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Research Article

Citizenship at a Cost

Undocumented Asian Youth Perceptions and the Militarization of Immigration

Tracy Lachica Buenavista

Abstract

Two federal policies, the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program and the proposed federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, represent the militarization of immigration. Critical Race Theory is used to analyze MAVNI, the DREAM Act, and semistructured interviews with fourteen undocumented Asian immigrant youth who believe these policies provide viable pathways to citizenship through military enlistment. The project explores the recurring pattern of militarized immigration reform in the United States and challenges scholars, policy makers, and activists to understand the relationship between immigration and legacies of American imperialism.

Introduction

They have something called the MAVNI program. . . . I was actually talking to the recruiter, [and I said], "Hey, I'm illegal but I heard there's something I could do about it." (Carlos,¹ 23-year-old, undocumented Korean)

I hope the DREAM Act passes but I'm scared to go to the military. I think that maybe it's better than going to school? Because at least I'll get paid, and I heard they help you get citizenship faster. (Victor, 24-year-old, undocumented Filipino)

A perilous relationship exists between contemporary military recruitment policies and immigration reform. Although many proponents for immigrants' rights have sought increased pathways to citizenship, often their efforts have ignored larger sociohistorical trends that have plagued Asians in the diaspora,

namely militarization. Militarization is the process in which social, economic, and political institutions are organized to reflect and produce violence against those considered to be a threat to the nation-state (Lutz, 2002). Scholars have also argued that militarization should be analyzed as “an extension of colonialism and its gendered and racialized processes” (Shigematsu and Camacho, 2010, xv). Although militarization has shaped the ways American citizens are conditioned to justify the use of force abroad, processes of militarization have also disproportionately imposed material consequences onto communities of color abroad *and* in the United States. For young immigrants of color who desire naturalization through military enlistment, citizenship comes at a cost.

A few scholars have noted the differential experiences of People of Color in the military: soldiers of color were more likely to be sent into combat, and also more likely to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (Kiang, 1991; Mariscal, 2004, 2007). I build upon this scholarship by employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine how racism has shaped the militarization of immigration. CRT scholars have asserted that American institutions were designed and redesigned to perpetuate white supremacy (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). More specifically, CRT scholars have stressed how notions of neutrality, objectivity, and meritocratic ideals often mask white supremacy (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). For example, even though recruitment practices have disproportionately targeted communities of color to enlist, the military continues to be touted as an “all-volunteer” force (Diaz-Strong et al., 2009; Peachey, 2008).

The stories of how racism has manifested in the lives of People of Color can invalidate dominant narratives that often have ignored or, at best, misrepresented their lived experiences (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Racism, however, is only one mechanism for disempowerment, and the concept of intersectionality should be used to understand oppression as multidimensional. For Carlos and Victor, two undocumented Asian youth whose statements opened this article, military service appeared as a plausible route to naturalization and signified the intersections between racism, nativism, and militarization. The racialization of Asian Americans has been characterized by a perpetual foreignness, indicative of the colonialism and imperialism that have facilitated Asian migration to the United States (Gotanda, 1995).

Immigration reform has become militarized. Naturalization processes that hinge upon participation in the U.S. Armed Forces require immigrants of color to put their lives on the line, literally (Mariscal, 2007). Carlos and Victor were among fourteen undocumented Asians who discussed with me some of the contemporary policies that target immigrants and are supported by the U.S. military, particularly the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program and the proposed federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. MAVNI is a military recruitment program that seeks immigrant enlistees with particular language abilities and/or educational attainment. The federal DREAM Act proposes a pathway to legal status through higher education or military service for undocumented youth. Although MAVNI and the DREAM Act have appeared innocuous to the Asian American community, these policies pose strong threats to Asian American youth due to current immigration trends and eligibility requirements outlined in these policies.

Even though undocumented youth have been ineligible to serve in the U.S. military, many of them still believed in the possibilities of citizenship through enlistment. The irony is that the very youth familiar with MAVNI and the DREAM Act are ineligible for the former, while the latter has not yet become law. In the following section, I discuss briefly the ways in which immigrants in the United States have participated in the military and some of the institutional factors that have facilitated their enlistment. In the subsequent section, I present discourse analyses of MAVNI, the DREAM Act, and interviews with undocumented Asian immigrant youth in order to examine how the militarization of contemporary immigration policy has shaped their aspirations and consciousness. Overall, I argue that for these youth, policies like MAVNI and the DREAM Act have demonstrated a recurring pattern of militarized immigration reform.

