



# Imperialism Within: Can the Master's Tools Bring Down Empire?

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## Abstract

Imperialism affects “here” as well as “there”. White middle class women have historically gotten out of the home and gained more of a Self by being good helpers, classically as teachers and missionaries. In this role they consolidated empire’s power, often unintentionally. Today the good helper role is being widely used, not only by white women, to work *against* empire. Yet this master’s tool is toxic. It may appear to take tiles off the master’s house, but it reinforces the systems of domination that prop up empire. Those of us who struggle against empire must also struggle against the imperialism within ourselves. This analysis of ways to decolonize solidarity work is grounded in the movement to close the School of the Americas [a U.S. army training camp] and a collaborative theorizing process with white middle class women prisoners of conscience. This work engages in alter-geopolitics, working to build another world.



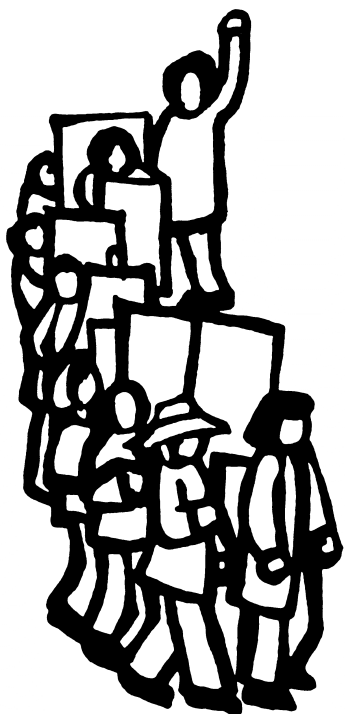
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The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

- Audre Lorde (1983)

On June 21, 2007 the U.S. Congress chose, by a 6 vote margin, to keep open the School of the Americas (SOA), a U.S. army institution with many links to human rights atrocities in Latin America. It did so in the face of strong grassroots opposition by one of the largest movements working to end U.S. empire. The 10<sup>th</sup> annual vigil at the gates of school, in Fort Benning, Georgia, drew 22,000 on November 19, 2006 - making it the largest protest before a U.S. military base since the Vietnam war. The vigil is the largest ongoing event against U.S. imperialism happening within the U.S.. It also involves the largest ongoing act of civil disobedience in the U.S.. At the 2007 vigil 11 people crossed onto the base, joining what are, as of January 2008, now 237 other "prisoners of conscience" who have collectively served nearly 100 years in federal prison for acts of civil disobedience against the school in the 24 years of the movement to shut it down. Over 50 more have served probation. The movement to close the school began in 1983 with a series of acts of civil disobedience that coalesced into the annual vigil and an organization called School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) that brings together a wide array of organizations working to close the school.



This essay is grounded in this movement to make a broader argument about how solidarity activism more generally can fall into colonial patterns, even as it works against empire. Today's empire is messy. It is easy to point to U.S. military violence, and harder to foreground how it is tied to global economic hierarchies and institutions that benefit the few at the expense of the many, harder still to see how it is intertwined with racism and heteropatriarchy, and how it shapes life not only "there" but "here" in the heart of empire, "here" in our resistance, and "here" shaping even our sense of self. Empire is global, but it depends on the intimate. Many of us carry imperialism within. The good helper role is one that white middle-class women have classically played, and which solidarity activists more widely now may fall into. This piece looks at ways to shift that role so as to decolonize solidarity work. It begins in a place, grounded, with a process and a frame - and then turns to the good helper role.

## **The School**

Is the U.S. government teaching torture? The U.S. army claims that, although manuals previously used at the SOA advocated executions, arresting the relatives of those being questioned, and physical abuse (Haugaard, 1997), such things are no longer taught (though of course if students pay attention to Iraq they may get the message). Yet even if truly only surveillance techniques, say, are being taught today – they are being taught to militaries that are likely to put those skills to horrific use. Today most of the students are from the Colombian army, which is notorious for killing journalists and union activists. This sort of repression shuts down dissent and opens the way for fundamentally violent neoliberal projects.

The torture techniques described in the manuals were developed as part of “Project X” in the 50s by the CIA, which spent billions of dollars to develop a new psychological torture paradigm whose basic techniques of stress positions, sensory deprivation and sexual humiliation are meant to make victims feel responsible for their own suffering (McCoy, 2006). The manuals suggest that insurgents do not carry legal status as prisoners of war, and recommend false imprisonment to create a climate of fear. These are precisely the techniques that have recently come to light in Abu Grahیب and Guantánamo. Personnel from Fort Huachuca, where Project X was based, went to Abu Grahیب to offer training in interrogation. The only thing new about this torture is that the photos got out (Hodge and Cooper, 2004, Klein, 2005).

There has been no accountability for the atrocities linked to the SOA. There has been no acknowledgment by the Army of wrongdoing, no truth commission, no reparations. In fact, abusers are still featured as SOA instructors. There has, though, been some attempt at cover up. In 2001 the school was renamed the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security and Cooperation. The army portrays this as a new institution, but it is in the same building, with principally the same teachers. The movement to shut it down continues to call it the SOA, as I will here.

## **The Ground**

This vigil is the largest annual gathering of what in the U.S. is often simply called the “solidarity movement” – that is, the movement that works for peace and justice with progressive movements in Latin America and focuses on ending U.S. military involvement in the region – which I have been active in for twenty years. I have worked with the SOAW for eight years through the translation and interpretation working group. In doing this activism I was struck that so many of us are white middle-class women like me. What does this say about the way that we

(and other movements) do solidarity and struggle against empire? This started my thinking about colonial patterns in our work.

