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### **Title**

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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6955c9jp>

### **Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 17(1-2)

### **ISSN**

1545-0317

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### **Publication Date**

2020

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Peer reviewed

Practitioner Essay

# Saying the Quiet Parts Out Loud: Guåhan, the USS Theodore Roosevelt, and the Role of Journalism in Repro- ducing Colonization in the Time of CO- VID-19

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Abstract

This essay takes place amongst the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and the discursive event of the USS Theodore Roosevelt outbreak in March. Using critical discourse analysis, I examine national and local news media's complicity in the continued colonization and militarization of Guåhan through the centering of U.S. military narratives and methods of erasure, isolation, ambiguity, the dehumanizing of counterhegemonic actors, and the use of "One Guam" rhetoric. I found that the Indigenous people of Guåhan, and their ongoing struggle against the United States for decolonization and demilitarization, were largely absent from national coverage of the event. Simultaneously, local news media used the event to reaffirm existing colonial power structures while obfuscating the island's status as a colony. This essay seeks to deepen understandings of the ways in which mainstream media reproduce American colonialism, and is imperative for Indigenous activists, political leaders, and organizers seeking to dismantle the interconnected projects of white supremacy, imperialism, and capitalism weighing on marginalized communities in the United States and around the globe.

Introduction

On June 4, 2020, the U.S. Navy announced its leadership was look-

ing for “safe haven” locations around the world where crews could stop for leisure time without the threat of contracting and spreading COVID-19 aboard their vessels. Vice Adm. Phillip Sawyer, the officer in charge of the navy’s COVID-19 response, stated to media the purpose of these safe haven spots was “so that we can pull in and get [rest and relaxation] for the crew, a chance to relax a little bit—get some burgers, swim in the water, that type of thing” (Harkins, 2020). In the same news article, another official, Navy Surgeon General Rear Adm. Bruce Gillingham explained these locations were “areas under our control [where we have] the ability to create a safe haven.” Beyond noting that Guåhan (Guam)<sup>1</sup> and Okinawa (two colonies hypermilitarized by the United States) are the only two locations directly implicated in the article, underlying Gillingham’s admission is the assumption that there are places *under* the control of the U.S. Navy, as an extension of the United States. This is ostensibly true of Guåhan, an unincorporated territory of the United States lacking both full constitutional rights and political sovereignty.

Like the frankness of Sawyer and Gillingham, the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the United States’ many hypocrisies and contradictions. At the time I am writing this, more than 1.9 million people in the United States have tested positive for COVID-19 and more than 111,000 have died from the infectious disease, though these numbers are likely underreported (Katz et al., 2020). Under the weight of the pandemic and mounting social tensions, such as the killing of George Floyd in May by Minnesota police, which sparked nationwide uprisings, the façade of American primacy crumbled. The master’s house was on fire. The only thing remaining intact, it seems, is the U.S. colonial project in the Pacific, aided by American news media and its role in reproducing militarization and colonization in places like Guåhan. At no point was this demonstrated better than the COVID-19 outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt (USS TR), which became a discursive event in national news after its captain leaked a four-page letter to U.S. Navy administrators to the *San Francisco Chronicle* on March 31, pleading with navy administrators to allow his crew to dock in Guåhan to avoid further spreading the disease amongst the crew.

Overnight, Guåhan became the site of a rapidly unfolding drama as the ship’s captain, Brett Crozier, pleaded with navy officials to allow his sailors to disembark on the island to avoid further spreading the virus among its 4,000 personnel. This essay takes place amongst the backdrop of the pandemic and the discursive event of the outbreak aboard

the USS TR. Using critical discourse analysis, I examine national and local news media's complicity in the continued colonization and militarization of Guåhan. These methods include the centering of U.S. military narratives, erasure, isolation, ambiguity, dehumanizing of counterhegemonic actors, and One Guam rhetoric. Missing from national coverage were the Indigenous people of Guåhan, and their ongoing struggle to demilitarize and decolonize from the United States. Simultaneously, local news media in Guåhan, which to date has 449 confirmed COVID-19 cases, used the event to continue its endorsement of the U.S. military's presence on the island while downplaying opposition to Crozier's request by Indigenous community organizers, further obfuscating the island's status as a colony.

### Guam, U.S.A.-Guåhan: An Unincorporated Territory American colony in the Pacific

Guåhan is often defined in national news coverage in terms of its strategic importance to American military planners. It has been called the "tip of America's spear," "America's permanent aircraft carrier," "America's unsinkable aircraft carrier," and "Fortress Guam" (Bevacqua and Cruz, 2020). Further, Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders are often seen "as subjects *on which* American, Asian, and European hegemones are *enacted*," if included at all in various discourses (Na'puti, 2020, 96; emphasis in original). However, we are often absent from discussions altogether, "while ongoing imperialism, militarism, and colonialism are disappeared" (ibid.). These titles, as well as the language used to speak about Guåhan, are reproduced by journalists covering issues relating to militarization in the region and American conflict with North Korea and China. However, lesser reported on is the island's status as an "unincorporated territory" of the United States, that is, a colony. Paradoxically, however, "the island is propagandized both internally and externally as being on the front lines of democracy, liberty, and freedom" (Bevacqua and Cruz, 2020, 127).

