Introduction

One Friday morning in early November students, teachers, and staff of Fairview High School in Lorain, Ohio, slowly file into the spacious, dimly lit auditorium for a Veterans Day assembly. It is noisy, with students laughing, greeting each other, and vying for seats near the back of the hall, while teachers and staff try to get everyone seated as quickly as possible. Mayor Craig Foltin is seated in the front of the hall, where three rows are reserved for local veterans who are the invited guests for the morning’s assembly. He sits quietly with a bemused expression at the controlled chaos of students who are required to attend this annual event honoring local veterans. This is one of many events that will take place throughout the Veterans Day weekend and in each instance—at elementary and middle schools, public parks, VFW posts, and private banquet halls—cadets from Fairview’s Army JROTC (Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps) program play a prominent role. In this morning’s assembly, members of the school’s Color Guard solemnly proceed into the auditorium as the rest of the student body suddenly lowers their voices to hushed whispers. Four young cadets carry large flags and post the colors at the front of the auditorium to signal the beginning of the program. They are immediately followed by nearly two dozen veterans who proceed down the main aisle to take the reserved front-row seats while all in attendance stand and applaud as they enter. The veterans reflect the diversity of U.S. military personnel: most are older white men, but many are young women and men, white, black, and Latino. And almost all wear some kind of hat, button, patch, cap, or jacket identifying their military branch or the wars in which in which they served. A number of the younger veterans wear items that identify them as veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom. A school administrator invites everyone to take their seats, welcomes us to this Veterans Day event, and then dims the lights to show a video chronicling wars in U.S. history. There is a lot of whispering and giggling among the students during the video, and
its sparse narrative, with patriotic background music celebrating war victories and the heroes who have served honorably over two centuries, does not seem to inspire those in attendance. Even the veterans appear a little bored.

Once the movie is over, our attention is directed to the stage, where a round table, draped in white cloth with a single candle in the center, is elegantly set for five. There are five empty chairs, also covered in white, each bearing a different seal representing the five branches of the military. Cadet Major Alana Ramos, in dress uniform and a white beret, approaches the podium near the table and begins a deeply moving POW/MIA ceremony that I have seen Fairview’s Honor Guard perform for veterans groups throughout Lorain County. As she begins speaking, five cadets also in dress uniforms and white berets march solemnly to the table. They each carry a service cap in their right hand, and a long, shiny saber hangs from their left side. As they approach the table, they move slowly around the empty chairs until they form a circle around the table, with a cadet standing tall and straight behind each chair. The auditorium is silent as Alana explains the significance of this ceremony:

I have been given the honor and privilege of introducing and acknowledging this table representing and paying tribute to all the prisoners of war, missing in action and killed in action from American involvement in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, the Persian Gulf Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and more. Many of you have looked at this table and wondered. Let me explain. This table, set for five, symbolizes the frailty of the prisoners against their oppressors. Remember, the tablecloth is white, symbolizing the purity of their country’s call to arms. Remember, the single candle, displayed at the center of the table, is symbolic of the families and loved ones who have kept the faith, waiting for the return of those dear to them. Remember, the red ribbon, tied prominently on the candle, is reminiscent of the red ribbon worn upon lapels and breasts of the many thousands who bear witness to their unyielding determination to demand a proper counting of our missing and the return of any Americans left on foreign soil. Remember, the lemon on the bread plate reminds us of their bitter fate. Remember, there is salt on the bread plate symbolic of the tears of the families as they still wait for their loved one
to return. Remember, the glasses are inverted. They cannot toast with us this afternoon. Remember, the chairs are empty. They are not here. Remember, all of you who have served with them and call them brothers and sisters and depended on their aid and relied on them. Remember them, for surely they have not forgotten you.

Once Alana has finished speaking, the song “Soldiers of the Cloud” begins as the five cadets pay tribute to the POW/MIA. With painstaking military precision, they slowly place the service caps on the table, salute the missing, raise their sabers to their hearts, and use them to salute once more before returning them to their saber guards at their side. The song is slow and haunting, with a poignant chorus about bearing witness to soldiers who must not be forgotten: “Tell the mothers that their sons are marching in the sky. Tell them that they’re soldiers of the clouds. Tell them, please tell them. Please tell them so they know.” As they finish their tribute, Alana joins her fellow cadets at the front of the stage, the members of the Honor Guard face all of us in the audience, and turn again with military precision and march silently offstage. The auditorium is filled with the sound of applause, cheers, and whistles from the students. The veterans, many with tears streaming down their faces, stand quietly while applauding. They are visibly moved, a response that I have consistently observed each time the Honor Guard has performed this ceremony.