I assume that my great-great-grandmother Sarah, a white woman who “went West” to be a missionary to Native people, believed she was doing good. Yet white middle-class women have often given empire a human face precisely by “doing good” as helpers of various sorts, and have actually consolidated the empire’s power, be it as teachers, missionaries, nurses, or social workers (Heron 1999). As Cynthia Enloe puts it, “white male colonizers’ success depended on some women’s complicity” (1990:16). Indeed, taking one’s feminine “civilizing” influence out to the “uncivilized” parts of empire was a patriotic duty (Bell, cited in Domosh and Seager 2001: 146). Some suffragists in both the U.S. and Europe argued that this service to the empire was proof of their reliability as voters (Enloe 1990:47). Yet many of these women were only unwittingly entrenching empire.

This good helper role is yet another colonial pattern that is still very present (Gregory, 2004). Today, in the movement to close the School of the Americas, many of us use that same role, even as we try to bring down empire rather than prop it up. Does it work? Is the good helper role a master’s tool that *can* actually dismantle the master’s house?

To understand this I studied not up, or down, but in. I turned to women at the center of my own social movement, those who had committed civil disobedience as a protest against the school. I turned to them not as objects of study, but as knowing subjects. I was interested not in what they had done, but in discussing collectively the ways that they thought about it. My analysis is based on our collaborative theorizing.

I specifically turned to white middle-class women to think this through, partly because this social location is my own, but also as a strategic standpoint (Harding 2004). This point of entry, or window, offered fruitful clarity on the workings of solidarity and the struggle against empire because white middle-class women most classically fit the ideal type of the good helper, though this is a role that others also fall into or are read through at times. Of course there are other useful windows on solidarity, but this paper will stay with this standpoint.

This analysis, then, is grounded in embodied experience, my own and that of others in the movement to close the SOA who participated in this research discussion. I did this research as a way of engaging in the very work of this and the broader peace and justice movement, for many of these dynamics rear their head in other movements, and across social locations. We widely recognize that ‘domination turns up in resistance’ (Sharp *et al* 1999: 20). This analysis is based in, and contributes to, ongoing discussions about how to better, as Gandhi put it, “be the change you want to see in the world” (attributed).

Rather than the politics of the everyday, this paper turns to the everyday of politics, that is, to geopolitics from below, a challenge to hegemonic geopolitical practices, what Routledge (2003) calls ‘antigeopolitics’. As Routledge uses the term it is not necessarily a grassroots or a progressive challenge, but rather any material or discursive challenge to geopolitical hegemony made “from below”, that is, by those who are dominated by it (Routledge 2003). In the *Geopolitics Reader* (Ó Tuathail, Dalby, and Routledge 2006) Routledge includes a piece ostensibly by Osama bin Laden in the antigeopolitics section. How dominated is bin Laden? How dominated are U.S. citizens by the actions of U.S. empire? Though we benefit from it, those of us not in the elite are certainly also negatively affected, but perhaps not dominated. From how far ‘below’ do we move? For this movement the term may be both too broad (including all sorts of challenges, not just grassroots) and too specific (depending on how one defines dominated).

The term *anti*-geopolitics focuses only on resistance, not on building something new. Feminist geopolitics does work on putting the pieces together in new ways, on building a broader definition of security for more bodies in more places. Jennifer Hyndman defines feminist geopolitics as both a critical approach and a political practice (Hyndman, 2001), yet academic feminist geopolitics has not looked at that practice as engaged in by social movements. This piece focuses on feminist geopolitics as it is being done ‘on the ground’, for we all have much to learn from the critiques and practices that are worked out in struggle (Routledge, 1996).

As a huge puppet banner announced at the vigil in 2005, as we organize to close the School of the Americas “another world is under construction”. We are working to end one way of being, as we work to build another. The global justice movement has widely insisted in recent years that it not be considered *anti*-globalization, but rather as working for a different sort, an *alter*-globalization. Likewise, the movement to close the SOA, and this essay, goes beyond working for the broader sense of security of feminist geopolitics to argue for building new ways of relating to each other, that include a U.S. foreign policy based on justice. This is an *alter*-geopolitics.

This work lies at new intersections, where critical geopolitics turns to issues of affect (Ó Tuathail, 2003) as feminist theory rethinks the interconnections between the intimate and the global (Pratt and Rosner, 2006), and as geographies of resistance turn to forms of research that participate in and are themselves part of resistance movements (Routledge, 2001). This is not the study of big men ruling nation-states that I, and so many other women, thought was all there was to political geography (Staeheli, 2001). This is political geography with a small “p” (Flint, 2003).

## The Process

I speak *as* myself, but *from* the *we* of this movement. I do not speak *for* the movement, nor for other white middle-class women solidarity activists, but I will use the “we” to signal where I speak *from*, as one of the many. This is activist research. I speak, not only *from* and *about*, but also *with* and *to* movements for justice and solidarity<sup>2</sup>.

I began this thinking in conversations with other activists, in anti-oppression workshops and listserves and informal exchanges. Once I donned the hat of researcher, I turned to texts. I read the extensive statements by prisoners of conscience posted on the SOAW website, with an eye to how we might be replicating systems of domination. I wrote an initial analysis, and then talked to people again. I posted a request on movement listserves for white middle-class women prisoners of conscience to join me in an online discussion group. Ten women participated in a two-week online exchange, which I began by sending my initial analysis, along with questions. Each woman responded at length, and then many responded to each other, and to my follow-up questions. Another two responded at length to my discussion paper but did not participate in the group. I will quote participants throughout by their first names, to distinguish them from other sources that I am citing (their full names and profiles follow<sup>3</sup>).