Guåhan was claimed by the United States after the Spanish-American War. As an "unincorporated territory," the island sits in a "liminal space, betwixt and between, somehow outside the normal order of sovereignty or integration" (Stade, 1998, 47). Literally, its status means it is neither part of the United States, nor is it politically sovereign. It is a *possession* onto which Congress has determined that only selected parts of the U.S. Constitution apply ("Definitions of Insular Area Political Organizations"). Through the Organic Act of Guam of 1950, the island

was granted limited self-governance. Ultimately, however, Guåhan and other colonies of the United States have no legal authority that is not derived from Congress.<sup>2</sup> Political ambiguity is part of what makes Guåhan strategic militarily, as it is:

not a foreign nation, and therefore, does not have the ability to limit the activities of the US military in its borders [and so] the US military can exploit the environment on Guam in ways it might not be able to do elsewhere, for those who call it home have no say in what the military may or may not do. (Bevacqua and Cruz, 2020, 132-133)

While the consequences of this on the CHamoru people are manifested in countless ways, both politically and personally, a recent (and ongoing) example is the U.S. military's desecration of recently discovered ancestral remains and artifacts across the island's Northern Plateau during the development of a new Marine Corps base and Live Fire Training Range for the Department of Defense's military buildup—the shift of forces from Okinawa to Guåhan.

The buildup continues unabated, despite a series of protests and outreach campaigns by community organizations such as Independent Guåhan, Prutehi Litekyan, and I Hagan Famalåo'an Guåhan; as well as official statements by local senators decrying the *inadvertent discovery* of more than forty-three historically and culturally significant sites (Kaur, 2020a). This is due in great part to the fact that there is no legal mechanism for the people of Guåhan to meaningfully engage with the buildup. Thus, to the military, the expressed consent of the people of Guåhan is unrequired. Despite these injustices, generations of local resistance to militarization and colonization persist, and are increasingly digitized (Cruz, 2020). This has been especially true during the pandemic, as Independent Guåhan has shifted more of its actions onto social media platforms and digital conferencing technologies such as Zoom.

### News Reliance on Establishment Sources, News Inundation, and the Implications on National Coverage of Guåhan

Compared to communities across the continental United States, Guåhan is a relatively small reader base for news corporations, and doesn't normally see reporters from national news corporations, with the exception being Gannett, the mass media holding company that owns news offices across the United States and the United Kingdom. Gannett, which owns *USA Today*, also owns the island's most estab-

lished daily news publication, *The Pacific Daily News (PDN)*, which has served as a site through which dominant American ideologies were reinforced (Dalisay, 2009, 254). Despite *USA Today's* long-standing ties to the island, its coverage of the USS TR event is consistent with other mainstream news sources discussed in this essay in its dismissal of island residents and centering of navy narratives. The absence of CHamoru perspectives during events like the USS TR outbreak is thus not simply attributable to the lack of national news presence on Guåhan. Rather, it is one of a series of “consequences of colonialism and its erasure of blackness and indigeneity as phenomena that profoundly impacts discursive constructions and material conditions of the Pacific” (Na’puti, 2020, 100). It is both cause and effect of the U.S. military’s prominence in national discourse.

That Capt. Crozier leaked his letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and not, say, *PDN* is telling of the implications of Guåhan’s colonization on the dynamics of news media discourses surrounding the island. His actions imply that he perceived the outcome of reaching out to a national news outlet to be of greater moral and political significance, compared to news outlets in Guåhan, and also reflects the perceived legitimacy of the Department of Defense to news reporters assigned to military affairs coverage. At times throughout Guåhan’s post-World War II history, the reach of national news media to a continental public and elected body has helped foster political change on the island, such as the national coverage of the Guam Congress Walkout of 1949, which in part was orchestrated by journalists to appeal to a mass audience (Hattori, 1995, 21).

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model (PM) addresses this reliance of journalists on establishment experts, as well as other market forces, on the performance of mass media in favor of elite interests (Klaehn, 2002, 148). The other “filters” of the PM that are directly relevant to this essay are advertising as the primary source of income of the mass media and *otherness* as an ideology that mobilizes a populace against an enemy (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). It is the PM’s attention to the function of capitalism in reproducing hegemony that makes it unique among a larger body of media analysis that seeks to explain mass media’s role in reproducing existing power relations (Gans, 2004; Gitlin, 1980; Richardson, 2007; Sobieraj, 2011; Therborn, 1999; Thompson, 1990; Titscher et al., 2000).

The news industry has been facing a slow decline, evidenced both by a fall in newspaper circulation and news staffing (MacLeod, 2019,

7). The coronavirus pandemic has only further burdened editorial offices still clinging to the dominant news model of relying primarily on advertising revenue, forcing journalists to produce more content while lacking the time and resources to produce investigative news articles. Journalists found themselves inundated with a constant stream of events and information that needed reporting, further increasing reliance on preapproved, establishment narratives.