As students and teachers file out of the auditorium, ready to begin their school day, some staff and school administrators stay behind with the mayor and the veterans. They embrace, shake hands, and are invited to a modest reception of cookies, soda, and coffee in the cafeteria, where they meet up with student cadets from the Honor and Color Guards as well as some of their parents who attended the event. First Sergeant Milano, one of two retired military personnel who leads Fairview’s JROTC program, is beaming. He is proud of how his students performed and is even more delighted by how moved and appreciative his fellow veterans are by the cadets’ tribute. During the reception veterans approach the students, tell them how proud they are of what they are doing, praise them for their hard work, and emphasize how good it is to see young people doing something positive for their community. The students are a little embarrassed but graciously receive their praise and thank
them for attending the assembly and for their service in the military. The parents are also pleased and remark, once again, on how well they performed the ceremony and what a great program Fairview’s JROTC is. Some thank First Sergeant (as students and others in the community often refer to him) for all his work with the cadets. Soon the students regroup and get ready to leave with their parents and First Sergeant to perform the ceremony at another school. Most of the Honor and Color Guard will be excused from classes for the day, a perk for being one of the few cadets to be in Honor and Color Guard. As an assistant principal of the school explained to me earlier in the fall, JROTC students are exceptional. Another administrator described JROTC as “one of the best programs in the school.” And in a formal interview with the three principals of the school, they all remarked on the distinctiveness of the program, with its emphasis on character building, extracurricular activities, leadership development, community service, and high levels of parental and community involvement. One of the principals observed that it is precisely these features that ensure the program’s success. “These kids are not perfect,” Principal Ramona Sánchez noted with a smile, “but they are good and quick to volunteer. They have the best behavior and discipline and integrity. So much of JROTC is about character development and leadership.”

Principal Sánchez’s observations about the distinctiveness of JROTC cadets are shared widely among administrators, teachers, veterans, and community members, who publicly praise JROTC as one of Fairview’s most valued programs. For many students participating in JROTC, it is precisely these positive experiences of being commended for the acclaim they bring to their schools, their families, and their communities that affirm the value of their participation in JROTC. Indeed, events like the Veterans Day assembly not only provide an opportunity for students to publicly honor military veterans but also elicit praise from a range of people both inside the school and beyond, and highlight the students’ exceptional accomplishments. These accolades were not uncommon. In fact, throughout the year I observed countless instances in local media, formal speeches, casual conversations, and interactions between JROTC students and the broader public that affirmed both the value of the program and of the kind of service and citizenship these students embodied. These positive assessments of young people’s dedication, discipline,
leadership, and commitment to community service are dramatically different from the negative portrayals of today’s youth—and in particular youth of color—who are often characterized as lazy, undisciplined, and prone to criminal activities. Thus, this Veterans Day assembly confirms what proponents of JROTC proclaim as one of the most valued features of the program: it creates better citizens.

Since its inception in 1916, JROTC has been promoted as a vital program for developing in young people the moral and physical discipline necessary for good citizenship. Today, JROTC’s principal mission is to “motivate young people to be better citizens,” a motto that is ubiquitous in the program’s promotional materials, educational texts, posters, and handbooks, and that infuses conversations with students, administrators, family members, and the broader community alike. But what kind of citizens are JROTC students invited to become? And what exactly does citizenship mean? How do working-class youth, and in particular young Latinas/os and their families, define citizenship? And why does the language of citizenship resonate with them so powerfully? Although these are not the questions that initially guided my interest in the experiences of Latina/o youth in JROTC, political and economic shifts at the local, national, and global levels made them unavoidable and led me to consider the ideological, social, and cultural conditions in which ideas about citizenship, obligation, and social opportunity are discussed and vigorously debated. These questions took on a particular urgency as the seemingly unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required new military recruits, deployed soldiers for multiple tours, and enacted a stop-loss policy that prevented military personnel from leaving the military once their service had ended. The devastating impact of war on soldiers and their families was concomitant with other violences in the American landscape, including rising anti-immigrant sentiment and the proliferation of anti-immigrant legislation at the local, state, and national levels. In both instances questions about citizenship—who is a citizen and what are the obligations of those who lay claim to citizenship status—loomed large and raised particularly vexing problems for U.S. Latinas/os whose youth, marginal economic status, and growing numbers made them simultaneously a source of hope for contributing to the ranks of the all-volunteer-force military and a source of fear and threat to the nation.
recruiting tool for the U.S. military, it was clear that for many Latina/o youth in high school military programs, questions of citizenship, duty, inclusion, and belonging were not merely theoretical concerns. Instead, they confronted these matters on a daily basis and developed a sense of themselves as citizens, community members, and contributors to the nation through both their local experiences in JROTC and their keen awareness of the broader political, economic, and social context of militarism, economic opportunity, and social aspirations.

Because Fairview High School is located in the predominantly Puerto Rican community of South Lorain, it is not surprising that large numbers of Latinas/os participate in its JROTC program. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that the majority of the students who participated in Honor and Color Guard are young Latinas, primarily from Puerto Rican families, some of whom have a long histories and deep roots in the city of Lorain, while others are recent migrants. Not only do young Latinas slightly outnumber their male counterparts in the program, they are also quite visible and hold the highest leadership roles in the program. Along with their fellow cadets, they interact frequently with local veterans and civic organizations in both the city and Lorain County, and they are actively involved in a wide range of community service, fund-raising, and public ceremonies throughout the year. This was not the first time that many of the veterans who attended the morning’s assembly had interacted with members of Fairview’s Color Guard and Honor Guards. Many veterans were also familiar with the students’ families, who are actively involved in JROTC through the Booster Club and who regularly attend different events and support the program through citywide fund-raisers. In short, the morning’s assembly illustrates the appeal and success of Fairview’s JROTC program: As a high school class that explicitly links curricular and extracurricular learning and activities, it integrates community engagement in ways that not only develop important leadership skills and experiential learning but also help students develop social and cultural capital that are absolutely essential for their success in high school and beyond.8

