



## Alter-geopolitics: Other securities are happening

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 12 January 2010

Received in revised form 12 January 2011

Available online 22 April 2011

#### Keywords:

Geopolitics  
Critical geopolitics  
Anti-geopolitics  
Feminist geopolitics  
Progressive geopolitics  
Alternative geopolitics  
Alter-geopolitics  
Peace  
Non-violence  
Accompaniment  
Solidarity  
Colombia

### ABSTRACT

In an age of increasing state (in)security, some are coming together on their own to build alternative non-violent securities. They are making connections across distance and difference which focus on the safety of bodies (often by actually moving bodies), and ground geopolitics in everyday life. The term anti-geopolitics focuses on resistance to hegemonic geopolitics (material or discursive), rather than this sort of effort to build something new. Feminist geopolitics is a form of anti-geopolitics that not only takes apart but also puts the pieces together in new ways – with broader definitions of security for more bodies in more places. Yet it has not generally looked at that practice as engaged in outside of academia. I propose the term alter-geopolitics for a type of feminist geopolitics as a way to extend both the concepts of anti- and feminist geopolitics. I argue for the term as a reminder to look to grassroots practice, to the ways that groups are doing geopolitics in the streets, in homes, in jungles, and in many other spaces 'off the page'. Though they may not think of their work as geopolitics, framing it in this way can open fruitful conversations. As academics we have much to learn and offer through collaboratively thinking with such groups about security. I have been doing this with international companions in Colombia and discuss their work, and the peace community of San José that they accompany, as forms of alter-geopolitics.

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### 1. Introduction

I came into alter-geopolitics on the 'over-ground railroad'. It was 1984, and we were driving North on I-5 (the major West Coast highway in the US). The signs in the windows said "Sanctuary Caravan". The car in front of us was carrying Sandra, Sergio and their daughter Natalia, refugees coming to a Seattle Quaker Meeting. We were offering them sanctuary because the US government was refusing Salvadorans asylum, since that would mean admitting that the US was giving over a million dollars a day to a Salvadoran government that was attacking its own people. We resisted by going around the government and creating our own security, by putting our bodies together for safety, by establishing our own people to people relations across place.

I have been a solidarity activist ever since, including several years as an organizer of CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. I have also worked as a professional Spanish interpreter and translator for 15 years, and organized interpreting for the solidarity movement. I came back to academia to understand differently what it is we are doing when we build solidarity, and how to do it more effectively. I found the concepts of anti-geopolitics and feminist geopolitics useful and want to build on them. I argue here for paying attention to a sort of femi-

nist geopolitics that is happening outside of academia, an *alter-geopolitics*.

To get at this I look at what the term geopolitics is widely understood to mean, and then how critical geopolitics has unpacked it. I discuss anti-geopolitics as one particular sort of critical geopolitics, and then feminist geopolitics as one particular sort of anti-geopolitics. I then argue for alter-geopolitics as a particular sort of feminist geopolitics, and explore how two groups in Colombia are doing it. It was trying to understand the work of these groups that led me to grapple with this question of what is geopolitics and how is it being done differently. I turn to these alternatives as a source of inspiration and hope. To understand how some are doing it differently, let me first clarify what I mean by mainstream geopolitics.

### 2. Geopolitics

Outside of academia geopolitics is widely imagined as (depending on your generation) chess, the board game Risk, or the Total War video games. Big men moving big guns across a big playing field. The world divided into clear sides. It's all on the map, as little figurines. Put a fort in here, a uranium mine there. They've blown up the runway. Hold the port. Why do all of this? Oh, right, for security. To avoid, or win, the war. To keep the people safe. Or just maybe, to keep the investments safe, to build an empire.

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The term geopolitics was coined in 1899 by Kjellen. Around this time Kjellen, Ratzel, Mahan and Mackinder each developed ideas of how states are shaped by conflict over territory and resources (Kearns, 2009). Carve up Africa. Rule the heartland to rule the world. The term is now widely associated with 'realist' interpretations of international relations, but often left undefined by those using it.

What is the difference between politics and geopolitics? This is an ongoing debate in geography, often framed as the difference between capital P politics (states) and little p politics (everything else?) (Flint, 2003). What makes it geo? Territory? Land? Space? Since geo means the earth, does it have to be global? Is it only geo if it has to do with the foreign policy of states? With war? With security? But whose security, defined how? I am afraid there has been a gendering of these discussions. The dearth of women and feminists in political geography has been noted many times before (Staehele and Kofman, 2004; Sharp, 2007). Feminist political geography has reworked the concept the 'political', but still many who work on what might be called the 'small p' do not identify as political geographers (Flint, 2003). But even those that do seem to be having different conversations. Critical geopolitics has tended to focus on the reasoning of statecraft (Dalby, 2008), feminist geopolitics looks not only at the state, but has also tended to look beyond and within it – though it has been arguing that scales are intertwined (more on this below). Mixing up these conversations would help to better understand both drones and the day to day. To me geopolitics means a focus on peace(s) across places, including the place of the body. This is more often framed as security across space, and all too often simply as the study of war.

### 3. Critical geopolitics

Hegemonic geopolitics focuses on issues of location, resources, and terrain – and these do matter for the security and wellbeing of states and of people. But how they matter has more to do with the ways we understand them, and as a result what we do with them, than any determinant of 'nature' (Dahlman, 2009). Five rivers meet near the peace community of San José in Colombia. That alone does not make them more or less safe. But biodiesel is the new big thing, and narco-paramilitaries are laundering their money through oil palm plantations which need heavy irrigation, which makes those rivers matter (Hylton, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Critical geopolitics<sup>2</sup> understands geopolitics to include the discourses and imaginaries of P/politics – that is, the way the world is understood and represented. If geopolitics is like the game of Risk, this is not moving the little tank figurines on the game board map, but the step before that – figuring out which side they are on. Who and what on the map is painted the color 'us' (blue?) or the color 'them' (red?). It has looked at these imaginaries in the studies, reports and arguments of academia and think tanks (formal geopolitics); political speeches, state actions (practical geopolitics); and mass media and public opinion (popular geopolitics) (Ó Tuathail et al., 2006, p. 8). Yet my sense is that outside of academia many think of it as only 'practical geopolitics', that is, Kissinger moving blue figurines, or the US opening seven military bases in Colombia immediately after Ecuador closed its US base. It is widely thought