Crozier's access to the *San Francisco Chronicle* is exemplary of this symbiotic relation between media and elites because the discursive event was fed into the national news media machine by an establishment figure, requiring editorial staff to spend no extra effort further investigating the issue, fact checking, or seeking alternative perspectives. Simultaneously, Crozier successfully drew the attention of a national audience to pressure U.S. Navy administrators into allowing his sailors to be offboarded in Guåhan. Both of these worked in tangent to form a news discourse that perpetuated the normalization of U.S. military presence in the Pacific while erasing the CHamoru people and the ongoing struggle for self-determination.

Further illustrating this point is the comparatively limited appeal of the people of Guåhan to national news media, which takes interest in the island primarily when there is an issue of geopolitical importance, in which case the event and people are treated as a spectacle of the national gaze for American audiences that are perpetually unaware that the United States is a colonizing power with imperial endeavors around the globe.

While news outlets in the United States continued to track the progression of the virus's spread onboard the USS TR months after the initial coverage, virtually no national reports discussed the infrastructural challenges of the island in coping with the pandemic, or the fact that CARES Act relief to Guåhan and other possessions of the United States were stalled weeks longer than in the continental United States, leaving a large segment of the island's population whose livelihoods were affected by the shutdown vulnerable to evictions and hunger (Pacific Daily News, 2020a).

Both the U.S. Navy's reach and national news media's reliance on establishment sources lead to an exclusion of discourses from Guåhan that deviate from mainstream narratives portraying the island as anything other than a U.S. military stronghold (America's so-called permanent aircraft carrier), or America's activities in the Pacific as charitable and for the greater good. These are the familiar stories Americans long

to hear during the present omni-crisis. Meanwhile, colonization and militarization persist in Guåhan, undeterred by the economic collapse and unreported by mainstream U.S. news outlets.

### Mainstream News Media as an Extant Colonial Artifact

Internally, the task of maintaining the colonial dynamics of power and the manufacturing of consent among the island's population is performed by an extant colonial mainstream mediascape rooted in American occupation. The island's most read newspaper, *PDN*, was originally the post-World War II military periodical, *The Navy News*, before it was bought by Gannett decades later, and was a means of keeping sailors informed of affairs in the continental United States and within the American cultural periphery while stationed in Guåhan (Stade, 1998, 146). Throughout this time, the practice of preferentially hiring off-island (most often white male) journalists to write locally became a fixture of the local news industry, and with it the import of white male, Americanist perspectives that influenced the way CHamoru<sup>3</sup> have looked at events on their island, and how they've looked at themselves (Cruz, 2020). Historically, this has meant the news perception that the government of Guam is inefficient, corrupt, and, most importantly, incapable of managing itself without the United States—a perception that is reinforced by the pandemic, as the island is severely underfunded by the federal government and has just one public hospital to serve a population of approximately 162,000, many of whom live below the federal poverty line.<sup>4</sup>

### War and Support the Troops Rhetoric

Both national and local news discourses regarding the military's activities in Guåhan (such as whether it is just or democratic that they continue to occupy one-third of the island's land mass and operate without the consent of the government of Guam) are guided by what Roger Stahl refers to as "support-the-troops rhetoric," which "works as a regulatory mechanism for disciplining the civic sphere itself—that is, it functions to subvert citizen deliberation" (2009, 534). This rhetorical strategy serves as both a deflection of the nature of the conflict military personnel are engaged in, as well as a dissociation that "conditions the image of the proper wartime citizen" (535). Soldiers, therefore, need saving; and an opposition to war and the military is seen as an attack on the soldier's body (ibid.).

Similarly, USS TR coverage was layered by the pervasive use of



wartime rhetoric, such as when New York Governor Andrew Cuomo declared, “[T]his is a war, we have to treat it like a war” (Walters, 2020). Doctors and healthcare administrators have also likened the virus to World War II, warning the public that “the enemy is invisible” (Sablan, 2020). Wartime rhetoric not only obscures what it is people need to do to prevent the spread of COVID-19 but also leads to “the closing down of information and the production of propaganda” (Andersen, 2020). Ironically, while politicians and other public commentators espoused the use of wartime rhetoric, Capt. Brett Crozier, the commanding officer of the USS TR, directly opposed the use of such terminology stating, “[W]e are not at war. Soldiers do not need to die” (Gafni & Garofoli, 2020). Elements of both rhetorical devices were present in national and local USS TR coverage.

### Absence and Ambiguities: Guåhan’s Erasure in National Media

Contradicting Crozier’s observation, the captain’s letter reflects both rhetorical strategies and is observable when he succinctly states, “If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset—our Sailors” (ibid.). Crozier’s letter shaped the narrative of national media, including that of progressive liberal outlets such as *Democracy Now!*,<sup>5</sup> which were enthralled by the heroic plea of a navy captain to save his crew. What isn’t factored into national news coverage, however, is the implication of Crozier’s request on the people of Guåhan, who were at risk of large-scale contamination from the ship’s crew. Also excluded are the contexts of colonization, such as the CHamoru people’s lack of sovereignty, their dispossession of ancestral lands due to militarization, and the inability of the local governing body to constrain military activities on the island.