The Veterans Day performance is also significant because it captures in a very visceral way the remarkable self-discipline and agency of students who participate in JROTC, two recurring themes that emerged throughout the research and that guide the analysis in this book around
the question of what motivates Latina/o youths’ decisions to take part in JROTC. The precision involved in posting the colors, performing a ceremony with sabers, service caps, and salutes, and a memorized speech honoring POW/MIA all require long hours of practice and self-discipline not unfamiliar to students who participate in their high school sports teams, debate club, drama, dance or drill, and cheer squads. But the cadets’ engagement in military rituals—which range from the most solemn national events such as presidential inaugurations and military funerals to more routine displays of national unity and patriotism like raising the flag, singing the national anthem, and military flyovers before sporting events—is of a profoundly different order. By participating in JROTC, a military program that is extolled by politicians, governmental officials, and national leaders across the political spectrum, students have aligned themselves with one of the most revered and trusted institutions in American public life and are the beneficiaries of the positive associations and respect that accompany their affiliation with the military.9

Students’ decisions to participate in JROTC are certainly shaped by the prestige and respect military affiliations potentially offer, but their choices also reflect their agency and their attempts to cultivate themselves as disciplined, community-oriented, and aspiring young people worthy of praise and emulation. As a program that began in 1916, and whose presence in American public schools has waxed and waned throughout the twentieth century, JROTC has experienced unprecedented expansion since the 1990s and now has approximately 557,600 participating in 3,405 units nationwide.10 Public support for proliferation of JROTC programs in poor urban school districts with large numbers of Latina/o and African American students is often based on the belief that the program provides much-needed discipline for “at risk” youth. Critics of JROTC argue, however, that the program is a recruiting tool for the U.S. military and is yet another example of an increasingly punitive climate that disproportionately affects impoverished, working-class, and youth of color in American public schools.

There are certainly limitations to laying claim to status that rests on militarized notions of respect, worthiness, citizenship, and belonging, but this book highlights the agency of the young men and women who choose to take part in JROTC and their efforts to redefine themselves and
their communities. By emphasizing youth agency, I do not wish to diminish the deeply troubling and very real ways that working-class youth and communities of color are targeted by military recruiters in their high schools, through slick media campaigns, online gaming sites, and interactive media. Military recruiters are more visible in some high schools and communities than others, and researchers and activists alike have drawn particular attention to the ways that Latina/o youth are specifically the targets of well-coordinated military recruitment campaigns.\textsuperscript{11} As the youngest and fastest-growing demographic in the United States, and one that the military has identified as having relatively positive attitudes toward the military and “active duty propensity,” Latinas/os are aggressively recruited and encouraged to consider military service as a viable pathway to economic security, fast-track naturalization, and greater social status.\textsuperscript{12} Military programs profoundly inform the aspirations of many Latina/o youth. But their hopes for the future are indelibly shaped by their profound understandings of the limited choices and resources available to them. Both the local political economy and national debates about citizenship, race, class, and belonging are characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and concern for working-class youth, and Latina/o youth in particular. It is precisely in this context that they strategize, aspire, and organize their social worlds with the limited resources available to them. Military service, education, social status, and upward mobility are intertwined in complicated ways, as they were to so many before them, and Latina/o youth draw on these resources in unexpected ways in order to create meaningful and economically secure lives for themselves, their families, and their communities.

JROTC, Citizenship Formation, and Youth Aspirations

That working-class Latina/o youth would turn to military programs (and, at different moments, military service) as an avenue for upward mobility and social standing is not surprising or new. As many scholars have shown, military service has been an important avenue for upward economic and social mobility and has been the site of significant struggle for full citizenship rights.\textsuperscript{13} What is less known and understood, however, is the role of military education programs like JROTC in the lives of young people. This book intervenes in these debates and provides
critical ethnographic attention to aid in understanding the motivations, experiences, and aspirations of students who participate in increasing numbers in JROTC programs in cities like Lorain, Ohio. Anthropologists, and feminist ethnographers in particular, have long distinguished their work by its commitment to “documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality and other aspects of participants’ lives.”14 In doing so, they are able to capture the complexity of social phenomena while simultaneously drawing our attention to power differentials in ethnographic practice. These methodological and theoretical insights inform my own research and writing, and they reaffirm the unique insights ethnographic approaches can provide, as well as the challenges they can pose to feminist researchers committed to producing “intellectual contributions that further social justice goals.”15

Students have complicated reasons for participating in JROTC—they join because of friends and family who had positive experiences in the program; they want to become more disciplined; they hope the course would be an “easy A”; they are considering the military after high school; they found strong mentorship in the program; they hope it looks good on their résumé as they apply for jobs and college. And although some of their reasons certainly resonate with public perceptions about the benefits and/or dangers of the program, their experiences in JROTC often challenge analyses that reduce the image of youth as either dangerous (and in need of discipline) or as victims (who need to be saved).16

This book explores students’ complex experiences in JROTC and pays particular attention to the experiences of Latina/o youth and the ways that gender, race, ethnicity, and class shape their experiences within the program, their aspirations for the future, and their evolving understandings of citizenship. It argues that Latina/o youths’ decisions to participate in JROTC are informed by their marginal economic position in the local political economy as well as their desire to be regarded as full citizens, both locally and nationally. Like a number of recent scholarly publications focusing on neoliberal subject formation, this book is fundamentally concerned with Latina/o youths’ citizenship formation, as well as their educational and vocational aspirations, and raises important questions about what kind of citizens JROTC students are invited to become.17 Because citizenship is one of the central concerns guiding the JROTC curriculum, this book explores ethnographically how students
understand and enact different visions of citizenship and grounds these understandings in local and national political economic contexts. It also highlights the ideological, social, and cultural conditions of Latina/o youth and their families who both participate and are enmeshed in vigorous debates about citizenship, obligation, social opportunity, militarism, and, ultimately, the American Dream.