Contemporary Immigrants in the U.S. Military

Immigrants have fought in wars and conflicts in North America long before the United States existed, and during and after the establishment of the United States as a nation, immigrants played critical roles in shaping American conceptions of citizenship (Ngai, 2004; Stock, 2009). Today, continued “noncitizen” participation in the U.S. military exemplifies the long-standing relationship between

militarism and immigration. In 2009, more than 114,000 immigrants served in all branches of the military, representing about 8 percent of the 1.4 million people on active duty (Stock, 2009). In 2008, 39 percent of immigrant service people were from Latin American or Caribbean countries, and about 36 percent were from Asia (Batalova, 2008). Enlistees from the Philippines constituted the largest immigrant ethnic group at 22.8 percent, followed by those from Mexico, at 9.5 percent. In addition, about 645,000 veterans were immigrants, or 3 percent of the entire veteran population; of that fraction, Asian immigrant veterans made up 25 percent (Ho and Terrazas, 2008). In 2008, there were seventy-nine thousand Filipino veterans, and they were by far the largest contingent of all immigrant ethnic groups; Korean and Vietnamese veterans comprised 2 percent each, but they were also among the top ten countries of origin for foreign-born veterans.

Military and civilian leaders have lauded immigrant enlistees for having contributed “special skills” and service, especially during war (Stock, 2009). Immigrants have served as foreign-language translators, interpreters, and cultural experts (Stock, 2009), particularly for reconnaissance missions (Kiang, 1991; Raimundo, 2010), and have often fulfilled recruitment goals (Bicksler and Nolan, 2009; Mariscal, 2004). American military success has depended and continues to depend upon the expertise of immigrant soldiers. Beyond immigrants’ contributions, however, more attention must be paid to enlistment factors and the actual experiences of immigrant service people.

Scholars have indicated that for People of Color, economic and educational benefits were key factors for enlistment (Mariscal, 2004; Peachey, 2008). Ironically, while the possibility of educational benefits has often attracted minority enlistees, higher education now competes against military recruitment for the same group of young people. College attendance has reduced the pool of potential enlistees and detrimentally affected “a disproportionate share of the high-quality youth cohort that is preferred by the military” (Bicksler and Nolan, 2009, 8). Military recruitment was markedly difficult between 2005 and 2008; after 9/11, because of protracted campaigns in Afghanistan and in Iraq, young people have enlisted at even lower rates (Bicksler and Nolan, 2009). As in other difficult recruitment periods, the military has reached broadly to fill its force, and more specifically, recruiters have once again targeted “noncitizens” (Mariscal, 2007).

Political leaders have facilitated that strategy now and in the past. Under section 329 of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, Congress gave the president the authority to expedite the naturalization of immigrant servicemen and servicewomen during times of conflict. In July 2002, George W. Bush did just that: he signed Executive Order 13269, a measure for the Expedited Naturalization of Aliens and Noncitizen Nationals Serving in an Active-Duty Status During the War on Terrorism. The order stated:

Those persons serving honorably in active-duty status in the Armed Forces of the United States, during the period beginning on September 11, 2001, and terminating on the date to be so designated, are eligible for naturalization in accordance with the statutory exception to the naturalization requirements, as provided in section 329 of the Act [of 1952].²

While most immigrants must establish at least five years of continuous residency in the United States to become eligible for citizenship, Executive Order 13269 enabled immigrant and nonimmigrant soldiers, regardless of their length of residency in the United States, to initiate naturalization processes immediately. By 2009, more than forty-five thousand persons became citizens through that one executive order (Stock, 2009).

Substantial evidence has shown that expedited naturalization has attracted many more immigrant recruits. If accounting for all persons of immigrant descent on active duty in 2001, 81 percent were already naturalized citizens. But through the first deployment into Afghanistan and through the war in Iraq, a much greater fraction of immigrant servicemen and servicewomen have gained citizenship. The number of immigrants naturalizing through military service grew almost exponentially, from just 836 people in 2000 to more than 9,100 in 2010, an increase of 991 percent (See Table 1).³ Again, these statistics have been part of a recurring pattern: in the United States, immigrants have become citizens through military service at much higher rates during and immediately following every major American war, including the two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and now Afghanistan and Iraq.