Rather, national coverage of the event followed a consistent narrative: (1) Captain Crozier “sacrifices career” by making plea to U.S. Navy administrative officials (2) to save sailors from dying aboard the ship; (3) the outbreak aboard the aircraft carrier is time sensitive, and any delay will inevitably lead to deaths; and (4) Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly issues official response as to why sailors have not been off-boarded. The erasure of local voices implies that Guåhan is merely a backdrop to the United States’ military endeavors in the Pacific, making Crozier’s request to bring infected sailors to Guåhan simply “a necessary risk,” or rather, “a political solution but it is the right thing to do” (Gafni and Girofoli, 2020).

Herman and Chomsky argue news media are able to conceal ide-

ology through the “illusion of genuine debate” (2002, 298). News media set the parameters for discussion by conveying to audiences what exists (and what does not exist); what is good, right, and just (and its opposites); and what is possible and impossible (Therborn, 1999, 18). The mainstream news narrative regarding the USS TR positioned Acting Navy Secretary Modly as the competing logic to Crozier. Modly, however, does not oppose Crozier’s request due to a moral consideration of the people of Guåhan. In fact, he affirms Crozier’s logic, and the proposition is made uncontested in stating, “We don’t disagree with the (captain) on that ship and we’re doing it in a very methodical way,” and “[w]e’re very engaged in this, we’re very concerned about it and we’re taking all the appropriate steps.” There is a duality in these military narratives that, through ambiguous language, seem to be both benign and insidious.

This ambiguity, characterized in part by the pervasive use of object and demonstrative pronouns like “it” and “this” to refer to the proposal to quarantine sick and/or exposed sailors on Guåhan, is observable in another instance in the *San Francisco Chronicle* article: “‘This is like the test case,’ said Cancian, a senior adviser with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington, D.C.”

This statement by Cancian belies the obscenity of the proposal. Stated more explicitly, “this” really means “*Introducing infected sailors to Guam is like the test case,*” where the people of Guåhan are implicated in the *testing* as de facto *test subjects*. Taken into context with the U.S. military’s weapons testing in the Pacific, this is not a stretch of imagination. Between 1940 and 1960, about 67,000 people on Guåhan were exposed to radiation from U.S. nuclear testing in the Pacific, not only during the detonations from the Bikini Atoll tests but also because of the island’s use as a hub for U.S. Navy ships returning from the Marshall Islands, where they were decontaminated, directly exposing the people of Guåhan to radiation from the ships involved in the tests (National Research Council of the National Academies, 2005). The use of ambiguous language thus conceals the atrocities of U.S. colonialism.

### Manufactured Isolation

When considering the context of colonization, it is more apparent that the language used by journalists to talk about Guåhan is often. *The Washington Post’s* use of the word “isolation,” for instance, lends itself to the colonial imagery of a fictionalized tropical oasis:

In a March 30 letter first made public by the San Francisco

Chronicle, Navy Capt. Brett Crozier, commanding officer of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, asked that 90 percent of the ship's crew of more than 4,000 sailors be moved into isolation on Guam, where the ship has been located since a spate of novel coronavirus infections emerged on board. (Ryan et al., 2020)

In this excerpt, Guåhan becomes synonymous with "isolation," a term that, due to the pandemic, has new implicit associations. Isolation has medical connotations (persons can be isolated from others, infections can be isolated within the human body, etc.). It is also a term commonly used in psychology and mental health (emotional and social isolation). During the pandemic, however, entire populations across the continental United States and the Pacific have gone into government mandated isolation in their homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and, in an unprecedented way, lockdown has impacted people's literal perceptions and associations with the word "isolation."

Where power is concerned in the colonial context, however, it is worth asking, "Who does the isolating?" Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey asserts the isolation of Pacific Islands is a condition reproduced by colonial powers such as the United States made possible through the "erasure of the technologies that enable mobility," yet made accessible to the colonial gaze through media that reinforce this myth of isolation (2013, 174). Isolation is a manufactured condition of colonization, by colonial powers. Recalling Na'puti's assertion that colonized peoples and places are subjects onto which actions hegemonies are enacted, Guåhan is likewise mentioned in *The Washington Post* as a place where actions will happen at the direction of the navy, as in the following: "The ship ... pulled into port late last week in Guam," or "'We've been working ... to move those sailors off the ship, and to get them into accommodations in Guam,' Modly said" (Ryan et al., 2020).

Modly's statement is indicative of the asymmetrical power relations between the navy and the government of Guam, which are reflected in the frequent, sporadic, and expanding military exercises and weapons testing in the Mariana Islands. During the midst of the pandemic, for instance, the navy issued a press release stating live-fire trainings would occur at multiple locations around the island (Press Release, 2020). This asymmetry is also evident in the navy's sonar testing, which has led to whale strandings on both Guåhan and Saipan, in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (Kaur, 2020b). These actions are projected to be expanded under the military's ongo-

ing plan to turn the entire Marianas archipelago into what is effectively the largest military training area in the world, the Mariana Islands Training and Testing (MITT) Study Area (Office of Vice Speaker Therese M. Terlaje, 2017).

### Manufacturing Consent: Examining Local USS TR News Coverage

While the in-fighting between two navy officials captivated national interests, the focus of coverage on Guåhan of the USS TR was whether the crew should be turned away to prevent a spike in cases or allow them to quarantine on island. A further question posed was whether they should be quarantined on existing federal facilities, or in local hotels, and what risks it would pose for the people of the Guåhan. Additionally, the conversation was nuanced by CHamoru decolonization and demilitarization activism.