Questions about citizenship, social opportunity, and the American Dream that guide this book are not the ones that first drew me to this project. In fact, they are concerns that emerged as a result of many years of fieldwork in Latina/o communities in both Chicago and Northeast Ohio and my engagement with scholarly and popular debates about citizenship, militarism, and inequality in post-9/11 America. A range of scholars has meticulously documented the experiences of impoverished and working-class youth in a neoliberal moment characterized by powerful narratives of personal responsibility, punitive governance, increased militarism, and diminishing public resources and has been invaluable in my own conceptualization of this research. But I have also benefited enormously from political debates about the American public’s relationship to war and its sense of duty, honor, and public service, as well as questions regarding what kind of citizenship do Americans value and aspire to for ourselves and the nation. These conversations both inside and outside the academy are bound up with even more troubling challenges around immigration, race, education, and social opportunity. Therefore, my focus on Latina/o youth and JROTC is not only grounded in scholarship that examines the ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship persist as important axes of difference that stigmatize, marginalize, and ultimately criminalize poor and working-class youth and their communities. It also grapples with the meaning and effects of U.S. military power and what many have referred to as the dangers of a civilian-military divide that characterize a post-9/11 world of heightened militarization and economic and political uncertainty. More specifically, this book asks what kind of citizenship is engendered, encouraged, and supported in military programs like JROTC programs in American public schools. How do local educational, cultural, and social institutions shape students’ daily lives and inform their educational and vocational aspirations, and how do class, gender, and race shape these aspirations and outcomes? And finally, how do Latina/o youth
themselves define and strategize to gain skills, social capital, dignity, and respect within a context of limited and diminishing economic, cultural, and social resources?

To answer these questions, I draw on the important work of scholars who explore the ways neoliberalism and militarization have shaped identities, communities, and cultural practices in distinctive ways in contemporary America. This book also builds on invaluable research that richly details the critical roles schools and communities play in youth subject and citizenship formation and how these processes are embedded in broader understandings—at the local, state and national levels—about young people that are often steeped in fear and exacerbate inequality. Feminist scholars have long concerned themselves with the particular ways militarism and militarization have shaped and the lives of women and the ways gender ideologies, sexuality, and inequality are inextricably linked in military projects. The attention to young Latinas’ experiences in JROTC contributes to feminist scholarship on militarization and considers the ways that race, gender, autonomy, and social opportunity shape young girls’ aspirations and hopes for the future. Burgeoning scholarship in Latina/o Studies provides a final foundation for my work, particularly writers’ focus on the limits of belonging, inclusion, and citizenship for Latina/o youth who do not always fit neatly within dominant narratives that ascribe social meaning and value to their lives.

Ethics and Ethnographic Practice

Over the years, I have reflected a great deal about the circuitous routes that led me to do this work. As I engaged in the research for and writing of this book, it often seemed to me that my interests in questions about inequality, the creative and tenacious strategies of marginalized communities to improve their lives, and the enduring power of American Dream ideology naturally led me to consider the role the military plays in people’s lives. But this was not the case. While I was familiar with the complicated ways military service often opened up important avenues for social and economic mobility for people, it wasn’t until I was completing my graduate work at Northwestern University that I began to develop a more profound sense of the myriad ways the
military insinuated itself into educational programs that would have a profound impact on working-class youth. Prior to my research in Chicago, I had little knowledge of JROTC, although I was quite familiar with university-based ROTC programs. My Catholic high school in Stockton, California, did not have a JROTC program; nor did JROTC have the high profile in the 1980s that it does today. Like many students, however, I was encouraged to take the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude and Battery test) my sophomore year with the idea that it was yet another standardized test that would help me and my classmates discern our vocational paths beyond high school. And recruiters approached and praised all of us for our high test scores by sending letters, promotional brochures, and information about the exciting possibilities in the U.S. military. But because I was interested in going to college, military service was not appealing to me, although one of my closest friends enlisted in the army after high school as I went off on scholarship to study at a four-year university. My sophomore year in college, I returned home for one of my brother's high school graduation and met the marine who actively recruited him his senior year in high school. My brother eventually enlisted in the marine reserves, in part to help pay for his college expenses, but largely because of his interest in serving his country as a marine. His education was abruptly suspended when his unit was activated during the first Gulf War. And as a veteran of Operation Desert Storm, he remains active in his local veterans' organizations and feels a great sense of pride as a marine and a deep sense of connection to other veterans, including our grandfather.