The transition from immigrant to citizen is not fail-safe. Military service might make citizenship more possible, but it has not guaranteed citizenship. Chicano Studies scholar Jorge Mariscal (2007) estimated that after 9/11, about 20 percent of legal

Table 1: Number of Persons Naturalized, 2000-2010

Year	Total	Civilian	Military	Not Reported
2000	886,026	812,579	836	72,611
2001	606,259	575,030	758	30,471
2002	572,646	550,835	1,053	20,758
2003	462,435	449,123	3,865	9,447
2004	537,151	520,771	4,668	11,712
2005	604,280	589,269	4,614	10,397
2006	702,589	684,484	6,259	11,846
2007	660,477	648,005	3,808	8,664
2008	1,046,539	1,032,281	4,342	9,916
2009	743,715	726,043	7,100	10,572
2010	619,913	604,410	9,122	6,381

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2010 Table 20: Petitions for Naturalizations Filed, Persons Naturalized, and Petitions for Naturalizations Denied: Fiscal Years 1907 to 2010." Washington, DC: Office of Immigration Statistics. <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk10Na.shtm>

permanent residents in the military who had applied for naturalization had been denied. He stated, "military service carries no guarantee that permanent residents will be granted the one benefit for which they probably enlisted and for which they may be forced to risk their life" (360). Moreover, by 2005, immigrants represented 8 percent of military personnel killed in action in Afghanistan and in Iraq, even though immigrants comprised only 3 percent of military personnel on active duty (Peachey, 2008).

Since 9/11, more than one hundred immigrant soldiers have been granted posthumous citizenship (Mariscal, 2007; Stock, 2009). Posthumous citizenship is the benefit granted to any active-duty immigrant soldier who dies during service hostilities. Although posthumous citizenship seems moot, this benefit has enabled any surviving spouse to apply for naturalization. Yet, surviving family members, who are often responsible for initiating such processes for fallen immigrant soldiers, receive little institutional support in attaining posthumous citizenship. For obvious reasons, recruiters have no incentive to mention the possibility of not getting citizenship or the reality that race still matters in military

service, or the very real possibility that military service can be fatal. Instead, they have focused on expedited naturalization processes, opportunities to express patriotism and demonstrate loyalty to the United States, educational assistance, and other benefits that can follow military service. Beyond such information, it is important to centralize the voices of immigrants of color whose perceptions of militarized immigration processes are conditioned by these factors.

Centralizing Undocumented Asian Perspectives

CRT scholars have often relied on counterstory as a method of highlighting the voices of people who are often located “on the margins of society” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, 32). To illustrate the militarization of immigration processes and the subsequent impact on immigrants, I draw on fourteen semistructured interviews with young people, all of whom self-identified as undocumented and Asian (American). Nine of the participants were men and five were women, and their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-six. Interviews lasted ninety minutes to two hours in length, each of which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. (I have edited some of their remarks here for clarity.) I then conducted several informal follow-up interviews; all of them are now part of a larger project examining the general experiences of Asian immigrant youth.

Developing strong relationships when working with undocumented Asian immigrants has been of the utmost importance. I met the participants through my work as an assistant professor and academic advisor for the Department of Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). CSUN is located in the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, the campus serves more than four hundred veteran students, and the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program is one of the most visible in Southern California (Venkateswaran, 2010). As a faculty member on a campus with a strong military presence, my research is informed by my perspective as a practitioner who “counterrecruits” Students of Color away from enlistment and into higher education. As an advisor, I have worked closely with a small community of undocumented Asian students, their friends who were not enrolled at CSUN, and some of their family members, who are all committed to their college access and retention.⁴

American imperialism imposed abroad has greatly influenced who becomes undocumented in the United States. Interview participants were from South Korea and the Philippines, two countries affected by American colonialism and militarization (Kim, 2010; San Juan, 2007). Approximately 28 percent of the one million undocumented Asians in the United States are from the Philippines (a former American colony), followed by people from India (20%), Korea (17%), and China (13%); all are nation-states on which the American economy is dependent for immigrant labor (Hoefler, Rytina, and Baker, 2011). This demographic context can explain the disproportionate ethnic representation of undocumented Filipino and Korean participants in this study: eight participants identified as Filipino, five identified as Korean, and one identified as multiethnic Filipino and Chinese. Although this sample is not completely representative of the undocumented Asian population, the ethnic distribution of participants reflected the geographical limitations of this project. All fourteen participants resided in Los Angeles County, most in the San Fernando Valley, where the population was about 10.7 percent Asian (San Fernando Valley Economic Research Center, 2004).