Coverage of the USS TR outbreak began after the first four sailors who tested positive were evacuated from the aircraft carrier to Naval Hospital Guam on March 25. At a daily briefing held the following day, the governor of Guam, Lou Leon Guerrero, deferred questions regarding the developments aboard the aircraft carrier to Joint Region Marianas Commander Rear Admiral John Menoni, whom she stated had been “very transparent with me” (Stole Weiss, 2020). This statement is indicative of the flow of communication between the two officials being asymmetrical. Transparency is what we ask of elected officials and others in positions of power entrusted with public trust. Transparency assumes that a party is in a position to conceal information from another, such as when the Department of Defense issued an order to halt the reporting of COVID-19 cases in March as infections on military bases were increasing (Dickstein, 2020).

The following day, twenty-three new USS TR COVID-19 cases were reported, as well as new details about how the navy planned to manage the isolation of the ship’s crew. As Gov. Leon Guerrero stated, “I am assured by the admiral that no sailors will be out of the base. They won’t even go to the base—they are just quarantined in the pier area. They are testing their sailors” (Governor Lou Leon Guerrero, 2020). At this point, the formation of pro-American ideology around the discursive event took shape, with *The Guam Daily Post* publishing a March 27 article titled, “Governor: 23 aircraft carrier sailors test positive; Navy assures sailors will remain pier-side.” The article, meant to ease local fears, makes it a point to further state that “[t]here are sailors on the aircraft carrier who are from Guam” (Daily Post Staff, 2020a).

This reframing of the USS TR outbreak as one that implicates persons “who are from Guam” is meant to implore empathy among readers who would otherwise view the proposition as a direct threat to their health and safety. The author then follows with a direct quote from Leon Guerrero stating:

They are doing their contact tracing with their sailors they are identifying those positive there, isolating them there, quarantining them and so the admiral is doing everything to again protect not just his military population and his military people but also ours. (ibid.)

Both *The Guam Daily Post* and Leon Guerrero seek the assurance of local readers that the navy is reliable, trustworthy, and transparent in a bid for acceptance and consent among the people of the existing power structure. This is also the intent of the government of Guam’s “One Guam” *partnership* with the U.S. military (Pacific News Center, 2020). This rhetoric often appears during flashpoints in decolonization politics, such as the North Korea missile threats in 2017, or the desecration of a sacred site in 2018 during land clearings for the planned live-fire training range at Litekyan (Babuata, 2018).

One Guam rhetoric was also deployed during the pandemic by the governor in response to growing concerns about the quarantining of USS TR sailors stating, “The virus does not discriminate and it cannot be stopped by borders or a fence. We are all at risk. Defeating it demands that we are truly one Guam” (Limtiaco, 2020). The aforementioned statement was included in a *PDN* article, in which the author similarly asserts, “Guam must act as one—civilian and military—to overcome the coronavirus pandemic” (ibid.). One Guam rhetoric, as deployed during the pandemic, concealed the inequitable regard for civilian and military lives, one example being the government’s decision to use the University of Guam’s gymnasium as a mass quarantine site, while the USS TR sailors were given spaces at local hotels in the island’s tourism district (Gilbert, 2020a).

Another major local news outlet, *KUAM*, similarly employed One Guam rhetoric, while dismissing opposition to the proposal, during an interview with Kristina Gschwend, a mother of a sailor assigned to the aircraft carrier. The author states, “A local mother worries for her son who is a sailor on the USS TR and she says hateful comments about the ship have hit close to home for her” (Barnett, 2020). Gschwend states:

“One stupid idiot said they ‘Hope they die’. That’s my son

that you just wished that on! And it hurts. I never knew our people to be so ugly. Sorry ... that really got to me. Remember that they are children of this island on that ship. And be mindful of your words, because they're hurtful. Keep them in your prayers," she pleaded. (ibid.)

In addition to dehumanizing opposition to the proposal, Gschwend parrots the rhetoric of pro-America statements by stating, "How can you be so hateful? They protect us. *They're protecting us*" (ibid.; emphasis added). The mother's comments reinforce Leon Guerrero's support of the quarantining of USS TR sailors on Guam, while reframing the issue as a humanitarian act, while opposing views are homogenously considered *stupid, hateful, and ugly*, with no distinction between the commenters Gschwend is directly speaking about and the community members who wrote to the governor in opposition to the quarantining of the sailors on Guåhan, as yet another means of local news media's othering of decolonization and demilitarization activist voices.

The *Guam Daily Post* on April 2 published a column by white settler, Lee P. Webber, a military veteran who retired on Guåhan after working as the publisher of *PDN* throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Webber's column, aptly titled, "It's our turn to help the sailors who have sworn to give their lives to protect us," presupposes that the sailors' (and by extension the United States') purpose in maintaining its presence in the Pacific is, in fact, to ensure the safety of the people of Guåhan—as opposed to the adverse conclusion that they are doing so to protect a capitalist supply chain from Asia to the continental United States, and to threaten Asian military powers such as China and North Korea through aggressive forward positioning of bases, nuclear-powered submarines, aircraft carriers, and so forth throughout the Pacific (Davis, 2020).