<sup>1</sup> Hylton's book is a good introduction to the Colombian conflict, where one out of 10 have been displaced by war (the highest displacement rate in the world) and a huge reverse land reform is happening through violence used for land grabs. For a geographer's analysis of this process and how it creates landscapes of terror see Oslender (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Critical geopolitics was popularized in the early 1990s, in particular by Ó Tuathail (1996) and Dalby (1990). For what this thinking looks like today see the 2008, 13:3 special issue of *Geopolitics*, the 2009, 75:4 special issue of *Geojournal*, in particular the roundtable (Jones and Sage, 2009), and the 2010, 29:5 special issue of *Political Geography*.

of as the 'Great Game', struggles by states over imperialist expansion, rather than the discourses that make that possible, or as something done by ordinary people.

Who gets to draw the map? Who gets to color it in? Geopolitics is often assumed to be something done by elites. Popular geopolitics, the imaginaries in the (corporate) media, is hardly 'the people's' geopolitics (a phrase used by Dittmer (2007)). There has been a recent turn to the reception of these imaginaries by various publics and how they actively make geopolitical meanings (Dittmer, 2008), but it is rare to find an analysis of imaginaries in 'the people's' media – that is, alternative grassroots media such as indymedia, witness.org, or email alerts (though see Gregory's analysis of blogs out of Baghdad (2004)).

The task that critical geopolitics sets out of problematizing the ways that elites write space continues to be important, yet I want to argue for everyone having access to re-envisioning and reworking both the map and its rules, including who gets to see, speak, have agency, and how we all get to move. I will come back to this as I outline alter-geopolitics. For now, I want emphasize that whether geopolitics is understood to be moving things on the map, or seeing and painting the map different colors, it is widely understood to be done 'from above', by elites, and through the container of the state. If we want to imagine geopolitics as something that we all have access to, from all directions, it is important to specify that when we use the term.

Those critiquing hegemonic geopolitics have sometimes been so busy looking at those doing the looking at the maps, that they failed to see the people on the map, much less their agency. At first, critical geopolitics was too often not 'peopled', other than by Big Men. That is to say, there was not a sense of how the politics based on those scripts affect and are affected by the daily lives (and resistance) of the non-elite (Sharp, 2000a,b; Sparke, 2000; Dowler and Sharp, 2001). It was also not peopled in the sense that the authors themselves were not present in the work, but wrote in a disembodied way (Sharp, 2000a,b; Sparke, 2000). New directions in critical geopolitics have worked to people it in various ways.

### 4. Anti-geopolitics

One such stream has been anti-geopolitics. Anti-geopolitics looks at the people on the map that are pushing back, that are trying to move themselves rather than be moved from above. Though the term was earlier used by Abdel-Malek (1977), Dalby (1990, 1993) and Ó Tuathail (1996), it has been frequently associated with Routledge, who has defined it more explicitly (1998, 2003, 2006). Whereas hegemonic geopolitics is traditionally carried out by those with political, economic and cultural power, anti-geopolitics, as Routledge puts it, is 'geopolitics from below'. This is not a parallel to Thompson's (1968) 'social history from below', but rather is a challenge of the hegemony of the state and its elites by those who are dominated by it. Anti-geopolitics resists the material and/or discursive geopolitical practices of the ruling elite, through material and/or discursive forms of resistance.<sup>3</sup> This may be a resistance to the policies and representations of the state, financial institutions, or the media.

As Routledge uses the term then, it is not necessarily, as the Zapatistas put it, "from below and to the left", but rather any material or discursive challenge to geopolitical hegemony made by those who are dominated by it (2003). But how dominated are US citizens by US empire? Those of us not in the high elite are

<sup>3</sup> Routledge has argued that it "challenges both material geopolitical power of states and political institutions and the representations imposed by political and economic elites upon the world and its people to serve their geopolitical interests" (Routledge, 2003, p. 237), but in personal communication (2007) he emphasized that it could be one or the other or both.

certainly *also* negatively affected since, say, more military spending means less money for schools, but we are not dominated.

If “from below” does not mean from the left, does it mean from a social movement? This seems to be a common misimpression of the term, as several other geographers in briefly reviewing the concept say that it is resistance by movements (Kofman, 2005, p. 527; Agnew, 2003, p. 116; Power, 2003, p. 202). Perhaps this is because Routledge himself has done so much work with movements, and has made calls for critical geopolitics to critically engage and identify with movements (1996). Yet in his introduction to the anti-geopolitics section of the *Geopolitics Reader*, Routledge argues that, “Anti-geopolitics can take myriad resistant forms, from the oppositional discourses of dissident intellectuals, the strategies and tactics of social movements to armed insurrection and terrorism” (2006, p. 233). The term anti-geopolitics is a reworking of Konrad’s term anti-politics, for the political activity of “those who don’t want to be politicians and who refuse to share in power” (2006, p. 260). It would appear then that anti-geopolitics is people wanting only to move themselves on the map, not others.

For understanding solidarity activism, like our sanctuary caravan, the term anti-geopolitics seems both too broad (including all sorts of challenges, even violent ones) and too specific (depending on how one defines ‘from below’). It also does not address the part of sanctuary and efforts like it that matters most to me. I do not simply want to resist being moved by those playing the Great Game, I want to play a different game! I want to change the rules. I push back against what I do *not* want in the world in order to make space for nurturing what I *do* want. To be critical means to do *both*. As Blomley (2007) argues, it means to be animated by both anger and hope.

## 5. Feminist geopolitics

Feminist geopolitics does turn to hope, and it is another way that critical geopolitics has been ‘peopled’. It is included as a form of anti-geopolitics in the *Geopolitics Reader* (Ó Tuathail et al., 2006). It does resist dominant representations, but it goes beyond deconstruction or resistance to a more positive focus on alternative understandings of geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2001). Unfortunately the term feminist geopolitics is widely misunderstood to mean simply gender and geopolitics. It is actually a much broader project which reworks what geopolitics means by re-envisioning who does it, how, and at what scales.