In addition to the interviews, I conducted discourse analysis of MAVNI and the DREAM Act. Discourse analysis includes the examination of “texts”; the social, historical, and political contexts in which the texts are created; and the focused narrative the texts construct (Luke, 1995–96). I use discourse analysis to show the contributive expectations imposed onto immigrants in exchange for the possibilities of citizenship. The decision to include such analysis had emerged during interviews when one question in the protocol elicited several students to name the MAVNI program and proposed federal DREAM Act: have you ever attempted to gain a legal status? Most youth mentioned a myriad of strategies for legalization and often associated a legal permanent residency status with potential naturalization. I did not explicitly ask about the military, yet enlistment played a central role in students’ imagined trajectories for citizenship. All of them mentioned the military as a strategy for naturalization: six participants named and/or discussed MAVNI, and fourteen, the DREAM Act.

There were some limitations to this project: perhaps the prevalence of discussion around the military and immigration among the fourteen participants occurred because several of them knew each other, and as undocumented immigrants, information sharing has been one strategy to find out about resources. In addition, because many of them lived near, attended, and/or knew someone enrolled at CSUN, military recruiters or the presence of the large ROTC program on campus may have heavily influenced the participants' consciousness. Yet, although all of these factors might be significant, the data provided by the participants remained compelling. All of the undocumented Asian immigrants I interviewed possessed an eerie familiarity with policies like MAVNI and the DREAM Act—they reported that these rules dominated their thinking about American citizenship, to the point that they had all considered military service as a viable strategy toward legal status.

Military Pathways for Undocumented Asian Youth

The strategic benefits of military enlistment are omnipresent in the minds of some undocumented Asian immigrant youth. Like many of the youth, Carlos spoke about military service as a path to citizenship that seemed much more likely than getting an education. He developed that perception from hearing about how his peers had approached the same problem:

I think that a lot of my friends think that going into the Army would probably be a good first step and then go to college because I heard that we aren't going to get financial aid anyway. So why not do what everyone else is doing? Just go [enlist] first and then school.

For undocumented students, who are largely ineligible for federal and state financial aid,⁵ as well as for state-financed public assistance programs, military service appeared as a sensible option. Carlos's response was typical among participants: they often equated legalization with naturalization (even though one did not necessarily follow the other), and they thought of military service as the chief method through which they could acquire citizenship. My interviewees knew about MAVNI, the DREAM Act, and military enlistment processes, and to an extent that emphasized the inherent connection between immigration status and the American military state.

Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI)

In 2008, the Secretary of Defense authorized a pilot military recruitment program called the MAVNI program. MAVNI targets “certain legal aliens” who are professionally trained health care personnel or have specific language and cultural capabilities—skills that the military deem critical during war (U.S. Department of Defense, 2009). An examination of the various eligibility criteria reveals that the MAVNI program disproportionately targets Asian immigrants.

The largest groups from which the MAVNI program can draw are those with asylee or refugee status.⁶ Asylees and refugees are persons who have been “persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution” in their country of origin (Martin, 2010, 1). Historically, American involvement in the Vietnam War facilitated the admission of thousands of Southeast Asian asylees and refugees to the United States (Espiritu, 2006). Today, asylees and refugees from other Asian countries remain sizeable groups. For example, in 2007 and 2008, Burmese refugees were the largest group admitted into the United States (Martin, 2010). In 2009, Burmese and Bhutanese nationals represented a combined 42.4 percent of the seventy-four thousand refugees. Similarly, Chinese nationals represented a significant amount of the asylee population for the latter half of the 2000 decade. In 2009, Chinese nationals comprised 27.6 percent of the more than 22,100 asylees admitted to the United States. The next largest group was significantly less: 1,100 persons from Ethiopia, or 5 percent of asylees admitted that year.

Beyond status, MAVNI also targets Asian immigrants through explicit language requirements. Although multiple language capabilities are job skills many employers seek in the global economy, many of the “preferred languages” under MAVNI are traditionally spoken among Asian populations, including but not limited to Cambodian-Khmer, Chinese, Korean, Lao, Punjabi, and Tamil. East, South, and Southeast Asian languages represented more than half of the thirty-five preferred languages.

Additionally, education requirements disproportionately impact Asians. Of Asian immigrants, 87.4 percent have a high school education or more, which is the highest among all immigrant groups (Larsen, 2004). In 2009, almost 70 percent of the MAVNI applicants who entered basic training possessed a bachelor’s degree

and included nationals of Bangladesh, China, India, Korea, and Pakistan (Mitchell, 2009). One preference for potential enlistees through MAVNI is medical training, though the specific type of training is vague—priority points to health care professionals who “fill medical specialties where the service has a shortfall” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2009, 1). The proportion of immigrants in management and professional occupations was highest among Asians at 47 percent (Larsen, 2004). Although Asian immigrants have experienced a trend of underemployment—work or pay are noncommensurate to their educational or skill levels—many are employed within the medical or health care fields (Choy, 2003; Madamba, 1998). Through MAVNI, Asian immigrants who have high levels of education and are young enough to enlist might find better opportunities to apply skills that civilian employers have not honored.

