ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Toward a Vernacular Security Studies: Origins, Interlocutors, Contributions, and Challenges

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This article seeks to situate, evaluate, and advance the recent "turn" toward the "vernacular" within security studies. It argues that vernacular security studies has significant advantages over alternative "bottom up" approaches. First, its conceptual emptiness allows for genuinely inductive research into public experiences, understandings, anxieties, and fears. Second, it offers engagement with a potentially far richer tapestry of everyday (in)securities by refusing to prioritize particular populations by virtue of their identity or sociopolitical position. And, third, such an approach avoids the universalism inherent within related, yet more explicitly cosmopolitan, approaches to security. The article begins by situating vernacular security studies within relevant intellectual and (geo-)political dynamics from the late twentieth century. A second section distinguishes this approach from six alternative traditions with a similar emphasis on individual human referents: human security, critical security studies, postcolonialism, feminism, ontological security studies, and everyday security studies. The article then elaborates on the significance and added value of vernacular approaches to security, before outlining core conceptual, methodological, and ethical questions for future research.

Keywords: critical security studies, everyday security, feminism, human security, international relations, postcolonialism, vernacular security

Introduction

A little over ten years ago, Nils Bubandt published an important and prescient article appealing for a reconceptualization of security, a concept, he argued,

that is "conceptualized and politically practiced differently in different places and at different times" (Bubandt 2005, 291). Focusing, specifically, upon the diverse ways in which Indonesian communities responded to national security discourse, Bubandt (2005, 276) noted that security is "neither unchanging nor conceptually homogeneous." What is more, he suggested, understandings of this especially powerful signifier at "local" or "lower" levels of analysis have considerable capacity to shape the working of (top-down) security politics. Bubandt (2005, 291) concluded by arguing for greater "comparative analysis of the ontological grounding and political management of socially specific fears and uncertainties," advocating situated, context-specific research into "the idioms of uncertainty, order and fear, as well as the forms of social control associated with particular discourses on security, whether these discourses are 'global,' 'national,' or 'local'" (Bubandt 2005, 277).

Taking inspiration from anthropological work, Bubandt (2005) advanced the term "vernacular security" to capture such particular security problematics. Although it attracted moderate early interest, the concept's visibility has accelerated markedly in contemporary research. Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2016), for instance, describe a nascent "vernacular turn" within security studies, emphasizing the importance of the "security speak" of individuals traditionally marginalized in stories told of global politics. Such an approach, in their view, might profitably focus upon "how citizens . . . construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge and categories of understanding" (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2016, 11). Robin Luckham (2017, 112), more recently, offers a related argument, although with greater normative emphasis, suggesting:

> It is not enough simply to assert that security should be turned on its head and looked at from the viewpoint of the people who are secured, including those beyond the vanishing point of officially delivered security. How ordinary people themselves define, experience and try to ensure their own security must be foregrounded. . . . "Security in the vernacular" emphasises that those who are vulnerable and insecure are not just social categories but people, groups and communities who perceive, cope with and respond to violence in ways that differ, sometimes radically, not only from the dominant state security narratives, but sometimes also from universal conceptions of human and citizen security.

Scholarship motivated thus has now begun to work with this notion of vernacular securities for empirical investigation of a range of concrete instances of security politics. Nicole George (2017), for instance, investigates the confluence of religious, state-based, and customary authority in the policing of Fijian gender norms. The interconnection of anxieties relating to social order, Christian values, and local cultural norms, she argues, helps to explain the particularly aggressive policing of sex work(ers) that there intensified from 2007 onward. Amber Huff (2017) explores the impact of resource conflicts upon recently displaced communities in Madagascar through localized constructions of security and well-being, especially *velomanpo*, translated as "that which enlivens the heart." Meanwhile, Niklas Hultin (2010) surveys a body of ethnographic work on conflict in Africa, which emphasizes, "vernacular understandings of violence and the impact of a pluralisation of authority and the presence of a range of formal and informal actors" therein.[1] Rogers T. E. Orock (2014) situates "mob justice" in an increasingly neoliberal Cameroon vis-à-vis citizen anxieties and perceptions of state failure, seeing such violences as a form of safety-making practice (see also Risør 2010 on lynching in Bolivia). And, in the United Kingdom, finally, Jarvis and Lister (2013b) employ the term to sketch the diversity of ways in which different publics conceptualize security and security threats (see

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[1] Although, in so doing, Hultin (2010) appeals for *greater* emphasis on security elites and professionals within this literature.

also Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009; Stevens and Vaughan-Williams 2016). As they argue, such an exercise offers a potentially useful corrective to the tendency within contemporary—including critical—scholarship to "speak *for*, rather than *to* (or, perhaps better, *with*) 'ordinary' people and the conditions of (in)security they experience, encounter or construct in everyday life" (Jarvis and Lister 2013b, 158). Such literatures, importantly, build upon and develop earlier work such as the *Shifting Securities* project which focused on British news audiences' media practices, finding, "a paradoxical sense of threats as both constructed and real [that] can engender responses both of powerlessness ('there's nothing we can do about it') and of pragmatism ('we've got to get on with our lives')" (Gillespie 2007, 284).

This growing interest in vernacular securities merits consideration, in part, because it resonates with a diverse range of related research programs on the seemingly ordinary, mundane, everyday, and quotidian experiences of security encountered and understood by citizens in the context of daily life. In so doing, it speaks to a wider recognition within (broadly) critical approaches to security that the stories we tell about security—and about social and political life more generally—are "never innocent or obvious but always intensely political" (Wibben 2011, 2). And, therefore, to a common corollary of this recognition, which is a demand for acknowledgement of security's heterogeneities, contradictions, and aporias, despite the temptation toward generalization and universalization within traditional studies of this phenomenon (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016, 312–13). In this article, I argue that this mooted "vernacular turn" has genuine potential to speak to and build on work within existing paradigms that share a similarly "bottom up" approach to security as something that concerns—at least at some level—"ordinary" people and their daily existence.[2] It also, I suggest, has potential to avoid some of the pitfalls of better-established attempts to take this ordinariness seriously, and to open up considerable new research areas within security studies.