By the time I began my fieldwork among Puerto Rican families in Chicago and Puerto Rico, military service was not unfamiliar to me, but the intensity and ubiquitous presence of the military and military programs was surprising. At the time, I didn't realize the significance of JROTC in the lives of the people I worked with, even though many of the families I knew had children, uncles, aunts, and friends who were either in JROTC or in the U.S. military. The military was such a familiar part of so many people's lives—the pictures of family and friends in military uniforms adorned living room walls and shelves; talking about recruiters in high school and considering the military as a good option after graduating was commonplace—that it was unremarkable and naturalized. It wasn't until spring 2002, when a bright, intelligent
young girl whom I had known for many years and who had been so focused on going to college with the ultimate goal of going to Harvard Law School, surprised her family with the news that she had enlisted in the army, that I began to pay more attention to the presence of the military in high schools. Because she had met her recruiter through her sister's participation in their school's JROTC program, I became curious about the role such programs play in the lives of Puerto Rican and Latina/o youth, and I eventually learned that Chicago led the nation in the number of JROTC programs and students and was increasingly presented as a model of success for school districts struggling to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Since beginning my research on Latina/o youth and JROTC, I have struggled to understand my role as an ethnographer working with remarkably generous people whose thoughts about the military and military programs are often different from my own. Many have shared the ways their lives are better because of their participation in JROTC or military service. They have learned important values and skills—discipline, leadership, the value of service; they have developed critical important social networks that have helped them get jobs and have economic security. And they have also been clear about the pride and social prestige military service has provided them.

When my family and I moved to Oberlin, Ohio, in 2003, I remained interested in understanding the consequences of the growth of JROTC programs on Latina/o youth in Chicago. As we settled into our new life in Northeast Ohio, we had the good fortune to meet a woman from Lorain who invited us to Sacred Heart Chapel, the beloved Catholic church in South Lorain established in 1952 to meet the needs of the city's expanding Puerto Rican and Mexican communities. Our friend and her extended family taught us a great deal about the experiences of Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and ethnic whites in Lorain, as well as about the city’s evolving political economy, which relied so heavily on the steel mills and heavy manufacturing that still operate, albeit on a much smaller scale. These conversations led me to want to learn more about the history and contemporary experiences of Puerto Ricans in Lorain and shifted my interests from Chicago to Northeast Ohio. When I learned of Fairview’s JROTC program, I was curious about how the experiences of Puerto Rican and Latina/o youth in Lorain were similar to and distinct from what I had observed in Chicago, and I reached out
to the JROTC instructors at the school to see whether I would be able to work with the unit for the 2006–2007 academic year. I was welcomed by the JROTC instructors to meet students, parents, teachers, and administrators; attend drill competitions and events; and learn all I could about JROTC at Fairview High School. When I finally had my first opportunity to meet some of the parents of students in the program, they were initially quite enthusiastic about my interest in their children's lives, and they welcomed me as someone whose attention affirmed the pride they and other community members felt about their children's involvement in the JROTC program they had collectively worked hard to develop over the years. But during the first Honor Guard performance I attended at a local VFW hall, the same solemn tribute honoring POW/MIA's I observed on Veterans Day at Fairview High School, one of the parents took me aside and said that some of them were concerned that I might want to do this research to dismantle their program. “Are you here to prove what you think you already know about this program? Or are you really here to learn?” I responded honestly that there were many ways for me to conduct this research and that one of the things I had discovered over the years is that young people have complicated reasons for joining JROTC and I wanted to understand those reasons. I wanted to work with them because I wanted to learn from them; and this entailed significant risk. It would be a lot easier for me, I explained, to prove what I thought I knew by not talking to anyone and not being challenged to rethink my critiques of the program. In following this unit for a year, I was committing myself to be as objective as possible and open to understanding their complex understandings of JROTC and the military more broadly. He and the other parents seemed cautiously reassured, but they reminded me that this was a program they had all worked very hard to develop and support and that it meant a great deal to the parents as well as the kids. “We're here for the kids. We do this for the kids.” This was a mantra repeated throughout my time working with students, parents, and teachers involved in the program. I don't believe my answer was completely satisfying to the parents that evening, but they did welcome me into their lives and I ultimately learned more than I could have ever imagined. And while my research has led me to some unexpected conclusions, my respect for those who provide emotional, financial, social and educational support for the students at Fairview High School and
the broader community guided and continues to inform how I approach my research and present my findings.

The national debate about JROTC is quite polarized. Proponents of the program embrace it as a powerful alternative for many youth who might otherwise choose to be involved in gangs. In his memoir, *My American Journey*, Retired General Colin Powell, for example, writes, “Innercity kids, many from broken homes, found stability and role models in Junior ROTC. They got a taste of discipline, the work ethic, and they experienced pride of membership in something healthier than a gang.” Critics of JROTC argue that despite claims to the contrary, the program is a recruiting tool specifically targeting poor and working-class youth of color and that these students, in particular, are tracked into military programs rather than college preparation. Within this extremely polarized debate, I argue that ethnography offers a unique opportunity to understand how Latina/o youth and their families make decisions regarding participation in JROTC, their attitudes about the military, and their futures. While the students and family members I worked with in Lorain share some of the views that proponents of JROTC advance, they are much more nuanced in their understandings of the limits of military programs. Yet unlike critics of JROTC, they see real material and social advantages the program potentially offers.