I did not do research *on* the women in this group, but rather thought through these ideas *with* them. This was collaborative theorizing, a process in which participants collaborate with a researcher to develop theory that both informs practice and is informed by practice (Kumashiro 2002: 16). We did not arrive at any sort of consensus, yet that process shaped this analysis, and this analysis continues to be part of an ongoing movement process. Before presenting in any academic forums I presented and discussed this work (Koopman, 2005) at a well-attended workshop at the vigil in 2005. An abstract of the work was posted on the SOAW site and other blogs and lists, and I have since received well over a hundred requests for copies, and it has continued to generate discussion and be part of a broader process of change in the movement. My intent has been to decolonize the research process by which I work to decolonize solidarity. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that such research should go beyond deconstructing and look for new combinations that might be made out of the pieces. It is in this spirit that I suggest more liberatory ways of doing solidarity.

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<sup>2</sup> As such, it was crucial to publish in an open-access journal.

<sup>3</sup> All women saw a final draft of this paper. One chose to have her comments removed and remain anonymous.

## The Frame

Let me briefly review some of my assumptions and approaches. I do not consider categories such as white, woman, or solidarity activist to be firm; instead I am interested in how they are constantly in-the-making (Haraway, 1997), and how we can shift and expand that repertoire. This constant becoming of who we are does not happen in a vacuum, but always *in relation* to others. Even as we work against empire, we do so from within the grid, the spaces of power-knowledge that shape what we see and who we can be (Foucault, 1994). None of us are ever truly off the grid, but seeing what we can of it may make it less seductive, and be a tool for shifting it, and enacting our individual and collective becomings with more discernment.

The commonly held “Western” sense of our self is not of ever ‘becoming’, but of ‘being’, essential and fixed. David Goldberg (1993) argues that Enlightenment ideas about the self are at the heart of Western thinking, and arise with and both produce and are enabled by racism. The self here is not social, but an individual Subject standing alone, appearing to be atomized, universal across place, time, culture and history. The irony of modernity, Goldberg argues, is that the more universal this idea of the individual appears to be, the more, in fact, it is determined by racialized thinking (3-5). This Subject *is* actually defined relationally – by what it is *not*. The purportedly universal Subject was in fact a role limited to white wealthy men, as exemplified by who was given the vote in the U.S. constitution.

Who else comes closest to that? White women who are enough well-off to have some higher education and a profession. Barbara Heron (1999) argues that in the liberal schema women are never quite fully a Subject, but that women can become more so through being “good” and helping others. Ironically, women become the acceptable feminine version of the liberal Self through self-sacrifice. Women gain more agency through relations with those who fit into the ideal Subject role even less than women do (children, “indians”, the poor, etc.). Yet though this brings women closer to full subjectivity, women can never quite achieve it. She argues that women seeing themselves as moral and innocent of participating in domination is key to this process (Heron, 1999: 231-41).

I see this dynamic happening in North-South solidarity activism. We risk re-entrenching the racialized systems of domination that give us privilege when we operate from, and reinforce, the liberal notion of Self. Diane Nelson (1999: 70) calls on us to look at the, “complicity of solidarity in the on-going production of relations of oppression”, and proposes that one way to do so is to ask, “what sort of subject is constituted and what are the enjoyments of solidarity?” I take up her call here as I explore how, in this movement, we use the master’s tool of our historical social construction as good helpers. I will turn first to ‘being’ good, then being helpers, then being a voice *for* as a form of helping, then being innocent. I will

suggest that instead we aim to 'become' ever more true *compañeras*, that are a voice *with* and are accountable. Ultimately I will argue for decolonizing solidarity work by basing it in and enacting this different role and sense of self.

## The Tools

### *Being Good, Becoming True*

Women have long been seen as more moral, and historically led campaigns for "moral reform", such as the temperance movement, in which respectable women used their moral influence to help in the "reclamation of the fallen" (Ware, 1992: 66-67). Is the civil disobedience of prisoners of conscience a twist on this call to be good? It is indeed a moral call, but then again, "good girls" are not supposed to go to federal prison. Yet, as Shannon wrote,

"For people who see something of the evils of Empire, etc., being good has a different definition than it might for other people. It has its own set of rules. And they can be enforced quite strongly. "Being good" might be the way you do civil disobedience, whether or not you go to Ft. Benning<sup>4</sup>, etc. These are measures of how "good" you are. If you don't do them, then you must not really care or be that good."

Curiously, the self-sacrifice of liberty in this case does lead to a larger public self. Two women in the discussion group spoke of their frustration with the persona they gained as prisoners of conscience (POC's). Abi said, "the structuring of a POC identity has been very destructive to our movement." She told of how she became a "small-town celebrity" and that

"I was often approached by people I'd not met: "... You're one of the Harrisonburg Four<sup>5</sup>, aren't you?" and so on. Over time one begins to subconsciously both revel in and resent this kind of attention, and it created in me a duality of purpose, and the constant question: Who was it for? Certainly this was one of the least selfless things I'd ever done, because it made me look so good to the public."

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<sup>4</sup> The SOA is inside Fort Benning. Shannon is referring here to going to the annual vigil held at the front gates of the fort.