In making these arguments, the article offers three contributions to contemporary debate. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of the enormous diversity of research that seeks—in different ways and for different purposes—to reconsider the politics of security away from the strictures of a "top down," elitist approach. In so doing, the discussion juxtaposes literatures infrequently considered together, shedding light on pertinent similarities and differences therein and situating this research within relevant historical, political and intellectual dynamics.[3] Second, it offers the fullest elaboration to date of what the "vernacular turn" in security might look like and what it might offer to the analysis of security vis-à-vis more established paradigms. As argued below, "vernacular security studies" has considerable potential for addressing and avoiding some of the limitations of its most proximate alternatives—such as human security—and there are, therefore, significant theoretical and analytical reasons for pursuing it. Third, this article builds on the above orientational ambitions to offer an agenda-setting contribution through elaboration on a series of promising research questions, avenues, and agendas for this most recent "turn" within security studies. In so doing, it focuses attention on significant conceptual, ethical, and methodological questions the turn raises for future scholarship.

The article begins by situating the emergence of people-centric work on security at the intersection of four dynamics that coalesced toward the end of the twentieth century: a skepticism toward systemic theorizing within international relations; a growing concern with the global South amid the collapse of the hitherto-dominant

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[2] Although this "bottom-up" metaphor is not unproblematic, I follow Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017) in using it as a shorthand to differentiate localized, granular, and often inductive research from large-scale, systemic, and often deductive analyses of global politics.

[3] As detailed below these refer to work on: human security, (the Welsh school of) critical security studies, postcolonial security studies, feminist security studies, ontological security studies, everyday security studies, and vernacular security studies.

East-West antagonism; an increasing interest in methodological and theoretical developments taking place beyond international relations, previously the uncontested home for research on security; and an increased willingness amongst researchers to articulate and explicate their own normative and political commitments. The article's second section then explores six distinct literatures that have been key in contributing to and constituting the "bottom up" research agenda that emerged from these dynamics: human security, the Welsh school of critical security studies, postcolonial security studies, relevant feminist work, ontological security studies, and everyday security studies. Although this discussion obviously cannot do justice to all relevant contributions to each of these, it does, I argue, point to the variety, vibrancy, and importance of pertinent existing work. The article then turns to the "vernacular turn" within security studies, elaborating the value of such an approach for a richer mapping of global (in)securities than that offered by alternative "bottom up" paradigms. Such an approach has additional value, I suggest, in avoiding the universalistic assumptions of more explicitly cosmopolitan approaches. And, its starting emptiness, moreover, allows for greater fidelity to the diversity of everyday stories of anxiety and fear than facilitated by approaches that begin with a concrete conceptualization of security. The article concludes by tracing several agendas for future research, reflecting, in particular, on the intellectual, normative, and pragmatic questions raised by vernacular security studies.

Security from the Ground up

The contemporary efforts to retheorize security of interest to this article may be situated within an opening up across security studies that began to gather pace in the late twentieth century. Although stories about the emergence and evolution of academic fields are precisely that—stories that select and plot particular events to the exclusion of alternative events and plots[4]—four developments of this period offer particular contextual relevance to that which followed.

First, was a growing skepticism toward the systemic theorizing that had dominated international relations—and, by implication security studies, then widely viewed as the former's subdiscipline—toward the end of the twentieth century. Most famously associated with the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz, systemic theories seek to "explain how the organization of a realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it" (Waltz 1986, 60). Although positioned by its advocates as a movement away from the traditionalisms of prepositivist approaches to international politics (Waltz 1990), neorealism's structuralism, and that of its then major competitor liberal institutionalism, attracted sustained and now-familiar critique from a range of alternative approaches. Critical theorists such as Robert Cox (1996, 55) challenged their ahistorical reductionism and the search for a single, determining driver of global political outcomes. Constructivists, notably Alexander Wendt (1987, 1992), elaborated on the coconstituted character of structure and agency, while poststructuralists questioned the exclusion of contingency from structural analyses of global outcomes (e.g., Doty 1997). Although marshalling diverse intellectual influences, critiques such as these challenged the determinism within the "neo-neo" debate's reified understanding of anarchy. Their significance, therefore, was in part rendering legitimate the study of global politics—and, in turn, security—at lower "levels of analysis" than that of the international or even the state (see also Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009, 680–81; Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017, 7).

A second relevant dynamic was a growing scholarly concern with the "global South" and its security challenges toward the end of the twentieth century. Crucial here was the collapse of Cold War bipolarity and the concomitant reorientation

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[4] The continuing narration of international relations as a discipline organized around a series of "great debates"—as well as the increasing contestation of this particular narrative—offers a useful example (see Lake 2013).

of dominant political imaginations from East-West to North-South relations (Dannreuther 2007, 20–28). Multiple drivers contributed to this, including a belated recognition of the significance of pervasive, often less dramatic, "structural violences" (Galtung 1969) upon life in the global South and beyond. As the 1994 United Nations Development Project report argued:

> For too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security has been equated with the threats to a country's borders. For too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security. For most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime—these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world (UNDP 1994, 3).

Also significant here was a growing recognition of humanity's interconnectedness (Axworthy 2004, 348) and the potential "migration of nightmares" (Nassar 2010) from the global South to the global North in a globalizing world. From such a standpoint, the lives, insecurities, and fears of (other) people might pose a pragmatic and self-interested concern to match their ethical or intellectual interest.

A third, more recent, factor has been a growing concern with theoretical and methodological developments taking place beyond international relations and political science. Recent years have witnessed a gradual decoupling of security studies from those disciplines, with security becoming increasingly studied by those with backgrounds in fields as diverse as anthropology, sociology, development studies, geography, and area studies (Croft 2008, 571). One exciting example is the emergence of what has become known as the "Paris School" of "international political sociology" and its sympathetic yet critical engagement with securitization theory (see CASE Collective 2006, 449) to question "the rationales through which international relations has defined the international, political science has understood politics, and sociology has conceptualized society" (Basaran et al. 2017, 4). Elsewhere, engagement with narrative approaches to security draw on ideas and methodologies found in narratology (Wibben 2011), autobiography and fiction (Park-Kang 2015) to explore how security is made meaningful for and by specific (located) subjects (Stern 2006; McLeod 2013). Contemporary work on strategic narratives builds on this wider "narrative turn" across the social sciences to advance understanding of the impact and significance of communication and persuasion upon global political outcomes (MisKimmon et al. 2017). This increasing eclecticism has contributed to a relaxing of the assumptions of state-centric models of the international system through which transnational threats and risks had been previously addressed.

Fourth, has been a growing willingness to discuss one's own political and normative commitments within relevant published research. Many of the approaches considered below emerge from a profound normative commitment to recenter humans within the study of security. As such, this work is often accompanied by explicit reflection on the purposes and value of such an effort, what it entails, and why it might matter. Christine Sylvester's (2013, 614) appeal for greater engagement with people, for instance, combines a normative critique of international relations' historical neglect of human experiences with an argument about the analytical implications thereof:

> Individuals aggregated into data points cannot share their voices, their power, their agendas, and their experiences with international relations. And that is my point: in IR, individuals are studied using someone else's script, not their own, which might be a reason why IR is on the back foot when it comes to anticipating people as stakeholders, actors, and participants in international relations.

Refusing to disregard the voices, power, agendas, and experiences of individual people is clearly vital to Sylvester's appeal here for greater engagement with what

Foucault (1980, 82) termed "subjugated knowledges": "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity." And, the commitment to greater reflection on the practice of reflection that this sort of reckoning often engenders is one widely associated with a feminist research ethic, summarized by Ackerly and True (2008, 695) as:

> a commitment to inquiry about how we inquire. The research ethic involves being attentive to (1) the power of knowledge, and more profoundly, of epistemology . . . (2) boundaries, marginalization, and silences, (3) relationships and their power differentials, and (4) our own situatedness as researchers.

The above dynamics, taken together, have contributed to a sustained, yet heterogeneous, attempt to decenter the statist/militaristic/positivist assumptions of security studies as traditionally constituted. Their importance is in providing the intellectual, historical, and political backdrop for the earliest efforts to establish a "critical security studies" program (e.g., Krause and Williams 1997) and, therefore, the backdrop within which the people-centric approaches to security with which we are here concerned also emerged.[5] In the following, I explore a number of responses to this opening, charting the evolution of six discrete bodies of work that, in different ways, seek to highlight the importance of everyday experiences of (in)security. Upon this, we will be in a position to better evaluate the distinctiveness of the "vernacular turn" as a more recent engagement with these dynamics.

Rethinking Security's Subject

Although there exists a long history of initiatives designed to prioritize the protection of people within the international system (Axworthy 2001), the notion of "human security"—almost certainly the best known of the approaches considered here—really came to prominence following publication of the 1994 United Nations Development Report. This report, famously, conceptualized the term as "freedom from fear and freedom from want" (UNDP 1994, 24), arguing for a shift away from the pursuit of security via militaristic technologies, and a recasting of security's referent to individual people (UNDP 1994, 24). The concept subsequently came to constitute a central rhetorical plank within the foreign policy discourses of several mid-power states and has offered a productive "normative reference point for human-centred policy movements" (Newman 2016, 2).[6] For critics, however, these "successes"—which may be tied to the concept's ambiguity[7]—offer problematic evidence of its potential for co-option in the service of more traditional security frameworks (e.g., Booth 2007, 323–25; Browning and McDonald 2013, 243–44). In other words, "'human' security may be sufficiently malleable to allow itself to be used to legitimize greater state control over society in the *name of protection*" (Shani 2011, 59, original emphasis).

In the years since publication of the UNDP report, work around human security has proceeded in diverse directions. Newman (2001) identifies four distinct, yet overlapping, approaches: basic human needs, interventionist, social welfare or developmentalist, and "new security challenges" interpretations. Kaldor (2007) distinguishes between two: those that emphasize political violence, such as the Canadian government's, and the development-focused UNDP approach. Shani (2011,

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[5] What to include or exclude from "critical security studies" continues as a live question. While some approaches considered in this article—such as Ken Booth's Critical Security Studies (capitalized)—are near-universally included under this umbrella, others—such as work on human security—are more ambiguously placed. Compare, for example, Browning and McDonald (2013) with Hynek and Chandler (2013).

[6] For an exploration of the concept's declining purchase within and beyond the United Nations, see Martin and Owen (2010, 211).

[7] I return to this below.

57), more recently, contrasts, "narrow" approaches that conceptualize human security "negatively in terms of the absence of threats to the *physical* security or safety of individuals" (Shani 2011, 57) and "broad" approaches, emphasizing a more positive set of "elementary rights and freedoms" (Shani 2011, 57). These differences notwithstanding, advocates of human security share an important commitment to security's universality, which combines a belief in the existence of common human vulnerabilities, wants, or needs with a cosmopolitan ethics that, "ascribes intrinsic value to each and every human being regardless of nationality, sex or any other marker of identity and difference" (Marhia 2013, 22). Each of these is evident in the UNDP's (1994, 22) well-known summary:

> In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons—it is a concern with human life and dignity.

A second reconceptualization of security from the "bottom up" is found within the so-called "Welsh School" of critical security studies (CSS), which draws upon Frankfurt school critical theory and peace studies literatures. This approach focuses upon breaking security from more traditional collocates such as sovereignty, order and power, and reconfiguring the term around emancipation (Peoples 2011, 1116–19). Importantly, the meaning of emancipation—and its relation to security—has morphed over time here, becoming increasingly detached from any concrete, discernible set of living conditions (Browning and McDonald 2013, 245). In Ken Booth's (1991, 319) early, crucial, formulation of his ideas, for instance:

> "Security" means the absence of threats. Emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do. War and the threat of war is one of those constraints, together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on.

More recently, Booth (2012, 70) draws on the writings of William Lovett—a nineteenth century Chartist—to characterize emancipation as "bread, knowledge and freedom," referring to "iconic struggles against oppression: struggles for material necessities ('bread'), struggles for truth in the face of dogmatic authority ('knowledge'), and struggles to escape from political and economic tyranny ('freedom')."

This approach clearly shares human security's thematic breadth. CSS, however, has a less straightforwardly deductive emphasis for two reasons. First is a recognition of security's derivative status, in that its meaning is seen to vary according to one's broader conceptual, normative, or political commitments (Booth 2007, 109–10): "What it means to be or to feel free—or relatively free—from the absence of threats in world politics depends upon whether the security issue being considered is by a political realist, a Marxist, a feminist theorist, a racist, a liberal internationalist, or whatever" (Booth 2005, 21). Second, is an insistence that security analysis should begin with concrete insecurities and fears as experienced by "real people" (Booth 2007, 98). As Booth (2012, 71) summarizes:

> What I am concerned with in the first instance is removing those brutal, demeaning, and determining constraints on peoples' lives such as poverty, racism, patriarchy, war and so on. The starting point for thinking about security/emancipation must be insecurity.

Despite these differences, work on human security and CSS attract similar criticism for a perceived, indeed often explicit, universalism; one perhaps linked to an implicit or unacknowledged Eurocentrism that masks security's traditional connection to oppressive political projects and imaginaries (Neocleous 2008, 4–6). Such criticism arrives, in part, from postcolonial and feminist critics.

Work bringing a postcolonial ethos to security challenges the claims of "main-stream" security research, which "provides few categories for making sense of the historical experiences of the weak and the powerless who comprise most of the world's population" (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 332). Central to such work is an escape from Eurocentric assumptions, still seen to haunt traditional, and perhaps even critical, research trajectories (see Acharya 1997; Ayoob 1997; Sabaratnam 2013). One means of enacting this is via "careful engagement with the experiences and critical political consciousness of those who are rendered as 'objects' of power . . . [by] engaging with the ways in which different people politicize various aspects of their experiences, narrate the terms of their situations and critically interpret the world around them" (Sabaratnam 2013, 272). For Hönke and Müller (2012, 395), this requires richer, thicker, and more localized understandings of security politics, "gleaning the meanings that the people we study attribute to their social and political reality." Thus, although the idea of postcolonial security studies might seem oxymoronic (Laffey and Nadarajah 2016, 137), this dissonance actually highlights the scope that exists for decentering security studies (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 330) and engaging its inadequacy for "addressing the security and strategic concerns of the weak, the vast majority of the people living on the planet" (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 352).

This postcolonial emphasis on the experiences of the global South's inhabitants echoes a more established concentration on gendered insecurities within feminist security studies. Although feminist work on security is vast and diverse (see Sylvester 2002; Sjoberg 2009; Steans 2013; Shepherd 2015), aspects of it have long highlighted the importance of the seemingly unexceptional or inconsequential within global politics (Enloe 2011), demonstrating that "the mundane matters" (Enloe 2011). As a consequence, this work has been vital in highlighting how violences and insecurities are narrated, experienced, and lived through assumptions, categories, and behaviors that are intrinsically gendered (Sjoberg 2009). Doing so, as Shepherd (2009, 215, original emphasis) notes, requires us to ask profound questions about "*which* violences are considered worthy of study and *when* these violences occur" and, in the process, to pull attention to "the politics of everyday violence . . . the violences inherent to times of peace" (Shepherd 2009, 209), still frequently overlooked. Cynthia Enloe's (2014) *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, and its demand that the lives, thoughts, and experiences of diverse women be taken seriously remains a key reference point here; meanwhile Annick Wibben (2011, 103), more recently, argues for a narrative feminist approach prioritizing meaning-making practices within "what IR considers to be marginal stories—the stories of prostitutes, poor, indigenous, and of those far from the centers of power." In her work on war experiences, similarly, Sylvester (2012, 484) argues for a focus on "real people" and their bodies, suggesting "war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from people and not only studied down from places that sweep blood, tears and laughter away."

A growing literature on "ontological security," which draws inspiration from R. D. Laing (1960) and interlocutors such as Anthony Giddens (1991), offers a fifth contribution here, with its emphasis on the importance of that which is routine or taken-for-granted. To be ontologically secure is to enjoy a relatively stable self-identity and, thereby, to avoid the anxiety or dread that would accompany constant confrontation with life's major existential questions. Here, the ontologically secure individual "must be more or less able to rely on things—people, objects, places, meanings—remaining tomorrow, by and large, as they were today and the day before" (Skey 2010, 720). Although earlier efforts to work through this concept within international relations sought to transpose it from individuals to states (e.g., Mitzen 2006; Zarakol 2010), more recent contributions concentrate upon the lives of people caught up within global political dynamics. Stuart Croft (2012, 220), for instance, employs it in a recent exploration of British Muslim identity and the ways in which "dominant notions of Britishness . . . have become means of

insecuritizing those categorized as 'British Muslims.'" Alexandria Innes (2017), more recently, uses this framework for analyzing plots around international migration within British soap operas and their reproduction of the international for viewers.

Finally, there have also been several contemporary efforts to work more explicitly with the notion of "everyday security," again from a concern with the mundane's minutiae. Although rhetorically appealing—"everyday security" so vividly distances the concept from its traditional elitism—the term does need to be approached with care.[8] First, because, as Jef Huysmans (2009, 197) notes, "the everyday" functions in multiple ways within security politics, constituting a "realm of practice"—a site in which actions take place—*and* a concept employed within (often elite) security discourses, for instance in post-9/11 demands for a "return to normality." Moreover, there also already exists a considerable—and diverse—body of scholarship on "the everyday" beyond the remit of security studies, with which contemporary work on security using this terminology will have to grapple (Seabrookes and Thomsen 2016; Stanley and Jackson 2016).

This emphasis on everyday security is found within literature on the saturation of risk, surveillance, and security practices, techniques, and technologies across daily life, such as, "Credit cards, CCTV, filling in forms for a myriad of services, monitoring workers, consumer data, [and] advertising that sustains precautionary dispositions and products associated with risks" (Huysmans 2011, 377). Such work has value in problematizing straightforward distinctions between everyday and elite politics (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016, 44), focusing attention on "how practices of security governance are *experienced* by different people and groups 'on the ground' so to speak" (Crawford and Hutchinson 2015, 2). Doing so highlights how, in Huysmans' (2011, 377) summary, "Many little and banal daily activities, meetings, regulations are actively part of the shaping of securitizing processes."

As the above suggests, there exists a rich and diverse scholarship engaging with security at the level of the banal, normal, or everyday. Collectively, this work has significance for its calling into question hitherto-paradigmatic assumptions about security politics, including: the state's capacity and willingness to act as security's provider; the preeminence of warfare—and especially interstate warfare—as a security challenge today; the utility of military power and technologies in pursuit of security; the possibility of impartial or objective security knowledge; and the conceptual association of security with survival in the absence of existential threats.

This is not, of course, to suggest that (all of) the above approaches argue for a complete dismantling of the state/military/security constellation. Indeed, although the concept of human security "raises questions regarding the relationship between the individual and the state, and regarding state sovereignty" (Newman 2004, 358), more "assertive" versions are quite forthright in supporting military interventions *on behalf of* the security of humans located elsewhere (Newman 2001, 244). Yet, these reconfigurations of security do highlight the limitations—and partiality—of seemingly axiomatic and universal claims often made about security. As Laura Sjoberg (2009, 192, citing her earlier work) puts it in a summary of the contribution of feminist security studies: "objective knowledge is only the subjective knowledge of privileged voices disguised as neutral by culturally assumed objectivity, 'where the privileged are licensed to think for everyone, so long as they do so "objectively."'" Ken Booth's (2007, 35) pithy critique of political realism—"realism is not realistic (it does not provide an accurate picture of the world)"—does something similar in the context of his CSS approach.

A second reason for the successes of these approaches is their concern to center previously marginal or camouflaged experiences within security analysis (Crawford

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[8] Indeed, as outlined below, this rhetorical appeal poses risk of researchers romanticizing the "everyday" as a site of resistance or authenticity.

and Hutchinson 2015; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). All of the above share a genuine effort to foreground the lives of individual human subjects. Although the problems of elitism—evident, for critics, in the state-centrism of traditional and much constructivist security studies—have been discussed for some time, bottom up research of the sort explored above poses real potential to redraw our maps of international security. Depending on where we look, we see a highlighting within it of the experiences and insecurities of women (in some feminist research); of subjugated citizens within the "global South" (in postcolonial work, critical security studies, and much human security literature); and of security professionals and bureaucrats (in literature on "everyday security").

Toward a vernacular turn

As noted in the article's introduction, the concept of "vernacular security" was introduced by Bubandt (2005), in an exploration of the sometimes-circuitous routes taken by elite security projects: circuitous because of the intervention of diverse local security conceptions and practices. Bubandt's article brought attention to the multiple constructions and imaginaries of security that permeate, and intersect within, daily existence, and the particularities of these problematics given that "security is conceptualized and politically practiced differently in different places and at different times" (Bubandt 2005, 291). Bubandt is reluctant, perhaps surprisingly, to pursue this insight into security's social and idiomatic specificities to the point of abandoning a residual foundationalism; human uncertainty, he suggests, provides the ontological grounding upon which fears and insecurities are projected (Bubandt 2005, 291). And, unlike much of the subsequent research that has worked with this terminology, his focus is therefore as concentrated upon questions of multiscalarity as it is on the specifics of locally situated articulations of (in)security. This suspicion of "relativism" notwithstanding, Bubandt is clearly justified in highlighting that security neither *means* nor *does* the same thing in different contexts. There is no singular, universal "logic" to security, whatever the efforts to tidy these multiplicities away beneath a single, essentialized, formula—whether "traditional" (e.g., Wolfers 1952, 485) or "critical" (e.g., Buzan, Wæve, and de Wilde 1998, 27). What is needed—as Browning and Macdonald (2013, 248) have argued—is, therefore, "understandings of the politics of security that are context-specific; that recognize and interrogate the role of different security discourses and their effects in different settings; and that come to terms with sedimented meanings and logics without endorsing these as timeless and inevitable."

My argument in this article is that a truly vernacular security studies—one that is stripped of assumptions about the human condition's extradiscursive conditions—offers a way of pursuing precisely these questions: of approaching and investigating the meaning and consequences of security discourses, practices, and technologies as specific to particular configurations of time and space. Devoid, therefore, of ontological claims and expectations about the linguistic and political "work" done by (in)security practices or discourses, vernacular security studies should investigate, instead, how (in)security is understood and experienced at all levels of sociopolitical life—especially, perhaps, as lived by non-elite communities. To truly take seriously the diversity of fears, anxieties, and threats with which all of the above research paradigms are in some way interested, the approach involves engaging security's subjects in conversation to explore fundamental questions around: what security *means*; how security *feels*; what conditions, objects, experiences, or relationships *create* security and insecurity; with which *values* security is associated (for instance: order, freedom, equality, or justice); and other first order questions. It is this emphasis on the richness and texture of localized security imaginaries that sets this approach apart from some of its obvious alternatives, important though their metatheoretical debate about security's referents or subjects has undoubtedly been.

From such a starting point, vernacular security studies must then turn to epistemological questions around competing knowledge claims around security. How, for instance, is security articulated or constructed? By whom is security spoken in particular contexts? What role is played in the perpetuation of particular security imaginaries by mainstream or alternative media? How do different types of security claim—factual and fabulous; qualitative and quantitative; normative and descriptive; logical, anecdotal, and hypothetical—relate to one another? Do particular publics expect others to share their experiences and understandings of (in)security? Do publics even care whether and how others experience such dynamics? Vital within this is a charting of the connections—or lack thereof—between diverse elite and everyday narratives, as well as documentation of how such narratives emerge, evolve, are contested and change across time and space (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017, 15–16; Huff 2017 161). As existing work in this tradition has already documented, the intersections and tensions between different security imaginaries (elite, non-elite, political, religious, cultural, and so forth) are often central to the resolution of social and political contests and conflicts (e.g., Bubandt 2005; George 2017).

A vernacular approach to security of this sort has capacity to build on the work undertaken in some of the alternative paradigms discussed above, as well as scope for responding to some of their limitations. In the first instance, and most obviously, such an approach avoids the universalism implicit—and sometimes explicit—within more obviously cosmopolitan approaches such as human security and CSS. By beginning with locally situated understandings or imaginaries, rather than preconfigured frameworks of security's primary issues or "sectors," such an approach takes seriously the differences between, and particularities of, lived experiences in all of their heterogeneity. There is no a priori reason to assume that security is equally understood—let alone equally desired—by people living in different times and places, just as there is no reason to assume people will take similar routes toward its satisfaction. This is, especially, the case given the dearth of detailed empirical work actually investigating such processes, beyond the discourses and actions of political or other elites, until very recently. Vernacular security studies, then, is characterized by: a curiosity toward variability in the work done by "security" discourses, practices, and technologies in diverse contexts; an acknowledgement that security might mean different things in different places; acceptance that different individuals and groups will confront different threats, risks, and insecurities—and that there is no inevitable hierarchy of importance or magnitude between these; and a desire to investigate how "elite" security discourses and technologies are understood, responded to, and (re-)shaped in diverse ways. A useful comparison here may be found in recent work in peace and conflict studies, which demonstrates how significant localized variations in citizen understandings of peace are likely to be flattened out, or overlooked, by measurement exercises focused at the national level (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017, 18).

Second, a vernacular security studies approach also offers a potentially far richer conception of the politics of security than its obvious alternatives because it eschews any predefined starting point. This is important, in the first instance, because it allows us to "highlight the experience and social agency of those who are secured" (Luckham 2017, 111), whoever these are, refusing to see individuals or communities as passive consumers or dupes of "top down" security discourses (Gillespie 2006, 911) or as irrelevant for our analyses because they are insufficiently marginal or insecure. Moreover, it avoids the prioritization of specific experiences or subjects that provide either explicit or implicit foundations for some of the alternative traditions discussed above: gendered or subaltern insecurities within feminist, postcolonial, human security, and critical security studies research, for instance. By beginning with the diverse experiences and worldviews of *people*—rather than with (those seen to be) the dispossessed, disenfranchised, or marginalized—vernacular security research therefore avoids reproducing constructed vulnerabilities and problematic

binaries that may or may not adequately capture the fluidity and contradictions of lived experiences (for example, between rich and poor, north and south, insecure and secure). In this, it offers a significantly broader tapestry of (in)security stories for researchers to hear (or co-construct), given that none of these stories or their carriers are normatively or politically privileged at the outset.

This eschewing of predetermined starting points for security research matters because it allows scope for engaging with the sheer diversity of sources of insecurity—and security resources—encountered by publics, many of which may not be commensurate with established or hegemonic understandings of this term found within policy, media, or scholarly discourses (see also Luckham 2017, 100; Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009). An added advantage is that it reduces the (understandable) temptation to present one's research as the "authentic" voice of marginal or subjugated communities, given its applicability to majority or privileged populations and their own understandings of (in)security, as much as to minority or seemingly disadvantaged communities. Recent work in this vein, for instance, has already shown how localized security imaginaries can contribute to disempowering and violent outcomes including vigilantism, domestic violence, homophobic assault, and the extrajudicial murder of suspected criminals (Risør 2010; Orock 2014; George 2017). Thus, while vernacular security research offers resources for contesting, deconstructing, or otherwise destabilizing elitist discourses of (typically national) security and their seemingly objective underpinning assumptions, it can also assist in revealing and challenging the work—and harm—done by security imaginaries that emerge and operate in less privileged sites and spaces. As Tonkiss (2016) shows, in a discussion of nonmigrant views of UK migrant rights, such work is also productive for documenting and engaging with less-than-progressive security narratives, which fall short of facilitating direct violence.

Because a vernacular approach to security treats this term as a fundamentally empty concept—one that is capable of being "filled" in a potentially infinite number of ways—it also has seemingly counterintuitive value for avoiding the vagueness of terms such as "human security," which suffer from the multiple formulations described above. Vernacular security is precisely, and only, whatever people understand or construct security to mean in the context of their everyday lives—and perhaps, therefore, might be better seen as an approach rather than a concept. This enables researchers to circumvent the conservative connotations of related terminologies such as "human security" with their attendant risks of (perhaps willful) misapplication in the service of other interests, given that "vernacular security" lacks any obvious immediate instrumental value for foreign policy communities (see Luckham 2017, 111). It also helps to avoids the implicit valorization of "the everyday," which is risked within debate around everyday security, as a "romantic space of authenticity and struggle in which citizens playfully (in a postmodern sense) interpret and contest government and media discourses, revelling in paradox and ambiguity" (Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009, 669–70). Although some vernacular securities may offer opportunities for resistance and progressive politics, many others—as indicated above—may not.

The emphasis on inductive, richly textured research of the sort advocated here calls for, and justifies, greater attention to the role of "specific cultural idioms without which issues of security, violence and politics can only be incompletely understood" (Hultin 2010, 111). As Luckham (2017, 112) shows, for example, although the words *amn* and *amaan* both denote security in Egypt, the latter "includes notions of personal safety, which extend beyond conventional definitions of security." Differences such as these raise additional opportunities and challenges for intercultural, and other forms of, comparison (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017). They also point to at least two opportunities for intellectual learning. The first is for greater connection between "bottom up" work on security's human referents and constructivist research on how security discourses are put together and understood

(Jarvis and Lister 2013a). A second opportunity is for further interdisciplinary collaboration with research areas beyond international relations—most obviously anthropology, area studies, media studies, and peace research—with experience of related research methods and questions (see Gillespie 2006; Hultin 2010).

On top of this, vernacular security studies also has real potential for adding methodological vitality to security research, including by working with and through a host of "bottom-up" research methods – such as participant observation, autoethnography,[9] and focus group research – with roots in alternative academic disciplines. An obvious point of contact might be with narrative approaches to security, which share an emphasis on the significance of particular interpretations and imaginations of security. The approach sketched here, however, has potentially far broader application given that narrative approaches tend either to work with an explicitly retrospective framework in which narrative refers to the processes through which the past is made meaningful (e.g., Wibben 2011, 44; Aharoni 2014, 380; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016, 250); or imply one by beginning with the question of how specific pasts have been made meaningful (e.g., Stern 2006); or, indeed, both (e.g., Suganami 1997).[10]

By beginning with, prioritizing, and refusing to generalize across, the views and experiences of others, a vernacular approach also, finally, forces sustained engagement with issues of researcher positioning, privilege, and reflexivity. It encourages, as Elizabeth Dauphinee (2010, 806) puts it in her discussion of autoethnographic work: "a reflexive awareness of the [academic] self as a perpetrator of a certain kind of violence in the course of all writing and all representation." This, in turn, encourages reflection on the limitations of the "academic gaze [which] is an all-encompassing gaze [seeking] . . . to make sense of everything it encounters" (Dauphinee 2010, 806), thus opening "potential to re-center our attention on the individual lives and deaths of people whose names we would otherwise not know" (Dauphinee 2010, 806).

To summarize, briefly, vernacular security studies has much to contribute to the ongoing broadening and deepening of security studies. This is the case in relation to traditionally elitist configurations of the field as well as its more contemporary critical refashionings. At a minimum, research in this tradition allows a diversity of non-elites to speak (in)security for themselves, as well as offering opportunity for various subjects to articulate their own threats and concerns in their own idioms and vocabularies. This may have potential for assisting progressive acts of resistance to elitist or militaristic security politics (Vaughan-Williams, and Stevens 2016), but it certainly offers scope for a far richer "map" of global (in)security by moving beyond any a priori topography, whether thematic (for instance in feminist prioritizations of gendered (in)securities) or demographic (for instance in human security and CSS emphases on the world's dispossessed). This, of course, leaves considerable agenda-setting work to be done, and the following section, therefore, concludes this discussion by outlining opportunities for a more concrete research approach, focusing on some of the core challenges likely faced by those tempted to work with this turn.

A Vernacular Security Studies Research Agenda

Sketching a research agenda for a vernacular turn within security studies is complicated for two reasons. First, is a risk of unnecessary prescriptiveness: of closing

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[9] Autoethnography is an approach to research privileging the researcher's autobiographical experiences and knowledge as a way into greater understanding of the research problem at hand. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011, 1) summarize, autoethnography, "seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)."

[10] For an exception, see McLeod (2013).

potentially promising avenues of inquiry while prioritizing particular research ques-
tions or subjects. Second, is because vernacular security studies should begin pre-
cisely with the understandings, imaginaries, conceptions, fears, and insecurities of
real people as experienced and lived within daily life. Future research should, there-
fore, start with, and be responsive to, precisely these understandings and imaginar-
ies, rather than having potential threats or fears mapped out in advance. While
mindful of these complications, decisions inevitably have to be made about secu-
rity's subjects (which people to work with), objects (which fears or insecurities to
explore), and methods (how to access these subjects and objects). Such decisions
raise considerable conceptual, analytical, ethical, and methodological questions. In
this section, I elaborate on some of the most pressing of these, although resolving
them fully is, clearly, beyond this article's scope.

Beginning with the conceptual, more work is needed to set out the meaning of,
and ontological commitments associated with, "vernacular security" and—in the
process—to differentiate this from some of its alternatives such as the "human" or
"everyday." Approaching the concept as "empty"—as I suggest above—is a signifi-
cant starting point from which to spotlight the plurality of ways in which "security"
is given meaning or "filled" in concrete circumstances. Yet, whether this emptiness
is absolute or tendential—whether security is *entirely* indifferent to the contents that
fill it—is, I suggest, better approached as a question than a starting assumption
(compare Gasché 2004 and Laclau 2004). Similarly, in terms of the concept's reach,
the local, ordinary, and informal connotations of the term "vernacular" offer useful
starting points for working with this turn, but the extent of its applicability requires
consideration (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016, 321). Do, for instance, authoritative
actors and their employees, such as police officers, military personnel, or security
staff that may fall short of the elites prioritized within strategic studies, have their
own "vernacular securities"? Or, alternatively, is the term better reserved for those
entirely disconnected from the state's apparatuses or those we might agree are "non-
elites" (if such agreement were possible)? The concept's origins might also require
greater reflection, too, given that Bubandt's (2005) initial framing took its cue from
anthropological work, a discipline with its own problematic historical relationship
to security practices (Huysmans and Aradau 2014, 608).

A second set of analytical questions, which follow the above, concern research
design and conduct. These involve the need to make decisions regarding whose
vernacular securities matter (most—or, at least, most immediately), to whom, and
why and on which spaces and times research into vernacular security should con-
centrate its efforts. Is the "vernacular turn" better suited to the study of (in)security
in ostensibly stable contexts absent, for instance, interstate conflict or pandemics of
violence which may dominate public fears and experiences. Or, should studies of
vernacular security focus on highlighting (in)securities that may otherwise go un-
noticed in situations where specific forms of violence do dominate attention, as has
been the case in much critical feminist work on war, for example? The value of the
former is a contribution to the broadening of existing understandings of security:
of highlighting security's quotidian, everyday manifestations. The value of the latter
is its capacity to problematize seemingly self-evident security problematics.

Related to this are important questions about the relationship between vernac-
ular security studies and other research agendas with similar ethos. What com-
plementarities are there, and how might overlap be avoided, between work on
vernacular security and relevant postcolonial, everyday, or feminist research, such
that we might avoid constant reinvention of security's "wheel"? Vernacular security
studies—as described here—has less obvious compatibility with notions of human
or ontological security or with the "Welsh School" of critical security studies. As out-
lined above—and slightly *contra* Bubandt's (2005) original framing—the empha-
sis on localized knowledge and experiences, and a skepticism toward ontologically
foundationalist claims, means such an approach must resist the essentialist, often

cosmopolitan, assumptions of these alternatives if it is truly to engage with the "veritable cacophony of vernaculars [and] . . . the many ways people navigate the terrains of violence and envision their own security" (Luckham 2017, 113), whether progressive, regressive, neither, or both. How, then, might (or should) it dialogue with these traditions, and how can it contribute to relevant feminist or postcolonial work, which appears far closer in orientation, given vernacular security's lack of a priori emphasis on subaltern or gendered bodies?[11] As important here, however, are pragmatic questions about how vernacular security studies might work with, draw upon, and—fundamentally—learn from research practices and findings in other fields of study, for instance work on oral histories, narrative approaches, or autoethnographic studies, which may have roots in their own anthropological, literary, or sociological paradigms. What opportunities—practical as well as intellectual—exist for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research—and what are the most appropriate strategies, forms, and outlets for disseminating work of this sort?[12]

Third, are methodological questions about how best to capture the types of imaginary, experience, and fear with which advocates of vernacular security studies will be most interested. Existing work in this "tradition" has tended to employ focus group or interview methods, typically followed by content or discourse analysis of the spoken knowledge produced in those environments (e.g., Mythen, Walklate, and Khan 2009; O'Loughlin and Gillespie 2012; Jarvis and Lister 2013a; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). Such a strategy fits with the verbal connotations of a "vernacular" turn but suffers from at least three limitations. First, is a risk of reliance upon the ability and willingness of research participants to articulate, and perhaps recollect, their experiences, emotions, values, and so forth. Although it is the richness rather than the "truth" of such articulations that matters most to many working in this area—given that "methods make the worlds we study" (Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009, 670)—such an approach may be better suited to working with particular communities than others. A second issue of such methods is their limited capacity to capture wider—nonlinguistic—aspects of (in)security, rendered more readily visible, for instance, within more traditionally ethnographic approaches emphasizing performativity or nonverbal communication. Third, is the artificiality of such research findings, which may be produced in unfamiliar settings, structured according to questions established by the researcher, and otherwise impacted by reminders that one is, indeed, partaking in a research project, such as the presence of recording equipment, consent forms, and other research paraphernalia.

Such challenges—sometimes discussed in the context of the "researcher effect"—are, of course, far from unique to the sort of scholarship anticipated by this discussion. They do, however, raise important questions around the linguistic or cultural capacity of researchers engaged in work on vernacular securities. Possible strategies to address these include working with "participant researchers" recruited from within communities of interest, engaging such communities as partners in initial decisions around research design, or working with individuals already known to oneself, personally or professionally. Yet, all of this, at least implicitly, suggests that the "vernacular turn" will be a primarily qualitative one, which raises a further set of questions about the desirability of, and scope for, quantification within "critical" research of this sort (see Sjoberg and Horowitz 2013). In either case, long-standing questions around validity and reliability will have to be confronted by those drawn to this turn (see Milliken 1999), as will issues around the criteria by which work within vernacular security studies might be evaluated—whether epistemological, political, aesthetic, or some combination thereof.

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[11] For examples of relevant attempts to bridge some of these approaches, see Hudson 2005 and Newman 2010.

[12] My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing me to the "Everyday Peace Indicators" project as an excellent example of potential complementarity with work on vernacular security studies. For more on the project, see Mac Ginty and Firchow (2016) and Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017).

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, are the ethical questions raised by research into vernacular securities and the importance of the researcher/researched relationship that is fundamental to this "turn" (e.g., Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Miller et al. 2012). Such questions have been debated at length elsewhere (e.g., Gillespie 2006, 912–13) but center here on the consent of those subject to this turn: those whose stories, in other words, are sought by researchers. Such issues include: how to inform participants of the research purposes; how precisely to include participants in research design decisions; what consent is owed to those mentioned—but not themselves present—within research on vernacular securities; whether—and how—to protect the anonymity of research participants, where appropriate, and—conversely—whether and how to credit participants as coproducers of research given the implications of this for anonymity; and, finally, questions of dissemination and purpose, including how best to manage demands relating to research impact or relevance without sacrificing the integrity of a piece of vernacular security research. Such questions cannot be resolved here and, perhaps, cannot be resolved beyond the parameters and negotiation of specific research projects. They will, however, need confronting if this "turn" manages to capitalize on the potential it has for those concerned with enhancing the extent of "bottom up" research on security.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the recent, and ongoing, "vernacular turn" within security studies has genuine potential to generate alternative, richer, understandings of the politics of security. The turn's importance, I argued, derives from its concern to center non-elite individuals within security research and to treat their understandings and experiences of the (in)security challenges of everyday life as vitally important. In making this argument, the article sought, first, to situate the vernacular turn within relevant (geo-)political and intellectual dynamics; second, to distinguish it from a number of alternatives with a shared concern with individual (in)security; third, to elaborate on this turn's significance; and, fourth, to sketch possible future research agendas for those attracted to its possibilities. This, as suggested in the article's introduction, offers three contributions to contemporary debate. First, it provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the diversity of research that seeks—in different ways—to rethink security from the "bottom up", and of the value and limitations of such research. Second, it offers the fullest elaboration to date of what the "vernacular turn" in security studies might look like and what it might offer to the analysis of security vis-à-vis more established paradigms and interlocutors. Third, it offers an agenda-setting contribution by elaborating on the significant conceptual, ethical, and methodological questions raised by this new "turn."

Despite the importance of greater engagement with the voices, experiences, imaginations, and fears of "ordinary" people, further work on vernacular securities will also, finally, have to negotiate two further and substantial challenges raised by this "turn." First, is that contributing to an already diverse research agenda with at least six proximate approaches (considered above) risks further fragmenting and thereby weakening a significant body of broadly sympathetic research (see also Sylvester 2013). Indeed, the existing heterogeneity of "bottom up" work on security already potentially renders it rather more easily ignored or dismissed than its advocates might hope (see also Sylvester 2013). This is, I think, rather more of a problem if we see such approaches as competitors vying for academic relevance rather than alternative—and only in places incompatible—routes to resolving what may be a shared set of (very broad) research questions. A second challenge is that this scholarship will—like its alternatives—likely be undertaken primarily by researchers situated in the global North, which poses significant normative as well as epistemological questions around the recognition and negation of power relationships

during and after the conduct of research. Neither of these challenges should prove terminal to this "turn." Although effort will be needed, each of these will be capable of address by the types of networking, capacity building, and forging of (interdisciplinary) relationships that contribute to the ultimate success of any intellectual or critical project. This article, then, offers a first attempt to facilitate such work and to outline some of the directions it may take going forward.

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