This book explores some of the social and economic benefits Latina/o youth derive from their participation in JROTC and locates their understandings of the program within the realities of a local political economy with extremely limited employment opportunities for working-class youth. Understanding both the meaning of JROTC in their school and the broader community was essential for appreciating both its popularity and support, and the ways students’ aspirations and hopes for the future developed. This broader context also required me to think carefully about the material and ideological contexts in which the students forge their aspirations. Ultimately, I was challenged to evaluate my firmly held beliefs and try to ethically analyze the experiences of these young people and their families in the context of limited economic and social resources, and pervasive media images that increasingly stigmatize youth and in particular working-class youth of color. Ethnography is often a risky enterprise, but it is absolutely essential for understanding complex social phenomena and broadening opportunities for critical engagement for effective social change.
The Study and Its Setting

Fairview High School is located in South Lorain, the largely Puerto Rican area of the city that, according to local historian Gene Rivera, is home to some of La Colonia’s pioneering Puerto Rican institutions from the 1950s. It lies within one mile of U.S. Steel Corporation and other heavy manufacturing to the east, with small residential neighborhoods to the south and west. Opposite the school is a strip mall with a convenience store and fast food shops catering to students after school. The high school is clean and spacious, filled with youth representing the diversity of Lorain, black, Latina/o, and white. There are security guards, men and women, who talk with students in the hallways and escort them to classrooms when they have to enter a class while it is in session, and they wear security uniforms. Fairview students do not wear uniforms, but there is a dress code that is enforced by staff. Unlike the Chicago high schools I was familiar with, Fairview does not feel crowded: lockers line the hallways, the cafeteria is open, and animated students walk loudly and playfully between classes. Visitors must sign in and show state-issued identification at the door before entering the school. On my first day visiting the school, I entered the main office immediately to the right of the front door, and after I introduced myself, the attending secretary, a middle-aged Latina, asked a student to walk me down to the JROTC office. The student gladly accompanied me quietly to the JROTC office, past the cafeteria, the open doors of classes in session, and posterred walls with motivating messages about the importance of education, student achievements, and announcements for upcoming events. Fairview houses three small schools or academies—Leadership, Pride, and Arts Academy. JROTC is located within Leadership Academy.

When we arrived at the JROTC office, I was immediately struck by how many young girls were in the class. In both sessions I observed on that first day, girls outnumbered boys, and most were young Latinas. Because it was the first day of classes, there was a remarkable amount of movement and activity, with students walking, talking, and laughing with each other and the JROTC instructors, Major Wise and First Sergeant Milano, middle-aged retired military personnel who developed and have run the Army JROTC program since 1994. Both Major Wise and First Sergeant appeared to have excellent rapport with the students,
who talked easily with them in a lighthearted manner. It was quite obvious that both men cared deeply about their students and are extremely proud of them. First Sergeant, for example, immediately showed me a computer file he keeps that listed what he calls the “success stories” of his JROTC cadets, many of whom are young Latinas. Two cadets entered West Point, the United States Military Academy, after graduation, and another currently attends the U.S. Naval Academy. Other success stories include those who have gone to college (mostly Ohio universities), military service, and are leaders in the local community. These biographical sketches are rich with details of the students’ accomplishments while in JROTC at Fairview, photographs, letters of thanks from students, and information about scholarships and awards the students have won. First Sergeant then introduced me to Alana Ramos with the same earnestness he evoked when discussing his students. Alana is a senior, tall, bright, and sweet, who immediately described how JROTC had changed her life. Initially uninterested in the program, she registered for the class in her sophomore year against the wishes of her father, who insisted she would not rise to the physical and emotional requirements of the program. To her parents’ and her own surprise, Alana enjoyed JROTC so much so that after a lackluster first year with significant absences from school, she began attending classes regularly and demonstrated a level of discipline and commitment to her studies that included arriving at school early in order to drill and practice for Honor Guard. Alana attributed her success in school to her participation in JROTC. Now in her senior year, she was the executive officer of the JROTC battalion, the second-highest position in the chain of command, and was thoughtfully considering what she will do once she graduates. Like many of the students I would eventually meet, Alana planned to go to college, and given her positive experiences in JROTC she was considering applying to the Air Force Academy as well as universities in Ohio and neighboring Indiana.

Alana was not alone in explaining how JROTC changed her life in a positive way. On my second day in the JROTC classroom, two sisters, Briana and Brenda Calderón, were sitting at a computer entering data about cadets’ community service hours when First Sergeant introduced me, explaining that I was there to study and learn about JROTC. The girls beamed when I asked whether they enjoyed JROTC, and Briana
responded emphatically, “I live for JROTC. I just love it.” Her sister nodded enthusiastically and then asked with a worried look how I was going to learn about JROTC in just one day. When I clarified that my hope was to spend the year working with them, Brenda seemed relieved and assured me that “there’s no way you can learn about it in a day. There is so much to learn!” Students often declared their love for JROTC, describing their classmates as family, emphasizing the ways that Major and First Sergeant provided much-needed guidance, explaining how it made them feel important, focused, disciplined, and excited about school. It was not uncommon to see JROTC students in the classroom before and after school, even when their classes were not in session. They would hang out with Major and First Sergeant and the other cadets, tell stories, laugh, seek advice and recommendations from Major and First Sergeant, and talk about upcoming events in JROTC and school in general. Beyond the curricular instruction, the JROTC classroom served as an important meeting space that contributed to the sense of camaraderie and family students consistently described.

The JROTC classroom had a large space filled with long tables and typically four chairs at each table. At the back of the classroom was small office space where Major Wise and First Sergeant prepared for class, worked on the computer, used the phones, and allowed students to do work for the unit. Adjacent to the classroom was a smaller space, also with desks and chairs, where juniors and seniors typically met with First Sergeant Milano, while Major Wise worked with freshmen and sophomores in the larger classroom. Large, colorful trophies filled tables along the walls of the main classroom, symbols of the unit’s success in drill competitions in Ohio and throughout the Midwest. Above the trophies were posters emphasizing core principles of JROTC, such as “Being a good citizen takes practice” and “Mission: To motivate young people to be better citizens.” The American flag was at the front of the classroom, as were photographs of President Bush, Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other Department of Defense and Pentagon officials, with the words, “Chain of Command” underneath.