As a pilot program, MAVNI achieved its initial goal of recruiting one thousand enlistees in 2010. Through MAVNI, successful enlistees were eligible to apply for citizenship immediately, whether or not they possessed legal permanent residency status.⁷ The program is officially on hold as it undergoes a performance assessment, although military officials have already deemed MAVNI a successful recruitment tool (Mitchell, 2009; Stock, 2009; Thornbloom, 2010).

Legacies of Militarization

The irony, or rather the audacity, of programs like MAVNI is that they have ultimately drawn from an immigrant population whose very presence in the United States was facilitated by militarization and war abroad. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense (2009) factsheet on MAVNI has highlighted the militarization of the Philippines through U.S. imperialism overseas:

the United States officially began recruiting Filipino nationals into the Navy in the late 1940s, when it signed the Military Bases Agreement of 1947 allowing U.S. military bases in the Philippines. In total, over 35,000 Filipinos enlisted in the Navy through the program between 1952 and 1991 (2).

Acknowledgment of Filipino participation in the U.S. Armed Forces has functioned as a selling point of MAVNI and signifies the “contributions” immigrants have made to the American military

industrial complex. Omitted from the text, however, are the social, economic, and political implications that the Military Bases Agreement and subsequent policies, such as the Visiting Forces Agreement, have incurred upon the Philippines. These include a sexualized labor market and the exploitation of and violence against Filipinos, particularly women (Lacsamana, 2011; San Juan, 2007). Such grave oversight has constructed a distorted legacy of military participation.

The legacies of an American militarized presence in Asia came up in my interviews. Joseph was a twenty-three-year-old undocumented Filipino whose extended family had served in the U.S. Navy for as long as he could remember:

I'm really close with my cousin who is in the Navy and he heard about MAVNI and told me about it, but he didn't know too much. I think just because he's in the Navy and his dad was in the Navy, that all I would have to do is join the Navy, and I would be legal . . . and I think they think that because that's what my uncle did. That's what Filipinos do.

Although he was out of status, his cousin was not, and even though Joseph did not seem to know how his cousin knew about MAVNI, or even the specific details of the rule, he believed that the rule could benefit him if he were to join the navy. His remarks were most striking for revealing the intergenerational dimensions of American military service in his extended Filipino family—joining the navy was a sociocultural practice.

Another participant, Carlos, had a related experience. Carlos shared some of the most comprehensive reflections about the program. The child of a former South Korean military officer, Carlos was already somewhat familiar with the pragmatic benefits of military life, but he was also encouraged to enlist by local military recruiters:

Actually, in high school I was thinking about [enlistment] and you know how they have recruiters that come and speak. I kept their business cards and called them, and they helped me, and we were sending e-mails, back and forth. . . . They [said to], "come back when you get your [legal] status."

Carlos had been in touch with military recruiters since high school, and they provided pieces of information that never resolved

completely whether his undocumented status would make him ineligible for military service. Throughout his contacts with these recruiters, Carlos said that he did not worry about revealing his status at all: “No, because I [wanted] to be part of [the armed services]! . . . I wanted to show them part of who I am.” Despite knowing that he was out of status, the recruiters stayed in touch with Carlos through his years in college; Carlos indicated that the recruiters did not seem to know whether his undocumented status precluded him from enlisting.

Even when Carlos was confident that his status made him ineligible to enlist under MAVNI, the military recruiters that he knew were not deterred:

I actually was talking to the Marine Corps recruiters too. They [said], “Why don’t you do an exercise with us for the physical testing and wait for your status to come?” But I [replied], “I don’t know how long it’s going to take me.” And I don’t know if I would be allowed, because you have to pass physical training [PT]. So [he said], “let’s get ready for it, because instead of sitting there and [waiting until] you get the status, you won’t have to work towards the PT again and you can just enlist.”

Eventually, when Carlos decided that military service would never be an option for him, he became disheartened, as though he was just being strung along:

So basically they were just saying, “yeah, we’ll hold you because I need you.” But I don’t think I would get paid for it. . . . They probably didn’t even know about all the immigration stuff. You know recruiters; they just have to recruit people. It’s their job. I’m just the back-up plan whenever they are short. I kind of felt that, so I was like, no, thank you.