Webber refers to the sailors almost exclusively as "young men and women" and writes of the sacrifices made to "protect us and our nation from all perils" (Webber, 2020). He states:

Navy sail the seas, normally live in very small quarters and work shifts around the clock to ensure the carrier is ready to fight and protect us should the need arise.

Now it is our turn to support them by helping them with a place to live while being tested for COVID-19 during the time their ship is made ready to safely accept their return and set sail again. (ibid.)

The second half of this excerpt from Webber positions the proposal to

quarantine the sailors on-island as an indebtedness of the people of Guåhan to the U.S. Navy, which came at the cost of the community's safety, especially *manåmko* (the elderly), as well as the large proportion of residents who are immunocompromised due to diabetes, cancer, and other preexisting health issues common among Pacific Islanders faced with poverty and with proximities to colonialism.<sup>6</sup> Webber's rationale is tied to a decades-long history of CHamoru servitude following the American recapture of Guåhan from the Imperial Japanese Army in 1944.

This discourse frames the United States as a benevolent liberator, and CHamoru as the indentured, "proud to serve," recruits who find success in the armed forces as soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen. Today, the island is recognized as having one of the highest levels of military recruitment per capita (Letman, 2016). Dalisay (2014) expresses this sense of indebtedness as colonial debt, "an acceptance of colonization manifested through a sense of obligation toward colonizers" and is associated both with pro-U.S. military / pro-buildup ideologies and less resistance to militarization (11).

Webber's column further parallels Gschwend's in its dehumanizing of dissenters, and to a greater degree CHamoru decolonization and demilitarization activists. For instance, he states, "There will likely be those narrow-minded people who voice their self-serving concerns about why Guam should have to deal with this," and "remember, as we have been taught, be wary of those who peddle hate, discord and ridicule. They do not have you or our island's best interests at heart" (Webber, 2020).

Unlike Gschwend, who points her criticisms at commenters on social media, Webber's attacks are made vague in that he refers to them only as "those narrow-minded people" (*ibid.*). Taken into context with his media history and his public position *against* CHamoru sovereignty and *for* increased militarization, it is difficult not to assume that his comments do not extend more broadly to CHamoru decolonization and demilitarization activists beyond the USS TR outbreak.

A review of the coverage from that week reveals the agenda of local mainstream media to normalize the proposition to quarantine USS TR sailors and manufacture consent, while dismissing opposition. The same day Webber published his column, *The Guam Daily Post* published an editorial titled, "Helping warship's sailors was the right call for Guam," arguing the proposition could be a leverage point for the island when seeking better relations with the military in the future (Daily



Post Staff, 2020b). However, the narrative reveals that the fact that the government of Guam has no leveraging capability when it comes to its relationship with the military in the author's use of "hope," as in the following excerpts:

We hope the military leadership at the Guam level, at the Pacific Fleet in Honolulu and the main decision-makers at the Pentagon will see and remember the kindness Guam has shown.

We hope the military will reciprocate our community's gesture with transparency, candor and respect for local rules, traditions and sensitivities. (ibid.)

Through this, *The Guam Daily Post* (which is consistently promilitary, pro-status quo in its reporting) displays a cognizance, if not reluctantly, of the subordination of the island's people to the military. Their support, and the governor's for that matter, is incidental and only serves to pacify dissenting residents scared of the potential for an outbreak arising from contact with the cases from the aircraft carrier. While the article recognizes that the proposition is, in fact, a "risk and a sacrifice," indentured service is latent in the text through its endorsement of Leon Guerrero, whom the author states "felt it is Guam's *obligation* to also provide a place for the warship's crew to wait out the fourteen-day quarantine in a humane facility" (ibid.; emphasis added).

Not all local elected leaders shared the enthusiasm of Leon Guerrero, or *The Guam Daily Post* for that matter. Senator Sabina Perez, called out the governor's support for quarantining the sailors on-island, drawing attention to the disparity between the vastly resourced U.S. military and the overstretched and overburdened government of Guam, as well as the risk of exposing low-income hotel workers to potentially infected sailors. As it became clear that the U.S. military no longer intended to quarantine its sailors on base, Perez drew attention to the fact that an option not being discussed was the military utilizing the thousands of acres it currently occupies as a site for isolation that would have genuinely benefited both the USS TR crew and the people of Guåhan:

"I feel like that need to exhaust their options, which I feel they haven't. What have they done to do that? Really, the safety of our community should come first," said Senator Perez on today's episode of Containing COVID.

She added, "They should continue to quarantine but in spaces on the base. As you know there are many, many facilities that are vacant and they have space, many acres—



over 38,000 acres to construct these temporary things that could provide a sufficient quarantine facility.”

Senator Perez in a letter to Governor Lou Leon Guerrero said, “Our military is well resourced and able to house these young sailors on base without compounding the problem by exposing vulnerable service workers and the public.” (Matanane, 2020)

Perez’s alternative proposition isn’t discussed in other media coverage regarding the issue. Further, that she is mentioned in this article alongside “community activist groups” places her commentary at the fringe of the discussion, in line with person’s who have been characterized as *stupid, hateful, ugly, and narrow-minded*. Despite Perez’s plea to the governor, along with those of the numerous community leaders, Leon Guerrero did not walk back her support for the quarantining of sailors and other potentially exposed military personnel off-base, with national security taking precedence over community health and safety.