Cynthia Enloe’s book *Bananas, beaches and bases* (2000 (1990)) did not use the term feminist geopolitics, but was an important early feminist receipting of what geopolitics means. She argued that the personal is international and the international is personal. This relationship is one that feminists have continued to grapple with.<sup>4</sup> The collection *the Global and the Intimate*, edited by Rosner and Pratt (2006), understands these two as intertwining. It disrupts grand narratives of global relations by focusing on the specific, not by reifying the local. They argue that the intimate is not the opposite of the global but its supplement, its undoing, even as the global can haunt the intimate. The intimate is not a refuge but a politicized sphere, which feminists can use to approach the world. For reviews of work that does this see Mountz and Hyndman (2006) and Wright (2008).

Another recent collection, *Fear: critical geopolitics and everyday life*, edited by Pain and Smith (2008), works with this recognition that the scaling of phenomena as geopolitical or everyday, global or local is an artificial and political move. I found the image they

offer of this relationship useful. They look at how fear circulates into and out of life not through a flat ontology but as an assemblage, something like the strands of DNA where, “the ‘two strands’ carry the same information and are bound by numerous connectors... We could see these connections as events, encounters, movements, dialogues, actions, affects and things... these engagements are fragile... the breaks and discontinuities... might represent the awkward, unfinished, disunited, conflicting nature of relations between the geopolitical and everyday; but ultimately they are inter-reliant and complementary” (p. 7). They want to re-imagine the nexus of geopolitical and everyday to open up possibilities for ordinary lives holding solutions to political problems. They point to the ways that the everyday speaks back and changes seemingly immutable forces. This question of what ‘the political’ is, and its relationship to scale, has long been a focus of Anglo feminist political geography. A key collection of this work is *Mapping Women, Making Politics*, edited by Staeheli et al. (2004).

The term feminist geopolitics was first used in print in 2001. That year Dowler and Sharp organized a special issue of *Space and Polity* on feminist geopolitics (Secor, 2001; Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Staeheli, 2001; Smith, 2001) and Hyndman (2001) published a separate call for feminist geopolitics. When they used the term feminist geopolitics Dowler and Sharp (2001) were grappling with this relationship between, as they put it, the international and the everyday – how identities and mundane practices shape reconstructions of the nation and the international, just as global geopolitical discourse shapes daily lives and bodies. They argued for widening the realm of the political. This means not only writing women back in, but grounding geopolitics in practice and in place in a way that makes the experiences of the disenfranchised more visible. Geopolitical discourse can be understood more broadly, not only as representation but the ways that geopolitical discourse is worked out and always embodied in mundane everyday practices. They argue for bodies not merely as “surfaces for discursive inscription” but as “sites of performance in their own right” (p. 169). Dowler and Sharp remind us that the danger in talking of a feminist geopolitics is that it can render feminist critique singular, and argue for the importance of engaging with ‘non-western’ feminists.

In Hyndman’s (2001) article she likewise argued for feminist geopolitics not as any one new theory, but rather as an analytic or imaginary that not only exposes the investments of dominant geopolitical imaginaries, but then works to, as she puts it, put humpty dumpty back together again, to point to new ways forward in practice, recognizing the contingency of place, people and context in making change. Hyndman here lays out three steps that can be taken in a feminist geopolitical approach: using a ‘finer and coarser’ scale of security than the state that instead focuses on the safety and broader wellbeing of people, as both individuals and groups; analyzing spaces of violence that traverse public/private, domestic/international distinctions; and focusing on people’s varying mobility as a way to analyze geopolitical power across space.

Hyndman has written several articles about feminist geopolitics (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007), and has done much to circulate and define the term. Now many more are engaging with it, as evidenced by the three paper sessions and panel on feminist geopolitics at the 2009 AAG.<sup>5</sup> Because Hyndman has made such an important contribution to thinking about what a feminist geopolitics is and can be, I engage with her work more closely here.

<sup>4</sup> Enloe herself has continued to do powerful work along these lines, see particularly her most recent *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Enloe, 2010) and its use of personal stories.

<sup>5</sup> The annual conference of the American Association of Geographers. These sessions were organized by Deborah Dixon and many of those presentations are forthcoming as a special issue in *Gender Place and Culture* edited by Deborah Dixon and Sallie Marston.

How might feminist geopolitics approach **violence**? In a 2003 article using feminist geopolitics as a framework to analyze the September 11, 2001 attacks, Hyndman argues that feminist geopolitics is “a more accountable and embodied notion of politics that analyzes the intersection of power and space at multiple scales, one that eschews violence as a legitimate means to political ends” (p. 3). Here then she goes beyond her 2001 argument for analyzing spaces of violence to say that the analysis itself should ‘eschew violence.’ Others have not taken this up, and Hyndman has not come back to it in quite this way.<sup>6</sup> **Her later work emphasizes how feminist geopolitics sees more violences, and in different ways. Feminist geopolitics offers powerful avenues for doing embodied analysis of violence across intertwining scales.** Yet the idea that the analysis itself could eschew violence intrigues me. Could we extend this to refer to analysis that is done through and with nonviolent action? I will argue for this below.

From violence to what? Hyndman, in her 2001 article, argues that feminist geopolitics should *point to* ways forward, and in her 2004 article she argues that it works to *render possible* paths of change. But what of paths and ways forward that are already being worked out by people organizing for change? How can it engage with them? Later in her 2001 article Hyndman says that a feminist geopolitical project relies on and aims to strengthen a healthy civil society that does not tolerate systematic violence against citizens (p. 219). She does not directly address whether organizations of civil society are themselves part of such a project, though she seems to leave that possibility open. Though she makes no mention of the relationship between feminist geopolitics and civil society per se in later articles (2004, 2007), she talks of O’Kane’s reporting from Bosnia as a kind of feminist geopolitics “at work” (Hyndman, 2004, p. 311). In 2003 she argued that “A feminist geopolitics might be viewed at once as a critical approach and a contingent set of political practices operating at multiple scales that include, but are not restricted to, the nation-state” (p. 4). It is unclear here who is engaging in these practices, but I would argue that many outside of academia are. In 2003 Hyndman went on to argue that, “A feminist geopolitics takes this deconstructive impulse one step further back into the ‘real world’ so to speak so that identities, ways of seeing, and *intervention on the ground* can also reconstruct alternative futures” and that “It seeks embodied ways of seeing and *material notions of protection for people on the ground*” (p. 5, emphasis added).