Carlos demonstrated more familiarity with MAVNI than the recruiters. He also expressed candor when he spoke with recruiters about being undocumented because he believed they would honor his desire to join them in the ranks. More importantly, he had not thought about the consequences of revealing his status. Carlos’s narrative showed the dangerous, potentially life-threatening, position he was willing to take for the sheer possibility of legalization through enlistment.

Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act

Better known than MAVNI is the DREAM Act. In recent years, the DREAM Act has been at the center of public discourse around immigration reform because it has represented one of the few potential pathways to legal status for undocumented immigrants. The DREAM Act was first introduced in Congress during 2001 and reintroduced as recently as 2011, but it has never been approved.⁸ At the heart of the bill has been the authority delegated to the secretary of homeland security to prevent the deportation of, and to facilitate a pathway toward citizenship for, certain classes of undocumented immigrants. They would first have to gain conditional permanent status in the United States, provided that they could prove good moral character aside from the civil immigration violation. The DREAM Act would repeal parts of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, the portions that denied undocumented immigrants eligibility for higher education benefits based on state residency, including certain forms of financial aid. Although some believe that the DREAM Act benefits all undocumented immigrants, its provisions have encompassed only a specific subset of the undocumented population—young immigrants of color who have demonstrated a comprehensive list of characteristics and behaviors, including a college education or satisfactory completion of military service (Buonavista and Gonzales, 2010–11; Mariscal, 2007).⁹

Opponents of the DREAM Act have insisted that this rule was another “amnesty” program, like the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and they have vowed to vote against any rule that might “reward” undocumented immigrants. At certain points, the DREAM Act has gained some bipartisan support in Congress, but more significantly, the rule has drawn the support of both progressive pro-immigrant organizations and the U.S. Armed Forces, two constituencies that otherwise have not had much in common. While progressive organizations support the DREAM Act because it might enhance educational access for undocumented youth, the U.S. military has framed the rule as an opportunity to enhance its own recruitment efforts. These military provisions—endorsing efforts

to recruit undocumented youth and to provide them a pathway to American citizenship through military service—have received less scholarly and media attention (Buenavista and Gonzales, 2010–11; Diaz-Strong et al., 2009; Mariscal, 2007).

Advocates for the military have framed the DREAM Act in ways that clearly tie together recruitment, citizenship, and the vulnerable position of undocumented youth. They have noted that low-income and poor youth have had a much harder time financing a higher education:

Because attending college is a very expensive proposition, the third option—joining the armed forces—is a likely choice for many of the young people who would be affected by the bill, hundreds of whom have already demonstrated an interest in joining the military. (Stock, 2009, 8)

Although an estimated 2.1 million undocumented immigrants might gain legal status under the several provisions of the DREAM Act, a clear majority, about 62 percent, would be unable to fulfill the education thresholds (Batalova and McHugh, 2010). Approximately 50 percent of undocumented youth each year are pushed out of high school; this fraction would not be likely to benefit from the DREAM Act, even if it passes (Passel, 2005). Joining the military has a much lower threshold, as most enlistees need a General Educational Development (GED), high school diploma, or a relatively high score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery exam; none of these requirements is the near equivalent of a college degree. Overall, then, the DREAM Act must be seen as a policy likely to push socioeconomically challenged youth of color to pursue military opportunities over educational ones, and even in this context, the number of those who will successfully gain legal status will be a highly selective group.

Enlistment as an Alternative to Education

The limitations of the DREAM Act were not lost on the young people who have been the objects of the policy. Because many of them saw the education requirements in the DREAM Act as a high bar, requiring substantial investments of time and money, many participants were wary of their ability to fulfill the requirements for conditional permanent status under the rule.

They turned, instead, to the military provisions, as exemplified by remarks made by Maria, a twenty-three-year-old Filipina who had enrolled in community college classes on and off:

I'm kind of glad that that choice is there because I don't think I [will] make it through college. I tried but it was hard because I wasn't really motivated and I had to work, too, because we have to.

She went on to explain how her position seemed common among her peers:

I think most people are going to be like me and like the military choice because school isn't a job where they pay you. You have to wait to be paid. But if you sign up for the army or something, that's a job. You kill two birds with one stone.

At the center of Marie's thinking was her ability to achieve a college education and financial stability. Marie felt that her work obligations had to take priority over school, as she had to support herself financially as no other structural forms of aid were available to her. Given that her college education may never be completed, she saw the military option within the DREAM Act as the most likely pathway to legalization.