More progressive local coverage of the USS TR event, by *PDN* reporter Anumita Kaur, is largely shaped by the discourse of the dissenting community groups as a means of relating oppositional viewpoints:

Guam’s political status has limited the local government’s ability to effectively negotiate with the Department of Defense, but the governor shouldn’t simply accept this, according to the groups.

“Times like this call for a change in antiquated colonial policies that hinder our safety. It is absolutely acceptable for you as our head of state to demand that the U.S. Navy not only be transparent with you, but also include you in major decisions that will impact our island regardless of our political status,” groups stated. (2020c)

Due to standard editorial practices, however, Kaur’s article is compromised by the inclusion of the navy’s narrative of the event and Leon Guerrero’s support, illustrating the point that, even when journalists are sympathetic to counternarratives, their coverage of events are often impacted by mainstream news media’s reliance on establishment sources.

### Progressive Coverage of USS TR

Leon Guerrero affirmed her prioritization of national security in this statement to *The Diplomat*: “These are sailors who run the USS TR. They are operating a very significant, strategic, critical asset for national

security and defense in this part of the world.... If I believed these sailors would minimize or compromise the safety of our people, I would have never agreed to help" (Letman, 2020). Leon Guerrero's statement was included in a more informative news article that openly discusses Guåhan's colonization, its lack of resources, and pursuit of self-determination, rather than glossing over these contexts. The article, "Guam's Growing Coronavirus Challenge," demonstrates what constructive national reporting could look like for Guåhan, while covering many of the issues raised in this essay. The headline is followed by superimposed text that reads, "On Guam, an already complex relationship to the U.S. mainland (and military) is complicated by a pandemic" (ibid.).

Both the headline and the following text express that Guam is distinct from the United States. Guåhan, its governor, and its infrastructural and healthcare challenges are the focal points of the article's introductory paragraphs, and the author illustrates an island that is politically ambiguous, overburdened, and underfunded. The author, Jon Letman, uses the rest of the article to highlight interviews with CHamoru men and women who present counterhegemonic perspectives that further illustrate the prevailing inequities of the island's colonial status, such as:

Desiree Taimanglo Ventura, a member of I Hagan Famalao'an Guåhan (Daughters of the Women of Guam) says the local government is doing the best it can within the limitations of being a colony. Despite the "One Guam" approach and talk of partnership with the United States, Taimanglo Ventura says, "We're not partners—we are their colonial subject. We are a possession."

As an example, she points to those with access to on-base resources at the commissary worrying about locals depleting goods.

Taimanglo Ventura says that even though the military has offered its assurance that all necessary precautions are being taken, many are unsure of what to trust. "This is our history. We don't get transparency with the military." (ibid.)

With the inclusion of CHamoru voices, Letman demonstrates how a journalistic inquiry that includes counterhegemonic, Indigenous perspectives, and situates Guåhan within the social, historical, and political contexts of its unincorporated territory status, can create a news story that is transparent about the island's relation to the United States, and is potentially more informative to a U.S. electorate.

Similarly, an *Al Jazeera* article by Chris Gelardi employs contextual

segments, as well as the positive inclusion of dissenting voices:

As of Thursday, Guam has had 125 confirmed COVID-19 cases, including four deaths.

More than 3,100 sailors have so far moved ashore, confirming for the advocates the power the military has on their island, even in times of crisis.

“It’s basically a question of whose health and safety matters more,” said Borja-Kicho’cho’. “And it’s so frustrating because we already know the answer to that. We know it’s not us.” (2020)

While these articles are more progressive and critical of U.S. foreign policy and its imperial endeavors, they also sadly confirm my argument in that neither publication is a mainstream news outlet. Rather, they constitute a fringe political view among national and international media. Further, among the approximately fourteen news articles written about the USS TR discursive event from March 26 to April 20, they are only two of four articles that attempt to critically engage with Guåhan not merely as a U.S. military stronghold, but as an island colonized by the United States.

### Suggestions for Journalists Covering Issues Relating to Guåhan

After the USS TR crew departed Guåhan, the challenges of the pandemic remained and the island now faces yet another spike in cases connected to transient U.S. Air Force personnel who breached their quarantine.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in July, at least two articles were published that further reify the island’s subordinated status as a military stronghold proclaiming, “China Aims Missiles at Guam: How Should the Pentagon Defend America’s Pacific Bomber Base?”<sup>8</sup> and “To Deter War with China, Defend Guam.”<sup>9</sup> While the latter uncritically proclaims Guam is part of an idealized American “homeland,” the former does away with the people of Guåhan altogether.