Is feminist geopolitics then the subset of anti-geopolitics that is done by social movements? I do not think so. Though the AAG 2009 sessions on feminist geopolitics included several papers that discussed social movements, these generally offered a feminist geopolitics analysis of this activism, rather than arguing that these groups were themselves engaging in feminist geopolitics. There has been a good bit of work in geography on social movements, even in critical geopolitics, and even on feminist political activism in particular (Dalby, 1993; Sparke, 1996), but I have not seen this activism framed as feminist geopolitics in practice. Instead feminist geopolitics has been widely taken up as an analytical

framework, rather than described as a practice that is also engaged in outside of academia.

Dowler and Sharp (2001) critique critical geopolitics for giving “little sense of alternative possibilities” and argue for feminist geopolitics as a more constructive form of critical geopolitics (p. 167). Yet feminist geopolitics has so far given little sense of the many alternatives being worked out on ‘the streets’. There is much to learn from the ways forward being worked out in practice. I want to both imagine a better world and work with others to build and live it.

## 6. Alter-geopolitics

**Another world is possible, and everyone seems to have different ideas about what it can look like. I want to hear more about them.**

Many grassroots groups are not only pushing back against hegemonic policies of (in)security (anti-geopolitics), but also nurturing other types of nonviolent security in connection that they do want – what I have been calling **alter-geopolitics** (Koopman, 2008). Grassroots groups are not waiting for (or trusting) the state, but coming together on their own, non-violently, for safety.

The securities they are able to build look untraditional. As the Zapatistas put it, there is one no and many yeses. There is no Zion to escape to, we are never fully off the Matrix, or totally safe. But we can all be safer, in different ways. In Colombia it may be the safety of resisting being displaced by the paramilitaries by living and working together in rural areas, being part of the alternative land registry, or running an independent school so that children will not be recruited into armed groups. In the Democratic Republic of Congo women walk remote areas searching for rape victims left to die and take them in and nurse them back to health. No, not safe, but safer. In Uganda shelters gather child ‘night commuters’ resisting recruitment. In the United States churches are once again taking immigrants into sanctuary to resist deportation. In Palestine, Israeli women stand watch at checkpoints.<sup>7</sup> In countries around the world ‘take back the night’ marches create safety through numbers,<sup>8</sup> the copwatch<sup>9</sup> movement monitors police with video cameras to deter abuse, and international companions walk with those under threat.

I am interested in how geopolitics is thought differently not just by writing about bodies, but by *moving* bodies. I am interested in the thinking that is being done in and through action, particularly by those that are using their bodies, together, to build alternative nonviolent securities. I want to engage with feminist geopolitics as it is being done by bodies ‘in the streets’<sup>10</sup> (and in homes, churches, the jungle, on youtube, etc., but at any rate ‘off the page’<sup>11</sup> as Pain has put it (2009b).

**Feminist geopolitics is not just about critiquing hegemony, but also about pointing to, and I would argue also *creating*, alternatives.**

What does that look like in action, off the page and in the struggle? Let me turn now more in depth to two forms of alter-geopolitics that I have been close to, peace communities and international

<sup>6</sup> She has however recently argued for critical geopolitics generally as “a space for the production of less chauvinistic, and hopefully *nonviolent* universalisms that do not come with pre-given content, political values, and prescribed outcomes, but that attend to context, history and vulnerability to violence” (2010, p. 254 emphasis added), though in that same article she quotes Butler on non-violence not being a rule that can be applied in all situations, implying that it to do so would be foundational. Instead Hyndman is compellingly arguing here for what she calls a ‘post-foundational ethic of encounter’. By privileging the thinking that happens in and through nonviolent practices I am certainly not saying that non-violence is the only right response to injustice. Gandhi himself recognized that non-violence was not always possible and said that it was better to resist violently than to be passive (Hardiman, 2003, p. 59).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.machsomwatch.org/en](http://www.machsomwatch.org/en).

<sup>8</sup> After a spate of rapes in my neighbourhood in Bogotá we had a take back the night march, winding around our blocks shouting “*solidaridad es seguridad*” (solidarity is security).

<sup>9</sup> There are over 70 copwatch groups across the US, with others in Canada, Australia and France using a nonviolent model of directly monitoring the police with video cameras to both deter and document police abuse. The movement is some 20 years old (Alex, 2007). In Palestine B’Tselem has a camera distribution program to foster this sort of monitoring.

<sup>10</sup> When I started writing about alter-geopolitics (2008) I described it as ‘feminist geopolitics on the ground.’ Yet Hyndman understands all feminist geopolitics to be ‘on the ground’ in the sense that it focuses on material bodies in everyday life (personal communication, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Writing pages about these actions is often a key part of the action itself, but these are usually circulated in forums that are more grassroots than say, *Geoforum*.

accompaniment, and then turn more specifically to what characterizes these and other such work as alter-geopolitics.

## 7. International accompaniment

I recently spent over a year in Colombia thinking with accompaniers about what they do. Protective accompaniment puts bodies that are less at risk next to bodies that are under threat, as a sort of “unarmed bodyguard” (Mahony and Eguren, 1997; Henderson, 2009; Pratt, 2008). Though described by Gandhi and used in India by his Shanti Sena (peace army), it was first widely used by the US civil rights movement when whites accompanied blacks.<sup>12</sup> The term accompaniment was first used for this work by Peace Brigades International (PBI), which sent the first international team to Guatemala in 1983. There are now international accompaniers in ten countries. Though Colombia did not receive a team until 1991, it is now the country with the largest number of international groups (10,<sup>13</sup> including PBI's largest team). There are also international accompaniers working in Sri Lanka, the Philippines (Mindanao), Palestine, Guatemala, Mexico, Nepal, Iraq (Kurdistan), Sudan, and First Nations territory in Canada.