For young people like Maria, military recruiters and officials reinforced this view. Alvaro was a twenty-year-old undocumented Filipino who had also left community college, but he knew that military staff supported enlistment as a pathway to citizenship. Alvaro said:

I started looking at what to do when I dropped out. I heard about [the DREAM Act] and just started to look at everything that popped up on Google, and kept seeing how all these high-ranking guys were supporting us. I [thought] that must mean something. It seem[ed] like everyone else is against us [undocumented immigrants], but it was finally a relief to see that they are not.

Alvaro's research regarding the DREAM Act began when his higher education ended. Plagued by the lack of institutional support to mediate his financial and emotional well-being in college, Alvaro had been pushed out of college. He found solace in the proposed military option, and he understood this as a final opportunity to occupy a meaningful position in the United States without having

to finish a college degree. Although he could not name the “high-ranking” military officials who had spoken in favor of the DREAM Act, he was impressed that one of the largest American institutions supported people like him. Amidst a barrage of nativist media depictions of undocumented immigrants, Alvaro felt validated by the military.

Just as Alvaro discovered online that the military supported the DREAM Act, Eric, a twenty-one-year-old Korean, found out about the military option through social media:

I mostly learned about it when my friend sent me all these YouTube videos. I just sat there for hours and hours watching everything that came up. There was professional stuff, homemade stuff, students, an army, protests. . . . I think they should just let us into school, to the army, whatever, because there [are] people who don’t even want to go and they get to.

Eric did not attend college, and he only seemed to know about the DREAM Act through these social media outlets. When he had mentioned discovering “an army,” I asked him to clarify what he had meant. He explained that a small group of youth had dubbed themselves the “DREAM Army,” that they advocated for passage of the act so that they could serve in the U.S. Armed Forces.¹⁰ Although he wasn’t sure how reliable his media sources were, Eric found through these searches a group of people yearning to serve in the military, to receive American citizenship, and this impressed him greatly. He said that other people—people who had legal status and American citizenship already—took these things for granted, and that he could not understand why he did not have similar opportunities.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Military participation is not without material consequence, including one’s vulnerability to premature death. Yet, in the absence of any viable institutional mechanisms for undocumented immigrants to live humanely in the United States, MAVNI, the DREAM Act, and enlistment represented future possibilities for these youth. The very people who have been disadvantaged by these structures can only acquire rights and opportunities if and when their interests “converge” with the interests of the society that created the inequalities in the first place (Bell, 1980). The

participants' perspectives suggested that Derrick Bell and many subsequent scholars associated with CRT were right: they have argued persuasively that white majorities give People of Color what they want only when it serves the interests of those majorities. That is how white supremacy has long functioned.

Marginalized communities, however, have differentially experienced and strategized against white supremacy and its various manifestations. Critical ethnic studies scholar Andrea Smith (2006) defined *white supremacy* as "constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics," including slavery / capitalism, genocide / colonialism, and orientalism / war (67). Smith pointed out that People of Color can resist one form of oppression successfully, but then they may become complicit simultaneously in the oppression of others during that same transformation and in ways that they may not recognize. This theory resonates when we consider the collective experiences of the participants for this study: many of them sought out military service as a pragmatic way to escape poverty and undocumented status, and yet none of them saw themselves as prospective instruments of the federal government. From a critical perspective, that government and the popular, voting majorities that supported its policies were most responsible for creating and enforcing the immigration rules that had rendered these youth as pariahs, and they denied these young people access to things like financial aid for college, or even decent public high schools. The young men and women I interviewed recognized themselves as marginalized racial others, but they did not consider the racial or subject status of the people against whom they might be deployed. Many were quite eager to join, even though they may not have thought through what military service would entail.

As scholars, practitioners, and policy makers, these circumstances must reinforce our commitment to seek alternatives to the militarization of citizenship, and to articulate other pathways toward legal status that do not involve participation in war or further projections of American military power that depend upon vulnerable immigrant young people. Within existing policies, some modifications might be possible. For example, rules like MAVNI have expedited naturalization for immigrants with special skills, but advocates might push to expand that process in an effort to capture all immigrants who have demonstrated sustained residency in the United States, irrespective of military service. Similarly, the

DREAM Act (should it ever pass) could make citizenship more attainable for those who achieve an education, and yet we must push for more resources and support so that all immigrants—regardless of their current legal status—might achieve that education and acquire that benefit. Further, expansion of the federal DREAM Act to benefit anyone who has successfully finished K-12 education in the United States could move us even closer to educational equity. At a time when nearly half of all undocumented youth do not finish high school, such rules would greatly enhance efforts to retain such students in the K-12 system, and they would greatly enlarge the pathways through which young people could become American citizens.