In this time of national unrest and global crisis, it is urgent that marginalized groups in the continental United States and colonized peoples in the Pacific foster a translocal solidarity that seeks an end to both global and localized systems of oppression (antiblackness, police brutality, settler colonialism, etc.). Journalists can be catalysts for democratic change in U.S. colonies such as Guåhan, but only if more critical and sincere inquiries into U.S. imperialism become normalized, and not unconventional. A few recommendations can be made from the analyses presented in this essay. First, articles should include both histori-

cal and political context, particularly when discussing militarization. News coverage that exclude these normalize the island's occupation by the United States, and its status as a "major strategic base," rather than situating these as outcomes of an American imperial agenda dating back to 1898.

Second, the narrative of news articles should be constructed from grounded CHamoru perspectives that counter establishment narratives. This can only be done by forming nonhierarchical relations, informed by reciprocity, with CHamoru activists and organizers on the ground working toward decolonization and demilitarization within the community. CHamoru community organizations such as Independent Guåhan, I Hagan Famalão'an Guåhan, and Prutehi Litekyan have developed an online presence that cultivates both local sovereignty and a borderless, translocal solidarity with other communities resisting militarization and colonization. These groups are accessible to journalists critically engaging with militarization and colonization.

## Conclusion

Looking at news coverage surrounding the USS TR event, it is apparent that discourse in national news media instinctively naturalize the projection of American military power in Asia-Pacific, and the continued colonization of Pacific Islands such as Guåhan to maintain the self-mythologizing of the United States as a bastion of liberty and democracy. Occurring simultaneously in Guåhan is the manufactured consent of a large segment of the population over recurring injustices committed by the U.S. military through the propagation of discourses of servitude, indebtedness, and American benevolence by an extant colonial mediascape. Both mainstream local and national news outlets are critical to the continuity of militarization and colonization in the Marianas by concealing the undemocratic relationship between the U.S. military (as an extension of the United States) and Guåhan, a current colony.

Guåhan is part of the interconnected fabric of oppression that thousands of protesters across the United States are revolting against as I write this. Not only through federal policies like the Pentagon's 1033 program, which funnels military arms and equipment into local and state police departments<sup>10</sup> to be used against Brown, Black, and poor communities, but through the maintenance of a global military and capital order. There are approximately 800 military bases around the world controlled by the United States,<sup>11</sup> which maintain

the nation's ability to project military power across the globe and protect the flow of capital and resources into the pockets of elite sectors of society. The latter became blatantly clear when, on April 2, the U.S. Navy revealed it was rapidly sourcing medical supplies and equipment from around the world, only to hand them over to private companies that then auctioned the goods to hospitals in the middle of the crisis. As Rear Adm. John Polowczyk succinctly stated, "I'm not here to disrupt the supply chain" (Palmer, 2020). He further stated, "We're bringing product in; they're filling orders for hospitals, nursing homes, like normal. I'm putting volume into that system" (ibid.).

Polowczyk's admission could not have better summed up the relationship between the U.S. military and its role in ensuring the prevailing inequities of capitalism. Guåhan and other islands in the Pacific occupied and militarized by the United States are integral pieces of this structure. American mainstream news media maintain these power dynamics through discursive biases supporting the U.S. military and its projects of oppression around the globe. Understanding the ways in which media structures reproduce U.S. colonialism is imperative not just for CHamoru activists working to decolonize from the United States, but for community members, political leaders, scholars, and organizers who seek to dismantle the interconnected American projects of White supremacy and capitalism weighing on marginalized communities in the U.S. sphere and around the globe.

## Notes

- 1 “Guåhan” is used in preference to “Guam” in this essay to protest the legacies of colonial naming and terminology by both Spanish and American colonizers.
- 2 US Supreme Court, *Commonwealth of Puerto Rico v. Sanchez et al.* 9 June 2016.
- 3 “CHamoru” is the more orthographically correct spelling of “Chamorro.” While the government of Guam recently standardized the former, its use among the larger population of Indigenous people of Guåhan is still expanding. The use of “CHamoru” is also not a standard for peoples in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. It is, however, used broadly among contemporary activists and cultural practitioners in Guåhan. My preference for, and self-identification as, “CHamoru” is thus an indication of my positionality as an anticolonial CHamoru activist-scholar.
- 4 Unlike the continental United States, data regarding poverty in Guåhan is not recorded regularly, with the most recent data being the 2010 census. There are, however, other indicators of poverty, such as enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and housing assistance programs such as Section 8 (Leon-Guerrero, 2019). Further, during the course of the pandemic, about 35,000 residents on Guåhan were displaced (Gilbert, 2020b).
- 5 Democracy Now! 2020. “Coronavirus-Stricken U.S. Aircraft Carrier Evacuated in Guam.” *Democracy Now!*
- 6 A recent study indicates that approximately 44.1 percent of adults on Guåhan suffer from multiple chronic conditions, such as high cholesterol and diabetes (Newman et al., 2020).
- 7 Anumita Kaur. 2020d. “‘Investigation ongoing’: Still no answers on Air Force unit coronavirus spike.” *Pacific Daily News*.
- 8 David Axe. 2020. “China Aims Missiles at Guam: How Should the Pentagon Defend America’s Pacific Bomber Base?” *Forbes*.
- 9 Rebecca Heinrichs. 2020. “To Deter War with China, Defend Guam.” *The National Interest*.
- 10 H. R. 3230 – National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997.
- 11 David Vine. 2020. “Base Nation: How U. S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World.” *The American Empire Project*.

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