Fairview’s JROTC has four classes each day and each is identified using military language: Alpha, Beta, Charlie, and Delta Companies. Each day class begins the same way. Role is taken with cadets responding “Here, Sir” when their name is called. Students then all stand to recite
the Pledge of Allegiance and the Cadets Creed, and then sit to begin the lesson for the day. On my first day in class, Major Wise encouraged students to participate and be involved in all of the extracurricular activities JROTC has to offer. Although students are not required to attend drill competitions, he reassured them that it is fun, an opportunity to travel to new places and meet different people, and he encouraged students to take advantage of these opportunities to have fun. Parental involvement is also important, and he explained the critical role the JROTC parent booster club plays in the program. Its members help to raise money for field trips, for lodging and food when they attend drill competition, and for JROTC T-shirts and sweatshirts. Although he emphasized the fun and importance of extracurriculars, Major Wise also explained the important life lessons students will take away from JROTC. “We’re teaching you to be better citizens. To do things in your community to get involved.” Being a better citizen requires discipline and respect, and these are values and skills they will develop in the program. “You have to learn certain behaviors,” he explained. Some things in life you just don’t have naturally, and discipline is one of them. JROTC provides discipline that helps students develop themselves and is a “military technique transferable to other areas of your life.” Students seemed attentive as he spoke, and after class many students approached him with specific questions about the program, especially how they might manage participating in drill competitions while also participating in other extracurricular activities such as band, sports, and cheerleading. Major Wise assured them that with early morning drill before school at 7 a.m., they would be able to be involved in multiple school activities.

At Fairview High School JROTC is a one-credit elective course that students can take all four years. In cities like Chicago students can choose to take JROTC in lieu of their physical education requirement, or it can also meet some high schools’ vocational education requirement.28 This is not the case at Fairview. Students take JROTC as an elective, and the course meets daily and uses a national JROTC curriculum. While extracurricular activities like drill team, Honor Guard, and Color Guard are not required, community service is and students are involved in a range of individual and collaborative community service projects throughout the year. Some students first learn of JROTC when they begin high school, although most are familiar with the program
because of siblings, friends, or other relatives who have participated in the program, or because they have seen cadets perform during middle school assemblies, local parades, church program, or community activities such as Lorain’s International Festival, which often feature drill performance and Color Guard or Honor Guard. In 2006–2007, 140 students participated in JROTC at Fairview; that is nearly 12 percent of the student population. As in other programs, young women outnumber young men in Fairview’s JROTC, and they also hold key leadership positions, including executive officer and commanding officer/battalion commander. In a school where 40 percent of the students are Latina/o, approximately 65 percent of cadets identify as Latina/o, with 15 percent as black, 20 percent as white. During the year I conducted research with Fairview’s JROTC program, I attended classes regularly throughout the school day. I also watched students practice before and after school for their various drill competitions as they participated in armed and unarmed exhibition, marksmanship, Honor and Color Guards and IDR (Infantry Drill Regulation). They drilled, ran, did push-ups, and worked closely with each other and Major Wise and First Sergeant. When possible I accompanied them out of town to drill competitions, orienteering events, public performances, and assemblies in their school and throughout Lorain. I also spent a great deal of time with their families at Booster Club meetings, on long road trips to different events, and also Sacred Heart Chapel, the local Catholic church many attended and that is a cherished institution for so many Puerto Rican and Latino families in Lorain. I would take detailed field notes after attending school and JROTC functions, and I eventually conducted thirty-two formal interviews with current JROTC students. Over the years, I have had the opportunity stay in touch with many of the students I was fortunate to work with during that year. I was pleasantly surprised to meet up with former students who attended a lecture I was invited to give at a local university about my research and was happy to reconnect and learn about what others I worked with that year had gone on to accomplish. My analysis is primarily informed by the fieldwork I conducted that year. But like many researchers, my questions, interests, and understanding of the topics of militarism, education, social opportunity, citizenship, and youth aspirations go beyond that year’s ethnographic work. As a professor at Oberlin College, I have
taught classes that have allowed me to think through difficult questions about citizenship, race, and belonging. And in various public presentations on college campuses and community spaces, I have benefited from the challenging questions people have raised regarding my research findings. I have also been humbled and surprised by how much this story about JROTC, military service, social opportunity, and youth aspirations resonates in deeply emotionally ways with so many people across race, class, and gender. Thus, while the analysis that follows focuses specifically on the experiences of the Fairview JROTC cadets and their families and communities, it is deeply informed by broader political, economic, and cultural currents in which debates about citizenship, youth, and our nation’s future are vigorously contested and discussed.

Book Overview

The chapters that follow provide insight into the ways citizenship, military programs, and youth aspirations are inextricably bound up in the lives of many working-class Puerto Rican and Latina/o families. Because citizenship is one of the central concerns guiding the JROTC curriculum, this book explores ethnographically how students understand and enact different visions of citizenship, grounds these understandings in local and national political economic contexts, and reflects on the kind of citizenship we value and aspire to for ourselves and the nation. More specifically, this book asks what kind of citizenship is engendered, encouraged, and supported in JROTC programs in American public schools. How do local educational, cultural, and social institutions shape students’ daily lives and inform their educational and vocational aspirations, and how do class, gender, and race shape these aspirations and outcomes? And finally, how do Latina/o youth define themselves and strategize to gain skills, social capital, dignity, and respect within a context of limited and diminishing economic, cultural, and social resources?