In addition to these measures, those of us on college campuses should also consider steps to demilitarize American citizenship in the places where we work. Many of the participants in this present study learned of military recruitment through peers, media outlets, and campus-based military recruiters; for those of us troubled by the “success” of these efforts, as well as the extent to which military service has often appeared as the most simple and most available option for undocumented youth, we must develop and support better, counterrecruitment outreach strategies. As educators, we ought to provide a deeper, historical context for how citizenship and military service have been related, quite often in troubling ways, throughout Asian, American, and Asian American history. As activists, we ought to articulate a counternarrative of military service, one that criticizes the ways in which immigrants yearning for citizenship are forced to pay a tremendous price for a status that citizens take for granted. Citizenship should not come at such a cost, and we ought to demand alternatives to the existing policies and practices that have shaped the expectations of undocumented immigrant youth in pervasive and powerful ways.

To a large extent, these efforts have already emerged: at CSUN, for example, I am part of the Dreams Alliance, a group of faculty, staff, and students who organize on behalf of undocumented students on campus. We strive to provide undocumented youth with scholarship opportunities and information about educational resources, as well as other options available to them during and after college. In the San Francisco Bay Area, *67 Sueños*, a collective of undocumented youth and their allies, has taken an explicit stance for increased educational access and against the militarization of

immigration policies.¹¹ These organizations provide undocumented youth and their families with important sources of financial and moral support, but more importantly, they bring progressive advocates together and help all of us think through alternatives to the prevailing militarized forms of immigration reform.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all the participants for confidentiality purposes.
2. Executive Order 13269 was signed by George W. Bush on July 3, 2002, and filed with the Federal Register on July 8, 2002. The complete text is available at http://www.justice.gov/eoir/vll/fedreg/presdocs/pd08jy02_txt-26.pdf (accessed September 15, 2011).
3. Statistics on military-facilitated naturalizations are documented since 1918 to present. For more detailed information, see Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2010*, Table 20: Petitions for Naturalizations Filed, Persons Naturalized, and Petitions for Naturalization Denied: Fiscal Years 1907 to 2010. Available at <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk10Na.shtm> (accessed September 15, 2011).
4. Sharan B. Merriam (2009) has described snowball sampling as a type of purposeful sampling that requires the researcher to ask early participants to "refer [her] to other participants" (79). In my work with undocumented youth, however, they actually initiated the process of introducing peers and family members to me in hopes that they could use the project to learn more about immigration resources. The power of snowball sampling within the undocumented community was key in the data collection process because traditional methods of recruitment did not always work.
5. In California, the state legislature had approved Assembly Bill (AB) 130 and AB 131, in June 2011 and in October 2011, respectively. AB 130 allows students that meet the in-state tuition requirements to apply for and receive specified financial aid programs administered by California's public colleges and universities, while AB 131 would allow them to apply for and receive Cal Grants. Eligible students include but are not limited to those who are undocumented. For more information, please see <http://www.californiadreamact.org/> (accessed February 20, 2012).

6. Immigrants eligible for MAVNI include those who hold asylee, refugee, or temporary protected statuses. Foreign-born individuals who have a “nonimmigrant” status are also eligible, specifically those who fall under the following visa categories: E, F, H, I, J, K, L, M, O, P, Q, R, S, T, TC, TD, TN, U, or V.
7. A complete list of frequently asked questions regarding the MAVNI program is available in a U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement memorandum, “Student and Exchange Visitor Program Policy Guidance: 0901-01.” Available at http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/mavni_faq_111009.pdf (accessed September 15, 2011).
8. The most recent iteration of the DREAM Act (H.R. 1842 and S. 952) was introduced on May 11, 2011. More detailed information is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d112:h.r.1842> (accessed September 15, 2011).
9. Several provisions of the DREAM Act represent militarized practices, which include demonstration of good moral character, submission of biometric and biographic data, successful passage of security and law enforcement background checks, registration with the Military Selective Service, and honorable military service for at least two years.
10. In subsequent communications with Eric, he forwarded me a link to a YouTube video titled “DREAM Army in Formation: Let Us Serve, We Are the Future,” which depicts a group of youth wearing T-shirts advocating for the DREAM Act and who imitate various military drills. This video, in addition to others, can be found by searching for “DREAM Army in Formation” on YouTube and on other social networking websites.
11. For more information on 67 Sueños, please see <http://67suenos.org/> (accessed September 15, 2011).

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