-reflexive process of "unpacking" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 81) to identify repeated phrases, concepts, and arguments as well as descriptions of similar or divergent assumptions or experiences. I also paid close attention to my notes describing verbal and non-verbal cues that influenced participants' pacing, intonation and affect, reflecting on how these things deepened the meaning of the narrative or indicated when participants were struggling to reconcile conflicting ideas or feelings.

Allowing Latinx veterans' voices to guide me in crafting composite descriptions and identifying themes for discussion, I also tried to approach with care those moments in my participants' narratives that challenged my own worldview. In particular, when participants expressed ideas about race, immigration, and socioeconomic inequalities that conflicted with my own, I sought to avoid the self-interested practice of attributing marginalized people's beliefs to "false consciousness" (Hawkes, 2003; Laclau & Mouffe, 1987; Wetherell, 1999). Instead, I have chosen to "take [my] risks with people and the stories they tell," trying to understand Latinx veterans' narratives within the context of their individual lived experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012, p. 57). In line with this commitment, I have also noted within the findings where individual participants' narratives diverged in significant ways from the majority, seeing this as a way of acknowledging these minority-within-a-minority voices.

Before discussion of those findings, a few words about the limitations of this study's research design are in order. First, any study based on a small sample size and a series of single 1-hour interviews will be necessarily incomplete and selective. Second, although I made every effort to bring together a diverse group of Latinx veterans of different ethnicities, gender, national origins, and citizenship status, and to represent different branches of service, MOSs, and rank, my final sample did not include any Caribbean or Afro-Latinx veterans—an important omission considering the historical role of Puerto Ricans in the US Armed Forces and the presence of significant numbers of Puerto Rican and Dominican Americans in today's military. What's more, although Latinx servicemembers do enlist more frequently in the Army and Marine Corps, these branches are overrepresented in my sample.

Additionally, 16 participants in this study are college graduates, in all but one case having used their GI Bill benefits to complete a bachelor's degree or higher. This high level of educational attainment is not representative of US Latinx people in general, only 15% of whom have completed university (Araiza, 2020); nor of veterans as a group, approximately 1/3 of whom hold at least a 4-year degree (Rolen, 2017). The important question of how participants' education has impacted their understandings of their Latinx identities and the relationship between their military service and patriotism is nonetheless beyond the scope of this study. However, since my methodology make no claims on generalizability, emphasizing instead the diversity and particularity of Latinx veterans' experience and perspectives, it should not affect the insights to be gained from the study's findings.

## PRAGMATIC, PERSONAL, AND PATRIOTIC: THE MOTIVES BEHIND MINORITIZED MILITARY SERVICE

Study participants reported a broad and diverse range of motives for deciding to join the military. Each offered between three and 13 specific reasons for serving, with the average being between five and six reasons. A first glance at the data reveals that these Latinx veterans were motivated by a mixture of pragmatic, personal, and patriotic reasons. Fourteen reported that a desire or sense of duty to serve their country was among their reasons for joining the military. Among these were Juliana,[4] a Salvadoran/Euro American former Army interrogator, and Eduardo, a Mexican/Native/Euro American who served 30 years in the Marine Corps. They also included Armando, a Mexican-American Army veteran who was born in Los Angeles but spent his childhood in Zacatecas, and Juan, a Tejano Mexican-American, both of whom described their desire to serve as a product of the political climate in 9/11's

aftermath. Despite his pacifist tendencies, Juan enlisted in the Army, where he would serve as a medic. "At the time," he reflected, foreshadowing his later struggles to make sense of his experiences while deployed overseas, "I believed that I was doing the right thing. I wanted to serve my country."

In second place were the desire to earn GI Bill benefits for college; following a family legacy of military service; wanting to prove their strength and/or prove they were "a man;" and needing to get away from a difficult home or social environment, each of which was mentioned by nine study participants. Those who sought to follow in the footsteps of veteran family members included several whose fathers, uncles, or grandfathers had served in the US military, in Vietnam, Korea, and World War II, as well as a number whose older brothers served in the Post-9/11 military. Two participants also expressed the desire to honor an immigrant grandfather or great-grandfather's military legacy in their birth nation: one had participated in the Mexican Revolution, and the other had graduated from a military academy in Guatemala.

Among those who saw military service as a way of proving their strength or masculinity were Army veteran Armando, a self-described "short guy" who always felt underestimated, and Salvadoran/Mexican/Polish American veteran Javier, who described himself as a "small and skinny kid" who hoped that joining the Marine Corps would prove his physical toughness.

Emiliano, a formerly gang-involved Mexican-American Marine Corps veteran who served in Iraq during the Battle of Fallujah before going on to university, expressed an even starker determination to prove his strength through combat:

> I already knew how to fight; I'd already been shot at, I'd already shot guns … and this is my ego talking, okay? I wanted to show that my father and mother raised the baddest motherfucker that came out of Santa Ana, there was nothing in my way that I couldn't knock down, because any obstacle that's put in my way, I will drop it.

Conversely, Carlos, a Guatemalan/Euro American Army infantry officer, saw military service as a way to prove his own ability to withstand adversity—in his case, to his lower income and darker skinned cousins who saw his middle-class upbringing and white-passing appearance as forms of privilege that made him "soft."

Others sought to get away from difficult home or social environments, including difficult family situations or living arrangements, negative peer influence or neighborhoods afflicted by poverty, drugs, and violence. Among these were Martín, a Mexican-American Army veteran from southern California, who joined the military partly to get away from parents that "didn't get along" that he "kind of hated at the time." Sebastián, a Navy veteran and the only self-identified LGBTQ study participant, similarly reported that one of his reasons for enlisting was to escape a conservative Colombian immigrant home in order to explore his bisexual identity. Eight participants also each reported needing a job or income; wanting training in specific skills or an occupation; the opportunity to develop life skills including discipline and time management; and wanting to belong/feel like part of a community.

Those who sought belonging through military service included Eduardo, whose mixed Mexican/Native/Euro American background and lack of a father figure made belonging an elusive goal before joining the Marine Corps. For him, enlisting was part of a lifelong struggle to feel "like part of a community, something bigger than me," a search for a "place where I would be accepted, regardless of my skin or background." Others saw military service as a way of transcending previous experiences of racialized exclusion and securing their membership in the nation. As Alejandro, a Mexican-American who served 6 years as an Army artilleryman, said, "I wanted to prove my belonging here in society … I know how to name it now, but you know, we struggle with imposter syndrome always you know, like we're not good enough." Along similar lines, Army veterans Martín and Carlos also admitted that their decisions to serve were also partially motivated by the desire to prove they were "good Americans."

Seven participants, including Army interrogator Juliana and Mexican-American Army combat engineer Marisol, were motivated by the desire to travel overseas. Five more reported needing a job; high school grades that weren't good enough for college; or saw service as a "way out" of trouble—in three cases due to gang involvement. However, an equal number insisted that enlisting was a way of expressing their patriotism. These included Army veteran Armando, who noted that the "huge sense of patriotism … right after 9/11 … had an impact on me." Army officer Carlos emphasized that his decision to serve was first and foremost an expression of patriotism, pointing out that this value was instilled in him by his immigrant grandmother who after 9/11 drilled into him the importance of "helping support the troops [and] protecting America from foreign enemies."

Among the less-commonly reported reasons, four participants, including both female veterans Juliana and Marisol, were motivated to join the military by a desire for independence from their families. Four also wanted to learn to fight or handle weapons. Two immigrant servicemembers also listed wanting to expedite their citizenship as a reason

for joining. Colombian-American veteran Sebastián arrived in the US without documentation as a child; he enlisted in the Navy soon after securing a green card, with the goal of becoming a citizen as quickly as possible so he could petition for legal residence for his undocumented parents. He was ultimately successful, unlike Mexican-born Diego, a Marine Corps veteran who had mistakenly believed that enlisting would automatically make him a citizen. Diego would eventually complete the naturalization process several years after leaving the military, before his struggles with undiagnosed PTSD landed him a four-and-a-half-year prison sentence for assault and firearms possession.

Despite the prevalence of military recruiters in underserved schools and neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income people of color, zero participants reported being convinced to enlist by a recruiter or high school counselor. To the contrary, several stated emphatically that they initiated contact with a recruiter, and that they were so eager to serve that they signed early enlistment contracts, which required parental permission, immediately after their 17th birthdays. These included Miguel, a 27-year Marine Corps veteran from rural New Mexico, who knew by his freshman year of high school that he was going to join, and Marine Corps veteran Eduardo, who noted fondly that he "bugged the crap" out of his recruiters for more than 3 years until "they would actually allow me to sign up."

When asked to rank the relative importance of their motives, Latinx veterans' responses reveal an even greater diversity of reasons for serving—strikingly, no specific number one or top three reasons were listed by more than three participants. Three stated that the desire to serve their country was their top motive, whereas two more each cited wanting to follow in the footsteps of other family members or needing a "way out" of trouble. Two more listed the desire to express their patriotism as their number one reason. Among participants' top three motives, the desire to serve their country and earn GI Bill benefits for college each appeared three times. Two participants each listed wanting training in specific skills or an occupation; wanting to develop life skills; the desire for excitement; needing a "way out" of trouble; the desire to honor a family legacy; wanting to feel like part of a community; and wanting to express their patriotism. In contrast, three participants specifically stressed that patriotic sentiment didn't enter into their thinking at all, including César, a Mexican/Native American Navy veteran from Colorado, who flatly declared that patriotism had "nothing to do" with his initial enlistment.

Fifteen of 18 study participants also aspired to serve in specific branches of the military. Seven chose to enlist in the Army, three of them following in the footsteps of relatives, including Mateo, a second-generation senior NCO in a special operations MOS whose father and uncle had both retired from the Army after careers in special operations. Another was Army medic Juan, who had joined the military despite his determination "not to hurt anybody;" his Mexican immigrant father had been an Army medic during the Korean conflict, earning his citizenship through this service. For his part, infantry officer Carlos chose the Army because it offered the widest selection of combat arms occupations for officers, and he was determined to serve in a combat role. He also admired the confidence and carriage of Army infantry officers. Two more participants, including Army radio operator Damián, a self-described Chicano from South Central Los Angeles, described the "Be All You Can Be" and "Army Strong" ad campaigns and the prevalence of Army service among young men from their neighborhoods as influencing their choice. A final two, Martín and Marisol, chose the Army because it had the biggest budget, allowed the greatest flexibility in choosing and changing military specialties, and had the shortest minimum required initial enlistment period.

Less motivated by pragmatic considerations, six of seven participants who chose the Marine Corps claimed they did so because of its elitism and grueling standards for discipline, physical toughness, and bearing. These included Armando, Emiliano, and Guatemalan/Mexican American Marine Corps veteran Benjamin, who all described the "Corps'" reputation for maintaining a "different standard," and their admiration for "the way they conduct themselves, the way they dress, the way they adhere to orders." Retired Senior NCO Miguel similarly noted how appealing he found the Marine Corp's "sharp" dress blue uniform and the "impressive" way the Marines carried themselves. Using the language of his urban southern California *barrio* to describe his attraction to the Marine Corp's martial spirit and extreme clannishness, Emiliano described completing boot camp as a kind of "jumping-in" experience, an initiation into "my gang … that I chose to go through and defend and represent … to the highest standard."

Summing up this group's passionate desire to prove themselves worthy of being a Marine, Eduardo similarly concluded that he'd joined the Corps "because they were the best. They were the bad asses … and so I said, you know, if I'm going to be a member of a tribe, that is the tribe that I want to be a member of." In marked contrast, Colombian-American Sebastián sheepishly admitted that he'd decided to serve in the Navy because he "liked the uniform." However, when pressed further, he elaborated on the ways that his upper-middle class upbringing in Colombia, which has its own distinct military legacy, had also influenced his decision. Describing his childhood fascination with the Armada Nacional, he stated, "In Colombia … only the best people join the Navy."

## LATINX VETERANS AND OUTSIDER PATRIOTISM

Although only four study participants described the desire to express their patriotism as one of their top three reasons for serving in the military, when asked to rate their own patriotism on a scale from zero (not at all) to four (very), 14 of 18 gave themselves between a three and a four. However, what precisely do these self-described, patriotic Latinx veterans understand that term to mean?

Although each participant articulated deeply personal answers to this question, close analysis of their narratives reveals a number of recurrent themes that, taken together, allow me to begin to trace the contours of a particular form of what I have decided to call "outsider patriotism." I use this term broadly to encompass expressions of affective attachment and commitment to the nation by any member of a marginalized community who finds themself "in the society, but not (yet) of it" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014, p. 178). In its Latinx iterations, I argue that outsider patriotism draws on Latinx Americans' particular experiences of living in the borderlands between idealized notions of white/US born/cisgender male veterans as the highest embodiment of patriotism, and racialized notions of all Latinx people as "foreigners" and "illegals" who are resistant to American values and a threat to the nation's economy and security. I turn now to discussion of five key themes that emerge from these narratives of Latinx outsider patriotism.

### Patriotism as Appreciation

First and foremost, the Latinx veterans in this study described their patriotism as an expression of appreciation for the benefits of US citizenship. In many cases, their narratives featured stories told by immigrant parents or grandparents about hardships endured in their countries of origin and freedoms and opportunities they found in the US. Benjamin expressed his gratitude for the life his formerly undocumented mother has been able to create in the United States, stating that "if my mother didn't leave Mexico, she wouldn't have gotten the opportunities that she has … I love the fact that this country has given [her] the option to create her own business." Carlos remembered his Guatemalan grandmother repeatedly telling him that "this [is] a great country, they let us in here." Although he has since developed a more critical view of the prolonged Central American crisis that forced his grandparents to seek asylum in the US, he maintains that he'll never "lose that sense of … a generation and a half ago, where they were, and then where they got themselves to be."

Others expressed gratitude for benefits personally received. These include Eduardo, who views his military service as a form of repayment for having been "on subsistence" as a child; in his words, "my country gave to me and I wanted to give back." Damián's own sense of patriotism emerged in response to trips he took to Mexico as a child, where he experienced firsthand the extreme poverty his undocumented parents had fled. Like Eduardo, he grew up very poor by US standards; but unlike his parents, who had never attended school, he is grateful for the benefit of an American public education—and for the free school breakfasts and lunches that sustained him. For Sebastián, the most important benefits of US citizenship come in the form of political liberties. "I love the US," he declared, because he comes from Colombia, where "people just got murdered for their ideas … for just public speech, and that wasn't the case here."

Participants also articulated that traveling overseas increased their appreciation for the United States—although in most cases, given their disadvantaged backgrounds, this travel has been mostly limited to the conflict zones and poor and developing nations visited during their service. As such, their relative assessment of the benefits of US citizenship tended to disregard those advanced industrial democracies that might be a more appropriate unit of comparison. Armando asserted that seeing children begging for water during a deployment to the Horn of Africa, gave him a "realization of the privileges we have." Eduardo confidently stated, "I've been everywhere and seen a lot of different things, and I haven't seen better … there is an opportunity [here] which is not available in other countries." Offering a more balanced assessment, Miguel observed, "I've been to over thirty countries in my career, and there's not one that has better living conditions than the United States. Conceding that Japan, England, Hong Kong, and Singapore were all "great places … to bring up a family," he nonetheless insisted that they were still "not like the United States."

But Latinx veterans' narratives of appreciation also explicitly included appreciation for the contributions of immigrants to the nation. According to Gabriel, a Mexican/Euro-American veteran who spent 10 years as an officer and Air Battle Manager in the US Air Force after serving for 4 years as a psychological operations specialist in the Army, "the most patriotic people in the world are immigrants." He continued:

> I've never seen people as proud to be Americans as the ones who are passing their citizenship tests, who are coming to this place because they know it means they won't be persecuted anymore … the vast majority … want to work for it, they want to participate in it, they want to be part of what they see as an American dream … it's never more real than it is for them.

Going a step further, Mateo attributed a kind of patriotism to undocumented immigrants who risk "death, you know,

drug cartels, to come here," concluding that "I would say those people are patriotic for the US." For his part, Alejandro voiced his personal pride in the contributions of his immigrant family. Although he feels that "a big portion of our society, if they were to look at my grandfather and my grandmother, my father … may not treat us with much dignity, we have done a lot for this country."

Participants' narratives also reflect their appreciation for the struggles of other minoritized Americans, and the recognition that generations of structural inequities can make it difficult for Latinx and other people of color to feel patriotic. Miguel conceded this was the case for some "Hispanics, where they're proud about …where they're coming from and they feel that the United States may have treated them or their families in the way they didn't want them to be treated," accepting that they "probably wouldn't have the respect or the same beliefs" about the US that he has. Javier expressed his belief that it might be especially hard for Black veterans, historically denied access to GI Bill benefits, to be patriotic; he also worried that other veterans of color might be discouraged by the lack of racial diversity among the military's officer corps.

## Patriotism as Aspiration

Veterans' narratives of appreciation were frequently tempered by their recognition that not all have enjoyed equal access to the benefits of US citizenship. Several participants explicitly pointed to the US's history of settler colonialism, racial slavery, and indigenous genocide; many more told poignant stories about the ways that race, class, gender, and citizenship status-based inequalities that structure US Latinx lives have personally impacted them. In most cases, however, these experiences of marginalization did not prevent them from feeling gratitude to the US for the opportunities provided them; nor did they see inequality as inherent to the US system or as an insurmountable obstacle to American unity. Indeed, all but one expressed a commitment to an aspirational and inclusive vision of the nation. As Damián put it, "patriotism is being proud not only of your nation, but what it represents;" and for him, that means "a strong aspiration for law, for righteousness … trust in not only your government, but also people in your community. We're not a perfect union," he said, "but I think we all are striving towards that."

Eduardo, the father of an LGBTQ-identified child, admits that he wants to see the country change "so that I feel my kids are safe … regardless of … who they are, the color of their skin." But he loves the US unconditionally and is committed to a more inclusive national future:

> I understand that [the US] has had challenges, I understand it still has challenges ahead of it. And can I be part of that change? Absolutely. Have I been a part of that change? Yeah, you bet your ass I have.

Others, including Juliana, Marisol, Sebastián, Alejandro, Benjamin, and Carlos, articulated that they saw drawing attention to and actively opposing injustices as part of their patriotism, which Carlos defined as "being able to look critically at what you know, the effect of things [on people], and then to be there to help."

## Patriotism as Action

In service of that aspirational vision, veterans in this study articulated a deeply held commitment to tangible action in the service of the common good. Along those lines, formerly undocumented veteran Sebastián described patriotism as the practical embodiment of citizenship: "not the paperwork, like, but you know, like more about community citizenship, right? It's about how are you contributing towards your community, how are you helping to build it, what are you doing to help move it forward?" For retired Air Force Major Gabriel, patriotism also "comes down to action: what one does to support the goals of a nation state and a community, as well as strengthen the fabric that binds everybody together in those institutions."

This understanding of patriotism as action was complemented by the acceptance of a broad range of beliefs and behaviors as "patriotic." Seventeen of 18 participants felt that a patriotic person could criticize the US government, society, foreign policy, or any specific decision to go to war. They also felt that a patriotic person could refuse to stand for the anthem. Sixteen believed that a patriot could be an anti-war or peace activist. Although one expressed his disapproval of "draft-dodgers," 15 agreed that a patriotic person could refuse to serve in the military (two more answered that they could not, and one answered "maybe"). They also felt that a patriot could be a Black Lives Matter activist (the other three answered "I don't know" or "maybe"). Thirteen agreed that a patriotic person could refuse to pledge allegiance to the flag (another responded "maybe," stating he'd be "curious as to the reason;" the other three answered this question with a firm "no.") All 18 agreed that a patriot could be an immigrants rights' activist. In contrast, however, 12 said that a patriotic person could not be a member of a white supremacist organization; three answered that they could, although two hastened to specify that they "didn't agree," or thought belonging to such an organization was "dumb and perverted." The last three answered this question with "I don't know" or "maybe." Summing up the expansiveness of these Latinx veterans' notions of patriotism, Juliana reaffirmed Americans' fundamental right to protest injustice, or to advance "women's rights, equal rights for

minority people of color … it's about the intention. You can still be patriotic and protest because you want something better."

Participants also frequently contrasted their commitment to patriotic action—what Benjamin described as "loving the Constitution … like truly living by it, not just bullshitting about it," with more performative version of patriotism they associated with white, conservative, southern, and rural men. Sebastián expressed his sadness that "patriotism has been taken over … like if you're not for Trump, you're not a patriot. I still can't wrap my head around that one, because half the people that are saying it would never join the military." Corey agreed, admitting that he had come to "hate the word" patriot, as did Armando, who felt that in the current political environment, there was "a bad connotation to it now." Expanding on this, Gabriel noted that "the question of whether or not somebody is patriotic more gets to, are we cultivating patriotism, or are we … suppressing dissent, silencing voices, minimizing or gaslighting … other schools of thought and groups of people?"

Many Latinx veterans also expressed their aversion to the public displays of patriotic symbols, among which they included fuel-guzzling trucks dressed up with bumper stickers, gun racks, and American flags. Expressing his distrust of these outward signs of patriotism, Gabriel observed:

> I think we saw with, like, the Capitol riot, when what was maybe seems like patriotism on the outside is really not … I don't want to say this about, like a group of people, but obviously there are some who have this, yeah, it looks like patriotism, but it's really a self-serving philosophy or cult mentality to get whatever they want.

Martín contrasted his own low level of patriotism with the hyper-patriotism he observed among Army infantry and artillerymen, criticizing their "American flags and American hats," speculating that "they might be psychologically projecting something." However, he quickly qualified this criticism:

> I understand, like, if someone died, and they want to live for someone that died [on a] deployment; but I think it's misguided patriotism, it's more like you want to live for your friend and that's the way you're presenting it on the outside.

Armando made a similar exception for veterans, who he saw as "very vigilant about, like, symbolism." As he pointed out, "a lot of veterans, they've lost something, right? Either someone or something, through their service, and having [made] that sacrifice … it hits you a bit different … when you hear someone speaking badly about the country." But he still felt that veterans' reactiveness to perceived slights to America and their demands for respect for the flag were "over-justified."

Participants' own feelings about the flag were more nuanced. One of only four veterans to describe flying a flag at their home, Eduardo stated that he displays the Stars and Stripes "twenty-four seven on my flagpole in front of my house," alongside the Marine Corps flag. However, he also honors his inclusive vision of the nation by flying a rainbow flag every year during July, to show his pride in his LGBTQ-identified child. Offering a culturally pluralistic defense of the American tradition of flag veneration (Collins, 2004), Miguel insisted,

> It doesn't matter to me what country you come from—I don't feel that a person necessarily has to assimilate—but if we're going to all be living here in this country, there is one flag and [it's] the one thing that we all respect and that we live under.

By way of counterpoint, Diego recalled that during his time in the Marine Corps, he and his Mexican-American roommates "had a Mexican flag in our room," and that it was mainly the white guys … who had American flags in their room."

### Patriotism as Service

Participants also viewed service as an important measure of patriotism. However, most of them understood this as encompassing not only military service but also community service and social justice activism. Juliana felt that patriotism didn't necessarily mean joining the military but could also take the form of working for the government or serving veterans. Marisol, who admits that her experience of gender discrimination in the military and the current anti-immigrant climate have left her feeling "not very patriotic," nonetheless proudly continues to serve by working at the VA and speaking up on behalf of those she feels are being treated unfairly. Others, including Gabriel, Carlos, Eduardo, Javier, and Emiliano, described patriotism as a "call to duty" that was answered not only by servicemembers, but also by first responders, educators, community organizers, clergy, and Peace Corps volunteers.

However, many maintained that military service was distinct from other forms of service. Several, including Eduardo and Marisol, saw first responders' service as on par with military service because both were defined by a willingness to risk one's life for the wellbeing of other Americans. Marisol particularly emphasized firefighters' essential service, especially in her home state of California,

where "we have fires all the time." Their narratives of military/first responder solidarity suggest that veterans may understand their identities through lenses other those of race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, and citizenship status that are so widespread in current scholarship. Along those lines, veterans studies scholars might consider more deeply the extent to which the primordial experience of willingly confronting death, injury, and trauma in the service of others serves to create a kind of loosely bounded "imagined community," including both former military members and civilian police, firefighters, and EMTs.

Importantly, Latinx veterans' narratives also emphasized how the lived experience of military service impacted their patriotism. Twelve of 18 participants stated that serving in the Armed Forces made them more patriotic, instilling in them a greater appreciation for US history and for the nation's foundational principles and institutions. Many also noted that the hardships of deployment intensified their sense of patriotism. Even though it didn't inspire their initial enlistment, four of the senior NCOs in this study stated that they came to see their continued service as a patriotic duty over time. However, for others, including Juan and Alejandro, traumatic combat deployments left them with deep political doubts and moral injuries that stripped them of their initially "blind" love of country, replacing it with a more critical commitment to social justice. At the same time, for Juliana and Marisol, service-related traumas and the realities of gender and racial discrimination in the military tempered their patriotism and, at least for a time, diminished their pride in having served.

### Patriotism as Self-Protection

Lastly, participants' narratives also revealed how patriotism sometimes functions as a form of self-protection for Latinx veterans. One way that it does this is by providing veterans with a way of making sense of the loss of life due to military service. For example, Miguel credits his patriotism with helping him cope with the deaths of several of his young Marines during multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Whether they were shot down in a helicopter, killed by an IED during patrol, or died in a training exercise, he took comfort in the belief that "whatever they did … they were doing it for this country." Knowing that those Marines "weren't coming back" thus made him feel "a little more patriotic." Emiliano similarly stated that he expressed his patriotism by "living the life that I know my brothers that didn't make it would fucking enjoy to the fullest."

But patriotism also provides Latinx veterans with protection against external and internal threats to their sense of self and national belonging. Aware that many white Americans continue to see them as "outsiders," several participants described purposely wearing military-branded clothing items or making sure to mention they were a veteran when meeting new people. According to Carlos, being a veteran gave him "street cred" with people who might otherwise question his belonging based on his skin color or immigrant family history. His service also gave him confidence to stand up to those that tried to dismiss or exclude him, because, in his opinion, he had done something that few people were willing to do.

At the same time, Carlos insisted that in order to be recognized as a patriotic American, he "shouldn't have to lead by saying I served in the military." Diego concurred, lamenting that when he walked down the street, "they see me as being Brown … they won't say, hey, this could be a vet." But he still believed his service entitled him to full membership in the nation, declaring that he would "never see myself as less of an American than those that have been here for generations and have never lifted a finger to do anything for the country." Alejandro articulated an equally self-protective patriotism, insisting "I belong here and I deserve access to everything, just as much as anybody else … what I fall back on is, I fought for this freedom … so you can't tell me nothing [*sic*]."

## CONCLUSION

The narratives of outsider patriotism and military service highlighted in this study suggests that Latinx veterans' decisions to enlist or commission into the US Armed Forces cannot be understood as inspired strictly by naïve and uncritical patriotism, nor as a predetermined outcome of their political, economic, and cultural marginalization. Instead, they reveal Latinx Americans' minoritized military service to be simultaneously pragmatic, personal, *and* patriotic.

This study also suggests that many Latinx veterans articulate a complex "outsider patriotism" that reflects their tenuous position in the borderlands between idealized notions of white/US born/cisgender male veterans as the highest embodiment of patriotism, and racialized notions of all Latinx people as "foreigners" and "illegals" who resist American values and threaten the nation. The individual narratives highlighted in this study reflect a shared appreciation for the benefits of US citizenship and a deeply held commitment to service to particular communities and the common good. However, study participants also expressed a strong aversion to prescriptive and performative forms of patriotism. They nonetheless occasionally expressed dominant notions of patriotism, including a belief in American superiority that they justified via invidious comparisons with their own or their ancestors' Latin American homelands and with other developing nations, rather than with other advanced

industrial democracies with which the United States might more appropriately be compared.

Participants also articulated an aspirational and inclusive vision of the US's future, including a shared appreciation for the contributions of minorities and immigrants to the nation. However, they also sometimes suggested that Latinx and other immigrants owe a debt to the United States—what critical refugee studies scholar Mimi Nguyen (2012) calls the "gift of freedom" for "letting them in." In many cases, this belief co-existed with participants' conviction that military service represents a privileged form of service that should guarantee foreign-born veterans' access to both *de jure* and *de facto* citizenship and respect. Though arguably entirely justified, such claims may also unwittingly serve to reinforce the historically rooted belief that people of color, immigrants, and other "outsiders" can legitimately be suspected of un-Americanness until they prove otherwise.

At the same time, many of the patriotic Latinx veterans in this study also expressed feeling torn between their love for the United States and their identification with other Latinx and marginalized people of color. Analogous in some ways to what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1989) called the "two-ness" of the Black American reality, this experience can be seen as part of a broader ongoing struggle between the warring ideals of attachment to the nation and the desire to challenge the structural racism embedded in US law, society, and culture (Shaw, 2004). However, just as Latinx veterans' lived experiences shape their shifting notions of patriotism, so too does social context shape the character of their "outsider" identities. Indeed, the narratives featured in this study reveal that many patriotic Latinx veterans who previously saw themselves as more "American" than "Latinx" have responded to the anti-Latinx actions of the Trump administration and its supporters by consciously embracing an increasingly oppositional pride in their ethnic identities and heritage.

The extent to which these findings would be borne out by a larger study, and their potential impact on Latinx Americans' willingness to continue risking their lives through service in an all-volunteer military, is unclear. However, given the significant presence of Latinx people in today's Armed Forces, both policy makers and veterans studies scholars would do well to take this question seriously. Doing so will shed new light on the complex ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, and citizenship status—among other axes of identity—shape both who serves in the military and the diverse ways that patriotism is understood and expressed in the United States. It will also contribute to a long-overdue recognition of the essential contributions of BIPOC, immigrant, refugee, LGBTQ, and other "outsiders" to this nation.

## NOTES

1 Throughout this essay I use "Latinx" and "Hispanic" to refer to the exceptionally diverse population of people of Latin American ethnic origins or nationalities in the United States. Although discussion of ongoing debates over the implications of these terms is beyond the scope of this essay, it should be noted that "Hispanic," "Latinx," as well as the gendered forms "Latino" and "Latina," which the inclusive/non-binary terms "Latinx" and "Latiné" seek to replace, are all historically rooted social constructions that have been championed and contested by different people for a range of reasons.

2 Conversely, conservatives that lament the preservation of non-white and immigrant cultural identities and loyalties rarely take issue with the dual allegiances and autonomous regional culture of white southerners who continue to proudly display the Confederate flag and protest the renaming of military bases named for Confederate generals.

3 This study was determined to be exempt from IRB review by the University of California Irvine Office of Research Institutional Review Board Human Research Protections Exempt Self-Determination process on April 11, 21.

4 All names are pseudonyms.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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