<sup>5</sup> Four activists from Harrisonburg who committed civil disobedience together.



Abi went on to respond to a story that I told of Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor of the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador. Rufina came several times to give her testimony at the vigil, and when she moved through the crowd at the vigil people reached out to touch her, as if she were a saint, and this made Rufina uncomfortable. Abi wrote,

“This makes me think of what I experienced for the year or so after my arrest. It left me with a very bad taste in my mouth, and a certainty that in the SOA movement we pedestalize both POCs and ‘victims’ (for lack of a better word). We have a tendency of creating out of these two groups of people saints, which diminishes the strength of a true solidarity movement. How can we (POCs) be in solidarity when others have convinced us, even subconsciously, of our own sainthood? How can we (as US activists) be in solidarity when we see those in Latin America as removed and special because of what they’ve been through?”

In another email Abi went on to say,

“we become the celebrities of the movement. The attention is diverted both from the problem (our government’s involvement in and policy towards Latin America) and the people affected, and transferred on to POCs. ... I despise in myself the part I discovered after my action, the part that so enjoyed the attention and respect I got”.

Anne, on the other hand, wrote:

“I found this experience one of the most empowering ones in my life so far. To stand up against the most powerful force in the world without being beaten down is about as powerful as one can get. I must say, I have enjoyed the notoriety. I still meet strangers who recognize me from that now famous picture from the 1997 procession in my “grandmothers for peace” t-shirt.”

Lee and Betsy agreed that they felt a “distinct advantage” in being “part of a group I admired.”

This is one of the “enjoyments of solidarity” (Nelson 1999: 70): it feels good to be admired and recognized by our community as doing good. Is this bad? I am not arguing that any of us doing solidarity are not good people doing a good thing. It is the way that we gain liberal subjectivity through being seen as good that I question. As Abi says above, it puts us on a pedestal. Though Abi refers in the quote above to those most directly affected by the school, like Rufina, as also being on a pedestal, it seems to me that we are lifted up in, and through, our relation to

those who are then disempowered. They may be idealized, but they are not on a pedestal. Historically the pattern has been that we are good in relation to those who are not, and are policed by the danger of 'falling' and no longer being good. Being seen as good for doing this work reinforces that sense of Self that distances us from those we are trying to work in solidarity with.

What then shall we do with this master's tool? I suggest we modify it, and aim to become, and be seen as, true, as living with integrity. The classic tool pushes us to be a bigger "me", to be liberal Subjects, in a move that distances us from what we are not. We can instead be led by a call to ever-become *more* of our "me", more true to our values, our faith, whatever these may be. Rather than distance or aggrandize us this may allow for deeper ties with others.

I do not mean to imply that POC's are not now true to their beliefs. Indeed many, if not most, in this movement are religious and inspired to act out of faith. I am arguing that we can be more explicit about how our activism is grounded in our faith and values. We can choose to frame and emphasize this desire to live according to our values and act upon our convictions, whether these are religious or not, as our "becoming" true, rather than "being" good. Learning to live with integrity is a constant process. Betsy helped me to see this when she reframed my question of goodness as one of faith. She wrote,

"I am not an activist because I want to "be good". My activism is based on my faith. ... I believe I can be more fully realized by being more like Jesus. For me, civil disobedience is sometimes part of being more like Jesus....My sense of self-worth is wrapped up in how well I am following what I perceive as God's call for me. ...I affirm what I see as my God-given goodness ("original blessing" to use Matthew Fox's phrase—see his book by that title), and do not feel a need to accomplish anything in particular, rather simply to be living faithfully, very much "a work in process".

### ***Being a Helper, Becoming a Compañera***

Historically, being helpers was the acceptable way for women to get out of the home and gain more of a liberal Self, as teachers, nurses, etc.. Yet helping traditionally implies a vertical relationship. It is hard not to let superiority in when you play helper. Jonna wrote, "It seems to me that there's a lot of back-patting going on when I'm there - and by that I mean that we are all so self-congratulating on the good work we've been doing on behalf of the poor, voiceless South." She also wrote of feeling uncomfortable with the sense in the movement of "We should help people. It is our obligation as the good people of the world", because it had the feel of superiority.

Most of the women in the discussion group did not see themselves as helpers, and several said so adamantly. I believe that in the movement we avoid this terminology because we have a sense that it is more like charity than solidarity, yet these roles are so pervasive that it takes careful intention to avoid them. Many prisoners of conscience say that they crossed onto the base (in civil disobedience) *for* those most affected, which to me implies helping. As Betsy put it, “I crossed for the families of the hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans who had been disappeared, tortured, massacred at the hands of SOA graduates.” Betsy argued that she was doing this for them in the sense of the Spanish *por*, in their place, because they could not, and that this brought her closer to them. Yet if I do this work *for* others, rather than bringing me closer, it seems to set me apart from them, even above them, as someone with the power to reach down and help. As Shannon put it, I enact my solidarity upon them. I turn them into the *object* of my solidarity, into the object that creates my subject<sup>6</sup>.

There is also a danger of thinking that this activism is more than just helping, but actually “saving”. Though the movement avoids this terminology, the term “SOA victims” is used, which objectifies undifferentiated victims and implies that they need saviors (Traub-Werner and Cravey, 2002: 398). We are then positioned as helpers or saviors in relation to those who are positioned as needy and weak. We are strong, a liberal Self, defined by what we are not. This move distances us from those who we want to be in struggle with, and hardly offers an inviting role for them.

The victim and savior lens dies hard. At one point I asked the group, “Without victims could we have our persona, identity, as solidarity activists closing the SOA?” Lee responded, “Without victims, there would be no need for us to protest.” Betsy also made this point, and spoke to how these personal connections make the work so much more compelling than more abstract anti-nuclear organizing. She went on to write, “Given the urgency of the present situation, if we could actually be saviors, hopefully benevolent ones, I’d say we should go for it!... that the outcome would be worth the downside of our pride-filled self-identification. I hardly see my activism as a “rescue mission”, however.” The savior role is seductive, even for one like Betsy who consciously rejects it.

Again, I want to argue for a modification of this master’s tool. We *can* do this activism without interpellating people as victims. It is true that if the SOA

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<sup>6</sup> Chandra Mohanty writes of how Western feminists become the true “subjects” of feminist counterhistories when their stories are counterposed to Third World women, who never rise above “objects” (2003: 39). Other feminist classics have taken on this dynamic, such as the critique of imperial feminism by Amos and Parmar (1984). This is not unlike critiques of development discourse (see, for example, Noxolo 2006). Of course it was Edward Said (1978) who most famously argued that it is only insofar as the East is othered that the West is the center.

were not doing harm, we would not be trying to shut it down. Yes, the appeals from those most directly affected make it a compelling struggle. Yet I want to argue for relating to them not as victims to help or save or work *for*, but as “*compañeras*”, that we struggle *with*. It is worth importing this word into English, as is widely done in the solidarity movement, to retain its triple meaning of companion, colleague and comrade. *Compañera* is the feminine version, but it is common to use the shortcut ‘*compa*’, which does not specify gender. I like the term “the most affected”, widely used in the prison abolition movement, rather than “victims”. The language we use does make a difference in our ways of seeing and of relating. In using “the most affected” we can remember that we are *all* affected by the SOA, and the heteropatriarchal white supremacist neoliberal imperialism that it represents.

Instead of ‘being’ helpers in a way that makes us more of a person, and those helped less of one, I want to argue for ‘becoming’ ever more *compas*, as part of a broader movement, supporting each other, all together ‘helping’ to create a better world. Shutting the SOA would give activists in Latin America more space to engage in the same struggles for a better world that most of us in the movement are also active in here – against privatization, for decent housing, etc. (struggles for which activists are regularly killed in Colombia by SOA graduates). Shutting the SOA would also give us more space for those struggles in the U.S. If less of our taxes went to militarism, there would be more money for things like health and housing. This is the broader sense of true ‘security’ for all that feminist geopolitics speaks to. This is alter-geopolitics, working to make another world possible.

Solidarity activism may be understood by some as being done *for* the benefit and rights of distant others (Passy 2001, Sundberg 2007), yet we are not working *with* random others. In the U.S., international solidarity is focused on people particularly affected by U.S. imperialism. Ideally this is so that we can better struggle together, combining our different points of leverage, to end U.S. empire and build a better world for all of us. We do regularly talk about this in the solidarity movement at large and at the vigil to close the SOA, and many events are designed to highlight the connections between domestic and foreign policy, such as the Seattle CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) work-a-thon I organized as staff in the mid 90’s where we restored wetlands while raising money for Salvadoran organizers working to restore their environment, ravaged by the U.S. funded war, and thereby raising awareness of what that money could be doing instead at home. Yet it is also true that at times we lose sight of these connections in our work, and fall into seeing ourselves as, say, helping those Salvadoran environmentalists, rather than strategically using our locations and stories to support each other in our work for a better world.

We can modify this master’s tool. Rather than reach down as helpers, we can reach across as *compas*. We can define ourselves by the vision of a better world

that together we struggle for, rather *who* we struggle for. We can define ourselves by who we are in struggle *with*, rather than who we struggle *for*. Together we can struggle *for* our vision of a better world with true security, for us all. Rather than see those struggling against empire from under its heaviest weight as the objects of our solidarity, we can see them as *compas*. We engage in the same struggle from ‘inside the belly of the beast’ . We can be allies not *of*, but *with* those most directly affected by empire, allies together in the same struggle, from different positions.

### ***Being a Voice for, Becoming a Voice with***

One of the ways we often play the role of helper is by being a voice. Just as we do this activism *for* others, we often *speak* for others. In the movement you often hear Archbishop Oscar Romero’s call, “We who have a voice must be a voice for the voiceless” (attributed)<sup>7</sup>. Prisoner of conscience (POC) Mary Vaughan says in her statement online, “I want to speak for all of the voiceless”. This is problematic because it romanticizes and essentializes the voiceless (Roman, 1997: 277). In constructing and speaking for this ‘other’ we again define, and center, our ‘self’ as solidarity activists, we reassert our privilege and further marginalize those most affected. But, as Arundhati Roy (2004) put it, “We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard”.



For all that we claim to be a voice, we do not even seem to be telling the stories well. I was surprised that none of the extensive POC testimony on the SOA Watch site tells any significant portion of a survivor’s story. Even more strikingly, the strong voice of the testimonies given on stage at the vigil by those most affected is nearly absent in virtual space. I found only one presented in written form on the site<sup>8</sup>. As Abi suggested, the voices of those most affected are displaced as POC’s take center stage. Yet those most affected and their stories are constantly conflated and invoked with brief allusions by POC’s. When I raised this concern in the group, Betsy responded,

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<sup>7</sup> Though I have never seen it cited in the movement, a similar phrase was first said by Martin Luther King Jr., who said in a speech on Vietnam, “We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.” (MLK, 1967)

<sup>8</sup> Since I first presented this concern a small number of these have been added, and some are now available as youtube videos.

“I sometimes feel I do not know the stories well enough to repeat them. I can also see the possibility of wanting to tell a story less than fully to explain better what I am doing. “I am here before you today because Juan was assassinated and Julia was disappeared and the mother of a family of 12 was raped and dismembered...” Each story is recalled, even without being told in full. I do not see this as an injustice to the people. At least their memory is being put out there, even if the names are changed sometimes to protect the survivors. We are often speaking to people who need to hear why we are there and why we are doing what we are doing. As long as we do so respectfully, I believe we are helping “the cause”, which I believe includes their cause.”

Yet I am more convinced by hooks' warning that these repeated invocations appear to acknowledge, but too often instead appropriate those voices (1992: 31, 13). Referencing these stories might appear to bring us closer, but instead it seems too often to distance us, as we become object and subject. I am wary of appealing to, as Liz put it, “cheap sympathy.”

Instead of speaking should we be listening? Certainly we could do more listening, but there is also a danger of slipping into the belief that all we need is more subaltern voices, more testimony, better communication, and we will all understand each other and merge into one. This is what Roman calls an ‘undeserved absolutism’ that places the responsibility on the subaltern to speak (1997: 274). It relies on a fantasy that the experiences of others are fully knowable, and on an appropriative empathy.

Speaking *for* is a way that we enact the role of helper, so just as I argued for a modification of helping, working *for*, towards a vision of struggling *with*, I want to argue for *speaking with*. We have privileges, including loud voices, that are important to leverage. People pay attention to the prisoners and are drawn to them and their stories. Most of us in the movement have more access to U.S. media and policymakers than most of those most affected by the school. We can use this “in” to speak *with* not the “voiceless”, but those who have been silenced and unheard, and *with*, as a part of, the larger global justice movement. Polyphony is not easy, but is full of potential (Routledge, 1996). As Lee suggested in the group discussion, when we speak *together*, we all have a louder voice for speaking truth to power. Instead of speaking as autonomous selves, separate from and able to speak for others, we can speak in ways that recognize our connectedness. Though this is not always possible, ideally if we tell the story of another we can either read their own words or discuss with them first how to tell it. Although it is not online, Betsy did write that during her trial she read aloud a letter from a group of Colombian women with disappeared family members, sent to her for this purpose.

This is a powerful example of using the space we can open with privilege to speak *with*, loudly<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Being Innocent, Becoming Accountable***

I do not mean to naively imply that we are all together in the global struggle for justice in a transparent and equal way. Leslie Roman warns of fantasies of identifying with, and knowing, others in a way that draws on liberalism's appeal to universalism to forge, "dreams of racially unequal subjects merging or becoming one, communicating lovingly in spite (or because) of the great chasms of inequality" (1997: 272-3). She argues that this attempt to separate the psychic from the material ignores asymmetries of power and material conditions. Her analysis critiques redemption fantasies that enable whites to keep our "investment in whiteness" by offering absolution, and erasing from view the ways that privilege is constructed (1997: 274-5). For her these fantasies are as much about the desire to *not know* stories of systemic white complicity in racial inequality as they are about the desire to know the racialized other. Diane Nelson also argues that having survivors tell us their stories, and thank us for listening, "functions like a seal of approval in these days of intense critique of the white first-world I-eye. Recourse to the politics of solidarity can offer a space of innocence for the gringa, a site cleansed by good intentions and activist "politics" from which we can still speak unproblematically of the Other" (1999: 57).

So how might we position ourselves as innocent through solidarity activism? It would seem that it is premised on guilt, the guilt of living in a country whose government invades others, guilty of our tax dollars being used to train repressive armies. Yet strangely, perhaps we claim guilt on one level as a way to claim innocence on another. We not only claim innocence in the sense of "not in my name", but I thank Barbara Heron (2005) for suggesting that even as we admit to imperialist guilt, this can serve as a "containment strategy that blocks awareness of ways in which domination, organized through racial difference, operates in these and other instances so as to preserve the story of the moral self". We ease our conscience, and are thereby less compelled to look at other intimate daily ways we participate in and perpetuate systems of domination<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Likewise here I have been trying to speak in conversation with, not for, the women in the discussion group.

<sup>10</sup> Similarly Mary Gilmartin and Lawrence Berg (2007) argue that geographers' focus on geography's collusion with colonialism long ago and far away serves to elide the way geographers are implicated in current colonial relations.

When prisoners of conscience speak of guilt, it is usually a reference to repression, not daily enmeshment in domination. Betsy broke that mold, and brought these issues to the fore, in writing “I do not expect ever to arrive at a state of innocence prior to my death. I could only become innocent if all domination in which I have the remotest complicity ceased to exist. ... I hope I never unconsciously (or consciously) imply that I am in any way more good, or less guilty, for having spent time in prison.” Yet it is not quite that simple. Our tax dollars are still going towards torture, but if we are working to end that are we not somehow less guilty? But can you be a little bit guilty? We tend to see guilt and innocence in black and white terms. The danger is that we may then think that taking one action releases us from guilt, and miss the other complex daily ways we are implicated in systems of domination.

Betsy's suggestion of seeing our complicity is a useful modification to this masters tool. Complicity implies many more shades of grey. Even Betsy acknowledged, “For me there was definitely a feeling of being “less complicit” with the evils of empire when physically imprisoned by it.” There are certainly less dramatic ways to be less complicit.

Seeing our complicities is the first step in taking responsibility for them. Owning our political responsibility is quite different than moving from guilt (see, for example, Iris Marion Young's (2003) account of how the anti-sweatshop movement does this). There has been powerful work written recently on the importance of expanding and deepening our geographies of responsibility (Massey 2004, Lawson 2007). One way that we can enact this responsibility, and move towards being less complicit, is to be more accountable, in all three senses of the term. We can try to see the grid we are in, and account for our positions in it (accountable as in able to be explained) by giving “accounts”, that is, sharing our stories and being self-reflective about how we benefit from privilege and colonial patterns. We have been insisting, in lengthy FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) battles, that the army give accounts of who is coming to the SOA and what they have been involved in before and after so as to hold the school responsible. We too can give accounts of our multiple complicities, so that together we can find and make choices that help us live with more integrity and untangle us from systems of domination. In so doing we can hold each other accountable for our geoeconomic and geopolitical position in the world, our social locations, and what we do with and about them (accountable as in responsible *for*). We can take the lead in this work from those most directly affected – in this case by the SOA, racism, and empire (accountable as in responsible *to*). As a movement we need to develop more spaces and mechanisms for accountability.

Although guilt may be useful as a kick-start, in that it alerts us that we are not being true to our values, it is the flip side of the master's tool of innocence. Guilt is all about me, it builds that bigger me, and reinforces a separate Self. Guilt



is a way of defining a ‘me’, not an ‘us’; it separates rather than unites. Diane Nelson (1999), in discussing the solidarity movement, argues that “the self-flagellation of the “mea culpa move” deeply reinscribes the power of white North Americans and the powerlessness of everyone else” (69). Shannon said of guilt, “It puts us at the center; doesn’t ask us to change our thinking or our being. Guilt is very dangerous because it blinds us to the ways we are acting and puts our own needs and desires at the forefront.” Guilt is focused on the past. Accountability, on the other hand, is focused on the present and is premised on a social self in process. By helping us see what we can change, it offers us a path to a different future.

There can be no pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure.

- Judith Butler (1993)

## The End

Those of us within the core of empire may think of empire as imposed over ‘there’ on ‘them’, but to effectively struggle against it we have to see how it also affects ‘us’ over ‘here’, and see the imperialism we carry within. The good helper role is one way empire becomes quite intimate. Solidarity activists have used it to try to bring down empire, but this master’s tool is toxic. When we use it we may appear to take tiles off of the master’s house, but we unintentionally reinforce the foundations, the systems of domination that prop up empire.

We cannot simply ignore or throw away this tool. The good helper role is too strong a trope, and we continue to slip into these patterns or be read through them. There is no place outside of power, no pure opposition (Butler, 1999). There is no Zion off the grid. The master’s house is taking up all of the land. If we are going to build a new house it has to be on this same plot, and most of our building materials will be recycled from his house. We cannot ignore his tools, or we will constantly trip over them; but we can dismantle and rework them. Changing the good helper tool to become true *compas* is a constant process. With this modified tool in-the-making we can dismantle the master’s house, *and* at the same time be building our own. One of the key components of that better world is new ways of relating to others, which requires a new sense of self. As we build these, we also undercut some of the main beams of the master’s house.

My intention in suggesting that we modify the tool and aim to become accountable true *compas* is not to write a recipe. I hope instead that it may serve as yeast, as both a theoretical and political offering to get you, to get us all, thinking

differently about what our house, and our tools, might look like. It is an attempt to push solidarity activism toward an ever more feminist sort of grassroots alter-geopolitics, using not only our bodies, but our very sense of self, to work for broader security for all. Yet I am wary of this being read as a binary, as a right and wrong way of doing solidarity. Though I have drawn on images of reaching across as opposed to reaching down, in part inspired by the widespread use of the terms horizontalism and verticalism in the global justice movement, I resist this simplification. I have found typologies of good and bad solidarity frustrating (Johns 1998, Olesen 2005, Sundberg 2007). Though I have long worked to decolonize solidarity work and make it more liberatory and effective for all involved, I have never found it helpful to establish tests or terms for 'proper' solidarity that shut out devoted well intentioned activists. Let us honor our becomings, our struggles with our contradictions.

The movement to close the School of the Americas has done important learning on many of these issues. This paper came out of and has been part of (Koopman, 2005) an ongoing process of reflection and change in the movement. The good helper role certainly still haunts us, but the shifts suggested here came out of the discussion group and reflect shifts that many in the movement are enacting. The term 'most directly affected' is now widely used, and there has been some shift in the way the relationship between them, prisoners of conscience, and the rest of the movement are talked about. The look and feel of the vigil, both on stage and in the crowd, has gotten younger and browner, in the last few years in particular. The SOA Watch has worked much more closely with Latin American human rights organizations in the past several years, and it was that collaboration that shaped recent decisions by Argentina, Uruguay Bolivia, Venezuela and Costa Rica to stop sending troops to the school. The anti-oppression group has been dormant for the past two years, but more of those discussions are now happening at the local and national council level. Outreach materials have ever more regularly and explicitly talked about the school as part of broader racist systems of control and domination. At the 2006 vigil there was a Latino caucus, yet no general workshop focusing on issues of race and privilege. Core activists are as a whole slightly browner, and there are more of those directly affected involved in leadership, but the coordinating council is still overall white, in look and style. We can do more.

My use of the "we" has often slipped in this paper, from we, those of us in the movement to close the SOA, to we, as women, to broader we's: we who believe in peace, we who work against empire, we who do solidarity work, we who ever play the good helper role in any part of our lives. It is my hope that you have considered yourself a part of some of these we's.

The good helper role is part of the imperialism that we carry within. Many of us carry it, certainly not just white middle class women in the movement to close

the SOA. When I presented this work at the World Peace Forum (Vancouver 2006) several Colombians told me they saw these patterns in the work of more privileged Colombians working with those who have been displaced by the war. Whatever our position of privilege may be, when we play good helper we unintentionally reinforce the mechanisms that sustain systems of domination. We set up an ‘other’ and raise our Self above them. These politics of identity affect our ability to change geopolitics. Instead let us modify the master’s tool, and ever become more accountable true *compas*. We *can* bring down the master’s house.

## Acknowledgments

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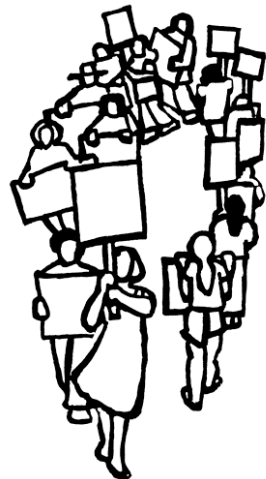
This paper would be much looser without the insightful reviews of Colin Flint, Claire Madge, and Jenna Loyd, as well as guidance from Valerie Raoul, Juanita Sundberg, Jennifer Hyndman, Philippe LeBillon and Barbara Heron. I am grateful for all of the support and, of course, own any errors.

## Participant Profiles

The following is how participants chose to identify themselves on the soaw.org site. Profiles were written at the time of crossing and ages as well as other details have changed. Year of crossing given in parentheses. Some participants have posted their court and other statements on the site, and those links are given here.

**Jonna Cohen** (2001) Denver, CO 20, MacAllister College student. Student of Maharaji, an Indian spiritual teacher. *Sentenced to three months in federal prison, \$500 fine.*

**Elizabeth Deligio** (2004) 28, *Chicago, IL* Liz is the chaplain for Misericordia, a home for developmentally disabled adults. She is also a full time student at Catholic Theological Union



earning a Masters of Divinity. Court statement at <http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=718> *Sentenced to three months in federal prison, \$500 fine*

**Christine Gaunt** (2002) 1956, Grinnell, IA, married to Jay, mother of three: Jodi(21), Julie(19), Jayson(15) hog farmer from Iowa / library assistant at Grinnell College. Have participated in SOA protests since 1998. Walked 37 miles for PEACE on November 1, 2002. *Sentenced to 3 months federal prison, \$750 fine (reported immediately).*

**Anne Herman** (1997) 64, Binghamton, NY MA Applied Social Science, six children, three grandchildren, Christian Peacemaker Team member *Sentenced to 6 months in federal prison and a \$3000 fine.*

**Betsy (“Frances Elizabeth”) Lamb** (2003) 65, lives in Columbia, Maryland, and is a member of the national Board of Directors of Witness for Peace. She has done pastoral work in Catholic parishes in the Diocese of Monterey and the Archdioceses of San Francisco and Baltimore, and is nationally known for her workshops and materials for and about small church communities, in both English and Spanish. Presently she is working with the Office of Hispanic Ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and is involved with Jonah House in Baltimore. She holds a Master's degree in theology—with an emphasis on religion and society—from the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. Statement at [www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=718](http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=718) *Sentenced to six months in federal prison and a \$500 fine.*

**Evalee (Lee) Mickey** (2002) 1935, Mt Pleasant, IA, retired farmer and widowed homemaker, mother of five, grandmother of 15. Interests are social action through my church, (presently peace activism), gardening, traveling with grandchildren, Habitat for Humanity, Mentoring Moms program. *Sentenced to 3 months in federal prison.*

**Abi Miller** (2001) Harrisonburg, VA, 23, Degree in Biology from James Madison University. Works at a restaurant in the process of collectivizing. Involved in a community center project, community garden organizing, and tutoring English as a second language. *Sentenced to three months in federal prison, \$500 fine.*

**Laura Slattery** (2002) 1966, San Francisco, CA, Nonviolence Trainer, graduated from the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, in 1988 and was stationed at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii for three years. Since resigning her commission in 1991 she has worked as an international volunteer in Mexico and El Salvador, chaplain in a hospital, high school teacher, and Catholic Worker. She received her Masters in Theology from the Graduate Theological Union in

Berkeley, CA in 1998 and currently works for Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service as their International Coordinator for the From Violence To Wholeness Program at their Oakland, California office. Court statement at [www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=596](http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=596) *Sentenced to 3 months in federal prison, \$1,000 fine*

**Sr. Miriam Spencer** (2000) 76, Bellevue, Washington. Member of Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, actively retired, 75. *Sentenced to 6 months in federal prison.* And one woman who chose to remain anonymous.

***Responded at length, but did not participate in the discussion group:***

**Margaret Knapke**, (1999) 47, natural therapeutics practitioner, worked with war-traumatized people from El Salvador, Master of Philosophy, Dayton, OH *Sentenced to 3 months in federal prison, \$2500 fine.*

**Shannon McManimon**, (2001) Philadelphia, PA 26, Catholic Worker at Martha House CW in Philadelphia. *Sentenced to six months probation, \$500 fine.*

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