Why does simply walking with someone protect them (Fig. 1)? Well, usually it is not just any body at risk that is being accompanied, but the bodies of those struggling to build peace and justice in the midst of conflict. Usually it is not just any body that is doing the accompanying, but a privileged outsider body that is less likely to be killed. The idea is that, as accompaniers often put it, by being there accompaniers “make space” for peace. But it is also about more than just being there in the moment, walking alongside. It also relies on networks with the ability to pressure chains of political and military influence in other spaces/times, which raises the stakes of an attack.

As movement thinking tends to happen, I had many informal ongoing conversations with accompaniers about what it means to make space for peace, and how privilege is part of that. My having long been active in the solidarity movement was key to making this kind of talk possible. It is not always safe to have these conversations in Colombia, but we found ways – often over lunch, at parties, etc. These conversations eventually gelled into a series of interactive workshops that I held with six of the organizations.

I worked most closely as a critical collaborator with FOR, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which has two to three accompaniers (mostly from the US) living full-time in the peace community of San José de Apartadó, Colombia (Fig. 2). The members of the peace community are struggling to resist pressure by armed groups to run them off their land and make them yet another of the 1 in 10 displaced Colombians who have had to flee their communities. In Colombia struggling to stay on, or even just near, your land is dangerous for small farmers – but there is a growing movement that is doing just that, as families join together and form what they call peace communities, or sometimes humanitarian zones, to keep the different armed actors from using violence to push them off their land. Accompaniment has been crucial for making this possible.

In 1996 and 1997 the Colombian military carried out two massacres near the village of San José. Most survivors fled to the city, but some just came down from their hamlets in the mountains and gathered in the village center, which at that point was a ghost



Fig. 1. FOR accompanying displaced San José peace community members as they return to their homes, February 2008. Photo by author.



Fig. 2. The peace community of San José is near the border with Panama. Map by Eric Leinberger, UBC.

town. Around 500 people who had come down from the mountains decided to stay in the village. They issued a public declaration that they would not collaborate in any way with any of the armed actors, that is, not the military, the paramilitary, the highly militarized police, the guerillas, or the plain old drug traffickers (though there are few of those, because all of the above are involved in trafficking). The community declared themselves neutral in active non-violence, and no one was allowed to carry arms. The idea was that by declaring themselves a peace community they would make it clear that none of these armed actors had any reason to attack them.

<sup>12</sup> Certainly not all in the movement saw the role of whites allies in this way.

<sup>13</sup> The teams currently in Colombia are: Christian Peacemaker Teams (US/Canada), Fellowship of Reconciliation (US), Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (US), Projet Accompagnement Solidarité Colombie (Quebec, Canada), the European Solidarity Network, Espacio Bristol (UK), Peace Brigades (Europe/US), International Peace Observatory (Europe/US), Witness for Peace (US), and Palomas de Paz (Italy).



**Fig. 3.** Luis Eduardo Guerra speaking at the vigil to close the US Army's School of the Americas, November 2004. Photo by Linda Panetta, [www.opticalrealities.org](http://www.opticalrealities.org), used by kind permission.

Astoundingly this has been seen as very threatening – all of the armed actors continue to claim that the community is supporting the other side, and continue to attack them. These attacks have included over 186 assassinations in the past 10 years, nearly 30 of these by the guerillas, the rest by the military and paramilitary, often working closely together. The community has grown to around 1200 as others who had fled came back and joined, but 186 dead is still a huge number. Attacks have also included rapes, burning homes and the school, armed robbery of scarce community resources, bombs left in fields, and blockading the road and cutting off supplies for months at a time – as well as constant death threats.

This community is incredibly brave and determined, and after a couple of years they decided that a group would try moving back to La Union, one of the closest small hamlets – a several hour hike up the mountains. In response the army committed a massacre in La Union, killing six people in 2000. Amazingly this time the survivors did not all flee. Instead they sought a way to increase their safety and be able to stay.

At that point Peace Brigades was coming into the village center a few days a week, and the community had seen that attacks decreased with PBI there. They felt that the riskier action of staying in the more remote hamlet of La Union required more support, and they asked another organization, FOR, to accompany them there full-time. FOR started doing this in January of 2002 and has had a team of two internationals there since.

A few years ago the community decided that some would try to move back to Mulatos, another hamlet further still up the mountain trails. In 2005 Luis Eduardo Guerra, a leader of the community,

was up there with his family working his crops to get the area ready for the return when he, his family, and another family (including three small children in all) were massacred and their bodies cut into pieces by the military, working with paramilitaries.<sup>14</sup> Because Luis Eduardo had travelled the world telling the story of the community, even speaking at the vigil to close the US Army's School of the Americas in Georgia (see Fig. 3), this massacre has become a key case in the struggle against impunity in Colombia.

At that point the police insisted on setting up a police post in the main village. The community is so clear that they will not have anyone with guns in their space that they displaced, yet again, and rebuilt the village just down the road, away from the police. They also kept working on moving back up into the mountains.

On February 21, 2008, the third anniversary of the massacre, five brave families went ahead and moved back to the hamlet of Mulatos anyways. A group of international companions and 150 members of the community hiked with them the 9 hours up to the massacre site to hold a commemoration and house blessing ceremonies. I was honored to be along. Several of the companions had come from Spanish and Italian sister cities specifically for the occasion, and some of these were so moved that they established permanent accompaniment there, as 'Operation Dove'.

Accompaniment keeps growing because it seems to work. Of course, it is hard to know exactly why actors choose not to attack, but a peace community member told me that even after having FOR there for several years, when he runs into armed actors on paths further up the mountains they ask him, "are those internationals still there with you?" Since FOR has been in La Union the attacks have happened away from the hamlet, away from the internationals.

FOR works to end US military aid to Colombia (which has reached six billion US dollars over the past 10 years<sup>15</sup>) and document how that military aid is tied to human rights abuses against the peace community and across the country. Yet as they push back against what they do *not* want, they also use their own bodies to focus on and non-violently support the creation of what they *do* want in this world.

Accompaniers widely describe their work as "making space for peace". There has been a great deal written in geography about the war, but surprisingly little about spaces of peace (McConnell and Williams, forthcoming). Even collections of geographies of peace have been more about war (Flint, 2005; Pepper and Jenkins, 1985). This was also true of the recent *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* special issue on geographies of peace and armed conflict. There were very few articles that focused on peacebuilding – and most of those focused on technocratic peacebuilding that failed (Kleinfeld, 2009; Stokke, 2009; Akçali and Antonsich, 2009). One article did look at how sharing has happened in territorial disputes (Cohen and Frank 2009). Only two articles out of the 24 look at grassroots peacemaking (Blumen and Halevi, 2009; Henderson, 2009). I am grateful that this issue came out, but I wish that it had discussed the meaning of peace. Instead the introduction, and most of the articles, seem to imply that peace is simply negative peace (i.e., the absence of war). One of the dangers of this definition is that it easily slips into peace as simply the absence of death, or simply certain deaths, and as such 'peace' becomes something that can be kept by occupying troops. Loyd

<sup>14</sup> One military officer (Captain Gordillo) pled guilty and implicated his superiors. Another 10 military officers were acquitted. Five paramilitaries have been found guilty through the supposed demobilization process. No charges have been filed against higher officers responsible for ordering the operation (Generals Fandiño and Montoya), nor against Colonel Duque, who coordinated it. The case has become emblematic of the army going beyond tolerance of paramilitary activity to actually coordinating atrocities with them.

<sup>15</sup> For documentation of US military aid to Latin America see Just the Facts at [www.justf.org](http://www.justf.org).

(2009) is the only author in the issue who complicates the definition of peace and turns to visions of positive peace, or peace with justice (though Coleman (2009) interrogates meanings of security).

In my own work on geographies of peace (Koopman, forthcoming) I have been exploring both what geographical thinking on the relational making of space can offer to the work of accompaniment, and what companions' work on the daily making of spaces of peace and alternative securities might offer to such theorizing, and to our understanding of peace and its spatialization. Here rather than look in depth at what peace space might mean in a particular context, I am arguing for geographers listening to more groups working for different visions of this on the ground, and for understanding their work as a form of geopolitics.

My most animated discussions with companions have been about the paradox inherent in their work. They are using the fact that their lives 'count' more (because of passport/economic/racial privilege, which are hard to untangle), to build a world where everyone's lives 'count' – where it matters when a chocolate farmer is killed in the Colombian jungle. When you use privilege in this way do you make it stronger? By looking closely with companions at how they 'make space for peace' – how space is something that they practice, produce and perform every day – we got a sense of the many ways privilege is at work (Koopman, forthcoming). Clearly alter-geopolitical projects are far from unproblematic. Yet it is precisely the process of struggling with such contradictions, and the thinking through of what works on the ground and how and why, that are worth both learning from and contributing to.

## 8. What is alter-geopolitics?

The term 'alternative geopolitics' has been used before to mean various things. Lacoste used it to mean a concern with the dominated rather than the dominant (Parker, 2000). Scott (2005) uses it to mean states finding security through cooperation rather than competition (e.g., the EU). Ó Tuathail (2010) argues that inherent in critical geopolitics is an alternative geopolitics, by which he means one that is more grounded and localized. Slater has argued for an alternative geopolitics of memory and for a postcolonial geopolitics (2004, 2007). The term pacific geopolitics is used by Megoran (2010) to refer to a focus on possibilities for peace. The term emotional geopolitics has been put forward by Pain (2009c, 2010) to point to how our understanding of geopolitics is reworked when we look at how emotions are deployed and felt in geopolitical events, especially if that thinking is done *with* those on the sharp end of fear. Sharp (2011) uses subaltern critical geopolitics to refer to geopolitical critique from outside the global North. In Latin America there has been a growing discussion about changing the geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2001; Walsh et al., 2002; Ulloa, 2010). These are all useful ways to *think* about geopolitics differently. I am using the term 'alter-geopolitics' here to point to something else, related but more specific. Alter-geopolitics is geopolitics being *done* differently. Of course this doing also involves thinking through and with action.

The term 'progressive geopolitics' has recently been used by Kearns (2008, 2009) to argue for geopolitics as more than what is done through states, force, and capitalist markets. Kearns broadens the perspective of what geopolitics is to include non-state entities, cooperation, and non-commodified forms of labor. As he puts it, if we only study states engaged in force, we will never imagine, or understand, how peace is made in other ways (2008, p. 1610). Kearns argues for looking at how geopolitics is also being done non-violently by non-state actors, and for paying attention to these neglected practices and their possibilities of progressive change – not instead of, but alongside the important work of critique. I am inspired by this call and take it up here. Alter-geopolitics falls

under this rubric, though as a very specific sort of progressive geopolitics.

Alter-geopolitics is feminist geopolitics as done through action. It is people coming together to build alternative nonviolent securities. It is groups making connections which focus on the safety of bodies (often by actually moving bodies) and ground geopolitics in everyday life.

What characterizes alter-geopolitics? First, let me clarify the obvious. Neither companions nor peace communities nor any other groups doing this work use the term alter-geopolitics. Most do not use the term feminist or even geopolitics. Just as feminist geopolitics is not necessarily about gender, gender may not be central to a group's focus, as in these two cases. Yet I consider them feminist in that they, to use a definition offered by Hyndman (2003, p. 3), "address the inequitable and violent relationships of power among people and places based on real or perceived differences". Solidarity groups do not talk about their work as "doing geopolitics", yet I argue it is. It still has to do with location, resources, even terrain – but by building connections across all sort of distances and differences solidarity activists rework who has access to what, and where, and how we stay safe and well together.

Second, these groups 'people' geopolitics very literally. They embody it with actual bodies. They highlight the everyday security of bodies by putting bodies together, putting bodies in unusual places, putting bodies on the line. In the case of accompaniment and peace communities it is bodies standing together, walking together, living together, non-violently, for safety. They do so in ways that challenge both material domination and dominant representations (anti-geopolitics), but that are also about living the change they want, about collectively creating their own alternative securities here and now.

Third, groups doing alter-geopolitics weave together various scales. Feminist geopolitics understands scales to be intertwined, alter-geopolitics ties more threads through them. Rather than see the peace community as 'jumping' scale, I like Pain and Smith's (2008) image of the everyday and the global as an assemblage with many connectors. Geopolitics does not just trickle down from elites through media images and policy. Companions do their own geopolitics, but not just 'from below', understood in terms of scale. They reweave the connections between the everyday and the global, inserting the safety of chocolate farmers in the mountains of Colombia into Congressional discussions of US military aid to Colombia. Indeed Luis Eduardo's assassination inspired organizing across the US that led to much of that aid being frozen for many months.

Creating a binary between what is geopolitical/global/discursive and what is everyday/local/lived is misleading (Pain, 2009a, p. 220). These groups shift these relations, and weave connections that shape spaces of safety in solidarity. Though they do not assume the state is the container for security, this does not mean that they ignore the state (Sharp, 2004, p. 98). Quite the opposite, in Colombia and in many places around the world the (in)security they face is largely shaped by the state. Yet they thread connections in between and through and beyond the state to weave their own security.

Fourth, alter-geopolitics is not done 'from below', understood in terms of power, but rather from all sides. Indeed, some are explicitly using what privilege they have access to. International companions do this by using the 'global' weight of their passport to get partners through daily checkpoints. They are also weaving the everyday work to build alternative securities into and through dominant geopolitics. When Colombian President Uribe met with members of the US Congress in July 2007, they raised their concern over the break-in to the office of FOR companions in Bogotá (members of Congress had received hundreds of calls and letters about the break-in).

Fifth, alter-geopolitics is collective not individualized. It is done by groups, but these may not count as or consider themselves to be social movements. There is disagreement amongst companions as to whether what they do is “activism” or a “movement”. The growing number of peace communities in Colombia do not all agree nor work together. It does not seem useful to have any litmus test as to what sort of group can be understood as doing alter-geopolitics. They might be large or small, organized or messy, stable or ephemeral. It could be a spontaneous gathering of neighbors to non-violently stop a military incursion (see León, 2004). It could even be DIY (do it yourself) actions, like taking pictures when you stumble onto police abuse. Though there is an organized copwatch movement, one does not have to have been active in it to do this. It seems though that DIY actions make an impact when many people do them and spread the word, so even though they are not done *in* groups per se, I consider this to be action by a group of people.

Alter-geopolitics is not, however, DIY paranoid parental hyper-vigilance. As Katz argues, the nannycam hidden inside the stuffed monkey is also deeply inside the security state (2009). These sorts of responses that individualize and privatize security are not tied to groups promoting alternatives. They are not building connections across difference, but rather distancing. They provide a false sense of physical security that diverts attention from broader social insecurities, like healthcare, education and employment.

Sixth, alter-geopolitics is nonviolent. Megoran (2008) argues for critical geopolitical thinking to contribute to non-violence as a vision and method. Hyndman (2003) argues that feminist geopolitics in particular ‘eschews violence’. I want to argue here that as it moves into ‘the streets’ it becomes more actively nonviolent. Not all grassroots groups working for alternative securities are doing alter-geopolitics, for many of them are using violence. Militias, paramilitaries, privatized security and gated communities are proliferating, North and South. But alter-geopolitics instead works to build and live alternatives to the (in)security of violence. It tries to live the change it seeks in the world. Alter-geopolitics does not work to keep ‘us’ safe by keeping ‘them’ out, but rather works to keep a larger us safe by building connections with former them. Peace community members farm together with their neighbors for safety. US citizens live in the jungle in Colombia to stop death squads. This no to violence does not necessarily mean a no to the state, but it can be an engagement with state (in)security, an attempt to shift it. In the case of accompaniment this is done through monitoring, and regular meetings with the military and both Colombian and US officials.

Seventh, alter-geopolitics works to build security in a broader, multiple, sense. It is people coming together across difference not just to stay alive and be safe, but to live well, to live with dignity and justice. Positive peace is more than simply the absence of violence. Well-being also requires security of food and housing and health, for a start. Far too often though the first priority has to be physical safety. You cannot organize your community for access to food if you get killed for speaking out about paramilitaries taking the land. The peace community of San José has been able to resist further displacement and stay near their original lands by coming together to work the land, and by asking for international accompaniment. Unlike the nannycam in the monkey (Katz, 2009), alter-geopolitics does not focus on bodily security so as to ignore other securities, but rather to make struggles for broader securities possible for broader groups of people.

Alter-geopolitics, then, to use the Zapatista slogan, says one no, to violence, and many yeses, to various visions of security. The no is to making us safe by making them unsafe. The no is to the (in)security state, to geopolitics as usual. The many yeses to alternative securities are necessarily different across contexts. Different visions of what security is and can be are being worked out in the doing, as groups work to create that security.

I have been struck by how often groups building alternative securities turn to putting bodies together for safety, be it at night (Ugandan night commuters), or in the desert (women walking to find abandoned rape survivors in the DRC), or in dark alleys (Take Back the Night marches around the world). The primary focus of these groups is on physical security. But those who have enough physical safety to work for other forms of security might do this not by putting bodies together, but perhaps by putting together food, or land, or engaging in other forms of commons-ism. In the case of the peace community it has also meant saving seeds, alternative schools, a feeding program for children and the elderly, infection control, and certifying as fair trade so that they can earn more for their cacao. Companions in the peace community work to stop military abuses as a way to highlight the need to stop US military aid, which they regularly point out is money that could be used for social needs in the US. For now I have focused on how groups build alternative forms of physical security, but often this is done so as to be able to work for broader securities, and these economic, food, environmental, health, and other securities are intertwined.

Finally, alter-geopolitics works to change the rules of the game. Geopolitics is not simply some Great Game to be played by Great Men. Companions and peace community members are doing it for themselves. Alter-geopolitics means not only pieces moving themselves on the map, not only changing the way they draw and see the map itself, what colors, what *bodies*, they see where – but also changing who gets to move what, where, when, how and why. This does not mean groups doing alter-geopolitics are advocating any one new set of rules, for these will necessarily be different across contexts.

## 9. Solidarity scholarship

If alter-geopolitics happens ‘off the page’, what is the role of academics? I do not want to ‘study’ these groups, nor do social movement theory about them. I am interested in understanding what these groups do as a form of geopolitics and in thinking about security *with* these groups, through collaborative theorizing. Traditionally academics thought about geopolitics to serve the prince, not the people, but I want to support the thinking and organizing happening ‘in the streets’. I do this academic work both *on* and *in* solidarity. As Haraway argues (1988), our knowledge is situated and partial (in both senses of the word), which is why it is important to think through ‘non-innocent conversations’ with various others, so that we can strengthen both our solidarities and understandings.

The over-ground railroad to sanctuary, a peace community in the mountains of Colombia, international companions living with them – these practices of alter-geopolitics tend to be done by small groups of people, but they are not “little things” (Thrift, 2000; Müller, 2008), and they can have a bigger impact if as academics we honor, listen to, learn from, contribute to, connect and share the work they are doing. Much as Gibson-Graham’s (2008) focus on alternative economic practices has been a way to re-imagine what economic geography can be, honoring alternative peace and security practices reworks what political geography can be and do. I am arguing for making visible and nurturing “those alternatives already in our midst” as a way to think differently (Blomley, 2007, p. 60).

I am arguing for academics asking what positive peace is in different contexts, how it can be made, and thinking about this with peacemakers. Certainly it is also worthwhile to look at groups with violent visions of security, such as Gallaher’s work on militias (2003). Critique, both of such groups and of more hegemonic geopolitics, can inspire and open space for resistance. But to be critical,

as put forward by the Frankfurt school, implies a two-way motion: both taking apart what one is against, and building what one is for (Benhabib, 1986). This does not mean that academics should not critique peacemaking. Indeed, many members of these groups are quite critical of their own work. Rather, I am interested in engaging in that critique *with* them, as a critical collaborator, in ways that learn from and also strengthen that organizing.

Again, I am not suggesting social movement studies of groups building alternative securities. I am not interested in describing and critiquing *how* these struggles come together, but rather engaging with them around their own *why's* and *what for's*. Rather than what tends to be a dry and distant analysis of what movements are doing,<sup>16</sup> I am arguing for getting messy and doing theory together. It is the thinking while doing, the theory in action, of these groups that there is much to learn from and with.

I recognize that even ethnography is unusual in political geography (Megoran, 2006), and that participatory and collaborative work is more of a stretch. Yet my sense is that many political geographers are already collaborating in some way with various organizations, though that is rarely discussed. This is particularly true of feminist work, which is part of a broader feminist project that cuts across 'borders' such as what is academic and what is political. It is my hope that we can keep opening more space for collaboration by supporting each other as academics in honoring collaborative practices and thinking.

This is not a new argument. Routledge (1996) has called for academics doing critical geopolitics to engage in solidarity, to work as critical collaborators with social movements. Rather than the indignity of speaking for others, he argues for Haraway's (1992) politics of articulation, for networking ideas as subjects working together to understand. Geographers have increasingly been doing participatory research – though not much in critical geopolitics. Pain (2009b) and Askins (2008) are notable exceptions.<sup>17</sup> Pain calls for a co-production of knowledge, and argues that “engaged and explicitly relational scholarship has much to contribute to critical geopolitics” (2009c). Sparke (2005) argues that as academics we have a responsibility to examine other graphings of the geo. I have found it not so much a responsibility as a joy to engage with the graphings being done with and through action.

## 10. Conclusion

Is this geopolitics? If geo means only international, only states, then no. If geo means global, and we see how the global is always intertwined with the intimate, then yes. Is this critical geopolitics? If that means only taking apart big P grand war strategies (Dalby, 2010), then no. If critical also means new ways of putting peace(s) back together, then yes.

If geopolitics is chess, what sort of game is alter-geopolitics? If hegemonic geopolitics is Big Men moving pieces on the board, critical geopolitics has tended to focus on the thinking behind their moves. Anti-geopolitics is a pawn, or many pawns, protesting being moved around. Feminist geopolitics sees both the players and the pieces on the board, the relationship between them, and the ways the pieces might move themselves. Alter-geopolitics is not only pawns but all sorts of pieces, from both sides, working together to move themselves into shapes that make them all safer.

But if the pieces move themselves, are they anyone's pawns? Is it the same game if the players change the rules about who can move with who, where? If they play together, rather than against

each other? If they see that the board is not flat, and weave across its many levels? Can they just throw out the game board, with its hand from above? The problem with that is that there is no Zion off the Matrix to go to. Even as some pieces work to change the rules and play their own game, others try to move them, to play the game on them. It's not just pawns that are changing the rules and the configuration of the board. The laws of war have been changing fast. Whose life counts. Who gets a day in court. What bodies can go where.

Grassroots groups often look to the rules, to international law. The peace community of San José has appealed countless times to the Inter-American court, which has repeatedly ruled that they require protective measures from the state. Yet they continue to be attacked by the military and paramilitaries, and so seek some measure of safety with international companions. They stand with those whom the rules might work more for, but their very standing together is bending the rules in their own way. The grassroots may wish that the rules of the chessboard were fixed, but it is more strategic to recognize and expose that they are changing, and to be part of making those changes.

The global justice movement (or network of movements) has widely insisted in recent years that it not be considered *anti*-globalization, but rather as working for a different sort, an *alter*-globalization. The slogan of the World Social Forum is “another world is possible.” In recent years “and we are building it” is often added. It is in that spirit of honoring and learning from and with organizing that is already doing geopolitics differently to build another world that I propose the term alter-geopolitics.

## Acknowledgments

Endless thanks to Derek Gregory, who is so generous with his support. Many thanks to Rachel Pain, Jennifer Hyndman, and Deborah Dixon for careful reads of drafts. Thanks too to Fiona McConnell, Nancy Hiemstra, Katie Willis and the reviewers for catching holes. Of course those that are left are my own. Thanks to too many geographers to name who have talked about this with me over the past few years. I am so grateful to be part of a vibrant discipline with so many committed to social justice. *La lucha sigue y sigue. Mil gracias a* John Lindsay-Poland and all of the companions who have thought about this with me. This research was supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the American Association of University Women.

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<sup>16</sup> For a critique of social movement studies along these lines see Croteau et al. (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Of course there has also been feminist collaborative work done that has not been framed as feminist geopolitics, but could certainly be considered such (see the discussion of collaboration in Mountz (2002) and Mountz et al. (2003)).

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