Chapter 1, “JROTC’s Enduring Appeal: Militarism, Ethnic Pride, and Social Opportunity in the Postindustrial City,” provides a history of JROTC and draws parallels between the political and social contexts in which the program was founded in 1916 and the present moment in which JROTC has enjoyed expansion. In both cases, anxieties and debates about U.S. military power inform understandings about JROTC,
militarism, and American identity. This chapter analyzes the appeal and success of JROTC in a time of war, economic uncertainty, and social polarization that include debates about citizenship, inclusion, and belonging. A key element of the program’s success is its broad support in a community where veterans’ organizations—although small in number—are quite visible and highly respected. The program also benefits from the profound ethnic and family pride in military service that informs and shapes young people’s understandings of the military and JROTC specifically. This is particularly true for Latina/o youth, who frequently link their participation in JROTC to their family’s distinguished and successful military careers. This chapter explores these understandings of service, honor, and ethnic pride and locates them within the context of deindustrialization in analyzing student and community support for JROTC.

Chapter 2, “‘What Are These Kids Doing In Uniforms?’: Discipline, Dignity, and JROTC Exceptionalism,” focuses on the ways JROTC students discuss the meanings of wearing the cadet uniform, including the ways in which wearing it commands respect from their peers, teachers, and the larger community. In this chapter I argue that this desire for positive recognition is critical for youth who are often regarded as dangerous in local and national media and challenges stigmatizing characterizations of working-class youth and youth of color. Drawing on interview data and participant observation in school, I explore how the cadet uniform is not only an important vehicle for eliciting the dignity Latina/o youth desire but also an important example of the cultural capital students develop in JROTC. From the very first day students join JROTC, they are trained, molded, and reminded of the importance of discipline, self-presentation, and self-modification that not only meets expectations in the program but also serve them in their aspirations for the future.

Chapter 3, “‘JROTC Today, Leaders Tomorrow’: Leadership, Social Capital, and Stories of Redemption,” focuses on the curious, and consistent, statement by cadets that JROTC teaches them to be leaders. Indeed, JROTC websites, teaching materials, and extracurricular activities all emphasize the program’s role in developing leadership skills in its students and how this is one of its most valuable transferable skills. This chapter explores the meaning of leadership, authority, and gender
and analyzes both how the JROTC curriculum advances ideas of leadership and the ways students understand and assume leadership roles. In formal interviews, students consistently explained the large number of young women in leadership roles, most of whom are Latina, as a result of their distinctive discipline, skills, and attention to detail. I argue that one of the reasons so many Latinas participate in JROTC and hold leadership positions is because participating in JROTC provides gendered autonomy otherwise unavailable to them. This analysis depends on an understanding of culturally informed gender roles that often limits young Latinas’ activities and how participating in JROTC is one way of exercising more freedom and autonomy.

Chapter 4, “‘Citizenship Takes Practice’: Service, Personal Responsibility, and Representing What Is Good about America,” focuses on the meaning of citizenship for JROTC students and their families. Since the 1990s, JROTC has developed and marketed itself as a premier leadership and citizenship education program. Students describe and discuss citizenship in a variety of ways, but central to their understanding of citizenship is the notion of service and obligation. These ideas are certainly reinforced through the JROTC curriculum, with its emphasis on community service, which brings JROTC cadets into contact with community organizations and groups, like AMVETS, that they might not otherwise know. Students talk positively about the interactions with veterans who, in turn, provide critical financial and moral support for the program. This chapter explores how young people develop concrete understandings about citizenship as a result of their community engagement. Latina/o students in particular explicitly link their understandings of citizenship to concern with uplift of their communities and neighborhoods, which are often characterized as troubled and stigmatized in local news media. Citizenship, therefore, is an opportunity for students to challenge the ways they and their families are regarded as being deficient, and to embody, instead, a vision of citizenship bound up with reverence for the military, a commitment to service, and disciplinary practices that focus on personal and community betterment. These citizenship acts are also an opportunity to interrogate the broader national discourse in which Latinas/os are defined as outside the nation, questioned about their motives and deservingness/right to be a part or even in the United States and their ability to properly belong.
The conclusion revisits the debates about JROTC, as well as highlights the ways that the expansion of JROTC programs in recent years can be conceptualized as part of what Andrew Bacevich calls the “new American militarism.” By focusing on the varied reasons why military programs appeal to Latina/o youth, as well as the way these very same programs and the military more broadly appeal to “Hispanic values and culture” as ones commensurate with the military as an institution, I raise questions about the costs and benefits of using military programs as a mechanism for inclusion in the nation. As the experiences of Latina/o and working-class youth and their families attest throughout this book, binding oneself up with one of the most highly regarded institutions in American public life has tangible benefits. But there are also profound costs to this kind of inclusion. How young people creatively reconfigure the very notions of citizenship, duty, and obligation that are at the core of JROTC instruction not only challenges narrow understandings of belonging that Latina/o youth face but also speaks to the enduring power of their dreams for a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities.