Doing and mediating critique: An invitation to practice companionship

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Abstract

What does it mean to study security from a critical perspective? This question keeps haunting critical security studies. Conversations about normative stances, political engagement, and the role of critique are mainstays of the discipline. However, they tend to revolve around a too disembodied image of research, where the everyday practice of researchers is sidelined. Yet, researchers do *do* research: they work materially, socially, and cognitively. They *mediate* between various feedback loops or fields of critique. In doing so, they actively build and exercise critique. First, despite manifold suggestions to abandon critique, we suggest returning to the practice of critique via the notion of *companionship*. This permits us to reinvigorate our attention to the objects, persons, and phenomena through which critique gains inspiration and purpose, and that literally accompany our relationship to critique. Second, we explore what happens when our companions disagree, when critique faces controversies and (a)symmetries. Here, we support research designs of tracing credibility and establishing symmetries in order to move away from critique as denouncing positions we disagree with. Third, we discuss the relation between companionship, critique, reflexivity, and style. Here, the rhetorical practices of critical inquiry are laid out, and possibilities for its articulation in different and less silencing voices are proposed.

Introduction

Critique is a specter. It haunts the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences alike. Indeed, critique has always held a role in knowledge production (Foucault, 1997), under this name or another, deliberately or not, admittedly or not. Yet it seems today that critique has run into trouble (Felski, 2012). The theoretical, normative, and methodological techniques associated with 'being critical' are being denounced for their apparent failure to translate their theoretical sophistication into practical change (Latour, 2004; Zourzani, 2002). More than this, debates are emerging about the possible contribution of critical techniques of reasoning to the rise of 'post-truth' politics (Collins et al., 2017; Fuller, 2016; Sismondo, 2017).

Critical security studies is also worrying about the status of its nomenclature. Reflections on the success of critical approaches to studying (in)security (Huysmans and Pontes Nogueira, 2016), their political dimensions (Koddenbrock, 2014), and their methodological commitments (Aradau et al., 2015) are multiplying. Indeed, as Debbie Lisle writes, critical security studies is among the 'scholarly traditions' that share 'the urgent need to do something' about the state of the world. And yet:

> Critical thinkers [also] know two things: (1) that 'we' are complicit in producing horrific conditions around the world because our privilege is built on the backs of others, and (2) that any solution – no matter how well intentioned – causes its own violence (Lisle, 2016: 419).

This sentiment speaks of a paralysis. Critique frequently has normative ambitions, but few ways to actualize them. In consequence, some are now asking whether the future of critical research approaches is at stake (Browning and McDonald, 2011). Is critique today being used 'out of habit', despite no longer being 'the tool needed for the kinds of situations we now face' (Barad et al., 2012: 49)?

This article explores the challenges that critique faces by focusing on its practice. Our intuition in doing so is that (self-critical) debates across critical security studies have neglected the fact that researchers do *do* research. Like any practice, critique is a practical activity. Hence, judging the successes, failures, or troubles of the field cannot rest on intellectual accounts alone. More is required than another genealogy of critical security studies (c.a.s.e. collective, 2006; Krause and Williams, 1997; Mandelmaum et al., 2016;

Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2010). The demand of the day is for an embodied account of critique that reveals how it comes to matter, or not, practically speaking. To meet this challenge, we focus here on what we term the 'doing' and 'mediating' of critique.

Doing critique refers to the socio-material practices of knowledge production that support our everyday research – the embodied work of critique. Our argument suggests that the material, social, and cognitive work of doing critique does not occur in a vacuum. Even when working as 'armchair' analysts, researchers are always busy selecting sources, engaging with research objects, and publishing analyses. They teach classes, speak publicly, and talk with informants. As a result, researchers are also themselves actively involved in the *mediating* of critique. Here, mediating does not refer to a hermeunetic form of communication where the scholar simply conveys a pre-existing truth. Instead, mediating refers to a researcher's position and work as one link in a chain of meaning-making that stretches across diverse actors and domains of life. Understanding the practice of critique through its doings and mediations ultimately allows for a better understanding not only of the directions in which critique is moving, or the transformations its practices bring about, but also of the challenges it is currently experiencing.

To sharpen this argument, we draw our discussion on doing and mediating critique together by focusing on the 'companionship' central to critical knowledge production. In our view, doing critique is fundamentally characterized by our relations or our companionship with the many other mediating links that critical works are entangled with. These links can be human objects of study, material or technological infrastructures, rhetorical styles of thinking, and much more. Following Donna Haraway (2008: 3), engaging with these companions is about a 'grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary'. In the context of critique, this involves recognizing the critical capacities that exist far beyond the corridors of academia (Boltanski, 2011) and – much more importantly – recognizing that these capacities are directly and unavoidably implicated in the production of critical security studies and its knowledge. An active appreciation of companionship thus involves not only avoiding 'generalizing from' the social world. It also involves engaging with the possibilities for critical renewal that everyday companions might suggest and – in doing so – being more humble about the place of critique.

Our argument develops in four parts. We begin by explaining what it means to understand critique as a practice and the problems encountered in considering critique in this way. The second section then introduces our notion of companionship and illustrates how the practice of critique changes in its mediations between researchers, objects, and other

phenomena. Appreciating the mediations that characterize this relationship, we argue, goes beyond the classic focus on positionality and involves recognizing the co-constitution of critical knowledge (see Kaufmann, 2018). The third section continues this argument by exploring how the doing of critique then also requires paying attention to the controversies and (a)symmetries in which research objects are enmeshed, and to the contestations over credibility that emerge in the very mediation of critique. The fourth section relates companionship to a discussion of reflexivity, style, and their re-imagination. We conclude by discussing how our account relates to the future of critique within critical security studies.

The practice of critique

We wish to think critique *as* practice. We wish to understand how it is 'done'. Towards this end, our discussion is situated within the broader study of practices across critical security studies (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; Bueger and Gadinger, 2014). Notably, we share the core ambition of 'developing an account of knowledge as action, appreciating the collectivity of knowledge, recognizing the materiality of practice' (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015: 449). Such an account, we wager, will allow us to explore the practice of critique in ways that focus our gaze on its troublesome present and possible futures.

Exploring critique in this way, however, faces several initial difficulties. First, we must reckon with the fact that the act of 'being critical' has long been portrayed as an exclusive and elitist exercise. Practitioners of critique have too often believed their tools to be 'exceptional' (Felski, 2012). Indeed, even the 'critique of critique', as Jacques Rancière (2009: 45–46) once put it, revolves around the image of 'the poor cretin' against whom its insights are directed. It is on the shoulders of this 'cultural dope' (Garfinkel, 1967) that critique has long established the distance upon which it has built its intellectual, social, and political legitimacy. Put simply, '"critical" researchers too often seem to perceive a need to outwit their interlocutors' (Kurowska and Tallis, 2013: 74).

The problem with such an elitist understanding of critique is that it often represents its own practice as an 'essentially disembodied intellectual exercise' (Felski, 2012). In doing so, it makes offering an everyday account of critique as a relatively 'unexceptional' phenomenon controversial. It is thus that, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of the practice of the *homo academicus* is an analysis of academic taste, capital, and structure as experienced specifically within that bounded realm ('field'). Here, critical practice retains its exclusivity by defining the borders of a very specific domain (academia) in which it occurs. And this

tendency is true also of critical security studies. Indeed, accounts of the practice of critical security studies have generally been focused on (genealogically) assessing its internal progress as a bounded field largely exterior to the broader social world (see, for example, Buzan and Hansen, 2009). Take the manifesto of the c.a.s.e. collective (2006). The manifesto focuses the bulk of its attention on reviewing the history of critical security studies and its potential futures, before closing with a discussion about 'becoming relevant' for broader society (c.a.s.e. collective, 2006: 473). The manifesto here acknowledges that it would be a 'mistake' to see 'security studies and security policymaking as clearly separated spheres', since both researchers and practitioners produce knowledge, sometimes even in 'co-production' (c.a.s.e. collective, 2006: 472). However, it limits the scope of these interconnections and stresses that these linkages must only exist to the extent that the 'autonomy' of critical security studies' own intellectual field can be maintained (c.a.s.e. collective, 2006: 472–476).

We argue that the idea of an 'autonomous' critical field of practice is both epistemologically illusory and politically dangerous. Epistemically, we argue that conceptualizing critical knowledge production cannot be marked by the borders of the internal and external, researcher and object, or abstract-political and everyday situations. Rather, we suggest that critique is a collective endeavor. We are part of the practices we study, and vice versa (Barad, 2007). Critique is not produced in a vacuum, but exercised as constant mediation, communication, and transformation between sociopolitical spheres. Understanding the doing of critique thus requires weakening the view of critical security studies as being made up of 'conscious constructors' of critique enclosed within a bounded field of practice (Ferraris, 2015: 430). Doing critique means embracing the fact that we are also often 'passive receptors' of the critical capacities present across different social domains (Ferraris, 2015: 430). In other words, we want to argue for a more ontologically holistic understanding of critical knowledge production, one that challenges the continued (Kantian) myth of knowledge production as achieved via a closed community of reason rather than being a distributed social effect.

Politically, the necessity of challenging the perceived 'autonomy' of critique is accelerating. Today, military organizations that once associated 'critique' with 'images of longhaired eccentrics or pipe-smoking philosophers' have now come to suggest that 'there are many important sources for military postmodern thought', including in their reading lists some influential thinkers for critical security studies, such as Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault (Zweibelson, 2017: 140, 151). And populist, conservative, and corporate political

and economic actors have equally come to borrow 'critical ploys' to counter knowledge claims that could hamper their interests (Latour, 2004). In this context, while individual critics must continue to seek *political* autonomy for their activities (i.e. avoiding *direct* co-option), they demonstrably cannot gain autonomy for the critical artifacts they produce. From the c.a.s.e. collective's (2006: 475) viewpoint, this speaks 'the impossibility of directly steering interpretation and usage'. From our perspective, however, this state of affairs is not necessarily a cause for concern. Instead, it suggests an opportunity to expand the possible sources through which critique is mediated, widening the horizons of its practice. Achieving that, however, requires a much closer look at how the practice of critique mediates with different and distant social spheres.

To move towards that goal, the praxeology of critique we offer herein is focused on the interactions between critical scholars and what we term – with Haraway (2008) – their 'companions'. To begin to see what we mean, look around yourself. Literally. What do you see? The answer will depend on who you are, of course. But let us guess: chairs, books, screens, pens, paper, people, colleagues, lovers, friends, companions of different kinds. These everyday companions 'help us make our minds, reaching out to us to form active partnerships' (Turkle, 2007: 308). This is true even where they have no direct or obvious connection to what we are trying to 'make our minds' up about: they emerge often from very distant domains of social life, informing critique nonetheless. For Haraway (2008: 17), to think in terms of companionship is thus to recognize that we are always 'becoming with' others, rather than against or without them. To say that doing critique is about companionship is thus to argue, ontologically, that the ideas produced by the critical scholar and inscribed in her text are produced at least partially *externally* to the academic field: by persons, material things, and other practices or networks that mediate those ideas across time and space.

Our argument is thus situated, to some degree, within the pragmatist variant of praxeology that foregrounds the ways in which any social practice is unavoidably intertwined with innumerable others. From this view, critique can never be practiced alone. Instead, critical companionship means, to adapt Annemarie Mol (2008: 31), that 'instead of passivity' on the side of the interlocutors of critique, the material forms that make it possible, or the everyday routines that surround it, and 'activity' on the side of the critical intellectual, there is instead 'activity all around' – a form of critical 'inter-activity'. We suggest that taking up this view, in particular as it is articulated through feminist (Barad, 2007), 'post-ANT' (Gad and Jensen, 2010), or 'speculative pragmatist' (Debaise and Stengers, 2017) perspectives, is a particularly promising way of grasping the practice of critique. Notably, it allows us to

overcome the often harsh tenor of elitist understandings of critique (Austin, forthcoming) by understanding the co-imbrication of the academic critique with the object of that critique (Bellanova, 2014). To see critique as about companionship is then ultimately about democratizing our understanding of knowledge production.

It is this focus on the companionship at the heart of critique that we wish – above all – to bring to critical security studies. By focusing on the practice of critique as it is done and mediated through its multiple companions, we hope to move away from a critical stance premised on the asymmetry between the enlightened sociologist situated in a more or less closed and privileged academic field and 'ordinary people sunk in illusion', and towards inclusive and symmetrical approaches (Boltanski, 2011: 23–24). The idea of thinking in terms of our companions of critique is thus an extension of efforts to highlight the critical capacity of actors (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999) and the situated knowledge they produce and stimulate (Haraway, 1991a, 1991b). The ambition, and our invitation, is to explore our scholarly practice of critique as always in the making, entwined and in conversation with what surrounds us rather than representing a detached striving for a virtuosic solo.

Companions and critique

We want to think of critique as a practice that both characterizes and is characterized by everyday companions. Let us begin with an example. Lisle and Johnson (this issue) attempt to make sense of the praxis of critical engagement. They do not do so scholastically but begin instead by 'deliberately muting' their own struggles 'in order to create more space for building solidarity' with the subjects of their research: migrants traversing the Mediterranean who, despite appearing only in 'absence, echoes, and traces' in their account, are the (ethical) companions of their journey. To make this possible, their interactions with those migrants are shown to be mediated through a set of material objects: fences, chairs, clothing, and other detritus of loss. Analyzing photographs of these objects, the authors trace out how it is such companions that 'bring everyday lifeworlds into the frame of both crisis and aftermath' and – in doing so – build up the very possibility of critical engagement, of doing critique itself.

Accounts like Lisle and Johnson's reorder the elitist vision of critique by suggesting a need to accept 'the possibility of critical researchers no longer "leading" their own projects' but instead humbly redefining themselves as only one among many mediators of critique (Austin, forthcoming). In this respect, a fuller appreciation of the companions central to critique relates to the shift to the everyday across the social sciences. However, rather than

simply studying that 'everyday', we seek to articulate a true presence between the everyday and critical political intervention. We move to such a view when we recognize that companions of critique are objects that ground us. They give more substance to critique and allow us to look at critique as a creative commentary emerging from within a very diverse field of social practice. In this, engaging with companionship does not mean identifying any particular companion whose critical capacity is capable of revealing an ultimate, universal truth ordering the social. Instead, it is about collecting a multitude of distinct accounts of the social that can feed into a far broader critical understanding of any state of affairs we may be exploring.

Companions, then, force us to speak from within their own and our shared worlds by guiding us into what Luc Boltanski (2011: 26) calls a 'complex interiority'. This viewpoint obliges us to consider how our companions' claims and disputes inform our own analysis of any situation, which also includes an acknowledgement of how companions work to mediate the critical content of our analysis *prior* to our engagement with it. Such mediations are always ongoing, and an active understanding of their existence can, we also want to suggest, work to destabilize the 'either/or mindset' (Felski, 2016: 216) that has long characterized critique, and within which what is not critical must be uncritical (Felski, 2015). If we understand critique as being ontologically mediated, then its specific content emerges from a host of distinct and sometimes opposed companions whose engagements are all equally necessary to the constitution of critique. Thus, the decision to label that which is not politically or socially active as 'uncritical' is a choice related to the doing of critique, and often its ethical or political commitments, rather than an ontologically valid statement.

In this regard, consider the work of Leese et al. (this issue), where the authors explore their experience working within EU-funded research projects. Their contribution explores a new (or, perhaps, newly institutionalized) companion of critique: practitioners directly requesting ethical critique. In theory, such financial patronage appears to allow for the possibility of a form of critique from within security practices, which would be the best-case scenario. However, in the worst-case scenario the risk of the co-option or curtailing of critical reasoning emerges. Yet the authors show that there is more at play here. The situation of companionship under discussion is one in which companions are setting the 'framework' under which critique must operate and, in doing so, clearly predefining its content – if not literally, then certainly ontologically. This forces a consideration not only of the limitations such frameworks impose (i.e. how they themselves mediate critique), but also of the ways in

which this new form of companionship might be positively harnessed to 'intensify the sense of possibles' (Debaise and Stengers, 2017: 17) available to critical forms of engagement.

Examples like these demonstrate how the desired distance between critique and practice, as articulated within the c.a.s.e manifesto, is increasingly illusory. This is true both when the frameworks in which critique occurs are established by our companions in very direct terms, but also vis-a-vis what seem more trivial companions. Indeed, take Sjoberg's (this issue) discussion of the failures of critique. She links many of these failures to the structure of Anglo-Saxon 'debating' practices. These debates are characterized by two purposes that are also typically at work in critique: the 'substance' of critical argumentation and the point that these arguments need to be articulated in ways that 'win' the debate or academic capital. Here, Sjoberg is effectively linking the practice of critique back to the ways in which it is mediated through much broader cultural-discursive practices that have typically accompanied critique. And these practices are – also – companions to critical reasoning today.

As these examples suggest, actively appreciating the role of companionship in producing critique is one avenue through which the politics of critique might be reconfigured and remobilized. If we recognize critique as always being in 'dynamic interplay with its object' (Raley, 2013: 135), then we are also forced to make the stronger claim that critique can have an 'object' only in an abstract sense. Pragmatically, critical companionship is about cultivating a set of subject/subject rather than subject/object relations. This position recognizes that while a particular phenomenon may be the focus of critique, this very critique can only emerge by engaging with the subjecthood of all that makes it possible (Haraway, 2016; Kurowska and Tallis, 2013; Mol, 2002). Doing so is important, ethically, because it might allow every companion to 'yield up ... [their] interpretive riches' for the critical endeavor 'rather than being' objects to be 'suspiciously probed for ... contradictions' (Felski, 2015: 66).

Importantly, a focus on companionship is distinct from the search for sociopolitical 'allies' that has long been central to critique (Deleuze, 1995: 22). Here, the link between critique and praxis rests on the mobilization of public spheres *allied* against a particular state of affairs, again in a typically oppositional (either/or) fashion (Abraham and Abramson, 2015). By contrast, companions in doing critique need not be allies. They can also be opponents, even enemies, or simply indifferent, nonetheless remaining vital to the possibility of critique. After all, Haraway (1991a: 151) made clear that cyborgs, her early companions, 'are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism', and yet they permitted her to think through our complex present in potentially

emancipatory ways. Indeed, the ethos of the approach is about embracing the positive *potentiality* of companionship, however ethically fraught. Overall, the perspective focuses on identifying and exploring 'matters of care' in a way that adds 'something to matters of fact/concern with the intention of not only respecting them, but of engaging with their becoming' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011: 100).

Naturally, the broad scope of companionship taken up here poses normative worries: are terrorists, torturers, and fascists to be considered companions in critique? Or what, less dramatically but perhaps more importantly, of the police, the military, and populist politicians (Kurowska and Tallis, 2013)? Are all these figures also doing and mediating critique? And what does that mean for those who self-define as critical? We will explore these normative problems throughout the discussion that follows, but, to begin, we would assert again with Haraway that our ultimate goal here is to stay stubbornly with the 'trouble' of critique. In her words, 'staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present' (Haraway, 2016: 1). When it comes to critique, this means to refuse the temptation to reduce critical action to the debunking of those we disagree with. Instead, we seek to stay with the deeply troubled present of the world, recognizing – in any case – that though 'the situation [today] is critical', we ourselves still 'don't know which protagonist's cause to take up' (Stengers, 2015: 34). In consequence of this, we can exclude no voice from our critical accounts.

Companionship can include the possibility, if not the need, to do and mediate critique in ways other than the established (critical) research methods and outlets. This also means that it can be discomforting if companions lead us outside our comfort zone and beyond our typical audiences. On the one hand, we may feel lost doing research without the guidance of well-known methods and formats. On the other hand, discomfort spreads when we have to push the boundaries of those successful methods and formats through which critical security studies expresses its contents. Indeed, for many scholars the possibility to keep working as critical researchers relies upon the capacity to produce accounts that have a recognizable value in their work environment. Some ways of doing and mediating critique are more valuable than others for securing a grant, a permanent position, or an international audience. Often, peer-reviewed articles in journals with a high impact factor become the only accounts that count. Such codifications of what it means to produce a critical product are, in and of themselves, companions to our work. They support the production of critical works and their scientific recognition (Salter and Mutlu, 2013), while highlighting critical security studies' specificity vis-a-vis other scientific endeavors (Aradau et al., 2015). By inviting us to leave our laboriously carved out comfort zones, companionship also questions the scope of this

success of critical security studies (see also Aradau and Huysmans, this issue). It wants us to recognize the risk of becoming *too* comfortable with methodological and publication standards. In practice, this calls for a more explicit discussion of the dynamics at play in the knowledge economy (Stengers, 2018), especially those touching upon the conditions of academic labor. Discomfort can thus turn into a resource for those scholars, publishing outlets, and institutions that consider themselves part of critical security studies and that want to continue to test the boundaries of what is possible when doing and mediating. This means embracing 'a more flexible understanding of what the criteria for valid knowledge' could be and in what ways research results can be presented (Leander, 2016: 471) – a point that brings us to our next section.

Controversy, companionship, and credibility

Doing critique from the position of complex interiority that companionship creates sees the critic come face to face with knowledge controversies and disputes (Barry, 2012). For example, William Walters' (2014) study of drone strikes brings the controversies that accompany this practice to the fore. By highlighting drone strikes as an object of political debate, he points to the problem that critique may never find just a singular political position to denounce. Likewise, Frank Gadinger's (2016) study on public hearings about Abu Ghraib held at the US Senate shows that situations of controversy, especially those where the dispute is institutionalized, are intrinsic to any practice. Each and every day, actors are producing conflicting accounts about a state of affairs, justifying their actions and behavior differently, and questioning each other's knowledge and its implications constantly (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). Controversies like these reveal an intensity of the everyday critical capacity at work, but are also a challenge for exercising critique from within. They raise the question of how we negotiate between competing truth claims without falling back into an either/or mindset. Put simply: what do we do when our companions disagree?

The 'symmetry' principle has been the most common way of dealing with controversies and the opposed critical capacities they contain. This sociological principle declares that all propositions made in the world (i.e. knowledge claims, practices) about a specific state of affairs should *initially* held to be equally relevant for a researcher. In this view, no particular knowledge claim or practice should be discarded from the scope of the analysis just because they have been socially abandoned, proved scientifically untenable, or because we ethically or politically disagree with them. The view was developed most

prominently within the sociology of critical capacity and science and technology studies (Bijker, 1995), where it was operationalized as a means of analytically, ethically, and ontologically 'flattening' the reading of any given situation to avoid the a priori privileging of any particular claim or phenomena. This flattening occurs under the analytical intuition that multiple perspectives and disagreements are crucially important to understanding social life.

This is a controversial viewpoint. For many, such an 'equality of positioning' is often taken to be 'a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry' (Haraway, 1991b: 191). More recently, it has been argued that the symmetrical approach has major political consequences. It appears, for example, that such an embrace of symmetry can unnecessarily offer credence to populist, racist, or misogynistic political viewpoints (Fuller, 2016). Likewise, the concept risks being 'weaponized' so as to demote or promote specific forms of expertise in ways that benefit particular political or economic interests (Collins et al., 2017). However, what is often forgotten when the symmetry principle is translated into critical security studies is that a symmetrical approach is part of a social scientific research *design,* and not a necessary *result* of research itself (Callon and Latour, 1992). Symmetrical research designs provide a baseline on which to begin studying complex social phenomena: understanding how political or social asymmetries come about requires tracing them from the point of their emergence as well as their continuous reinforcement. Accordingly, this principle does not deny that actors are different from each other, in diverse positions and with different resources, nor does it deny that controversies themselves are not politically neutral. It merely states that understanding (or indeed supporting) such normative, ethical, or political asymmetries requires that we first and foremost develop a fuller descriptive understanding of how they emerge and are solidified. To put it in the language of this article's argument: the companions that critique engages with will inevitably differ in their commitments, and this disagreement must be fully considered. But this does not mean – in the final analysis – that the critic cannot adjudicate between their claims but, rather, that each of these companions is given an initial equality of weighting, and it is recognized that none can be ignored if an adequate critical position-taking is ever to take place.

Ultimately, the symmetry principle is based on moving away from the traditional critical focus on the debunking or deconstruction of taken-for-granted knowledge claims. As Isabelle Stengers (2008: 92) writes, 'debunking, or "deconstructive" conceptions of [social science] usually only address the value of truth associated with our judgements in order to denounce it'. As discussed earlier, present sociopolitical circumstances show that this strategy is not only inadequate to address emerging political dilemmas but can also be actively

mobilized by normatively problematic actors. In the face of this 'post-truth' era, Aradau and Huysmans (this issue) thus suggest an alternative (symmetrical) approach to 'debunking' that seeks instead to understand how knowledge claims and practices gain *credibility*. The guiding principle here is that it is only by understanding how one or another knowledge claim gains pre-eminence that it becomes possible to imagine challenging such claims. Indeed, the relevance of a focus on credibility can be seen by exploring the decline of credibility in the modern scientific method. In the early stages of modern science, the 'gentleman' was a central figure in assembling the credibility of scientific claims (Shapin, 1995). Such figures acted as witnesses to the scientific experiments being carried out. Gentlemen lent their credits – obtained through social status rather than scientific competence – to the practices and scientific claims at stake. Today, however, science generally gains credibility through the alleged objectivity of its methods or, as Beate Jahn (2017: 69) puts it, through 'the practice of abstraction – embodied in numbers, formulae, models, scientific languages', which works to 'establish a sense of factuality, of irrefutability – of policies formulated in response to and addressing the nature of things'.

As Aradau and Huysmans (this issue) note, critical security studies has become keen to echo such a logic by presenting its work as methodologically 'valid' and 'rigorous'. Indeed, diverse techniques of justification and clarification have been refined within critical security studies, with methodological repertoires increasingly codified into manuals and handbooks (Aradau et al., 2015; Burgess, 2010; Leander, 2016; Salter and Mutlu, 2013; Shepherd, 2013). To some degree, these practices can be taken as an attempt at the scientification of traditional critical modes of thinking. However, this focus on gaining credibility through methodological rigor appears effective only within the (artificially closed) scientific field itself, and does not take into consideration how alternate social fields are gaining credibility in ways that radically undermine scientific authority. From Aradau and Huysmans' perspective, it is thus necessary to trace precisely how credibility has been assembled in diverse and distant social fields. For example, take the following much-quoted conversation between a journalist and a member of the Bush administration:

> The [administration] aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore.' (Suskind, 2004)

These words speak to a manipulation of knowledge achieved through new media technologies and the social performance of knowledge. Today, such mediated credibility has reached its zenith in the rise of 'fake news' and 'post-truth', which are assembled via the co-option of social media, big data, and other technologies, as well as critical theory itself. Understanding how this has occurred requires taking these mediated forms of credibility and their tools as a set of uncomfortable companions to critical inquiry. Doing so allows us to appreciate that the term 'post-truth' is something of a misnomer, since it is not – in fact – the coordinates of truth that have shifted but the coordinates of credibility. If we recognize this, we can see that both assembling credibility and tracing how credibility is assembled are ongoing activities. Credibility is not achieved once and for all, but has to be reassembled and fitted, again and again, depending on circumstance. And this is, for those working within critical security studies, equally and most importantly true for the practice of critique itself.

Indeed, most important in this symmetrical understanding of (credible) knowledge production is the potential it holds to allow for the imagination of new modes of doing critique within critical security studies in ways that augment its credibility. For example, Lisle and Johnson (this issue) reorder the practices of doing and mediating critique by deliberately moving away from the critical reliance on the written word. By drawing on photographic material to mediate their critique, they shift critical praxis away from linguistic argumentation and towards an affective and poetic critical engagement. These photos make no claim to objectively render a controversial state of affairs. Instead, they leave Lisle and Johnson's study a matter of interpretation in a way that gives their objects the possibility to object and allows us, as peer reviewers or colleagues, to object (to the choice of the pictures, their style, etc.). In engaging images in this way, Lisle and Johnson shift the coordinates of credit accumulation by gifting the voices of their critical companions greater volume than their own.

Take another example. Leese et al.'s (this issue) experience as part of European-funded research projects involves 'living' – quite literally – with their object of critique on a daily basis. In this, they risk their scientific status by unintentionally lending credibility to their partners, because they are funded and framed as the guarantors of the ethical 'soundness' of the security measures developed in their projects. This is a quite extreme example of the difficulty of carrying out critical research in an academic context that increasingly embraces the mechanisms of the 'knowledge economy' (Stengers, 2018). Rather than despairing in this situation, however, the authors tease out the critical possibilities of such a difficult situation of companionship. It is a situation in which critique becomes nested within current socio-technical networks of knowledge production in ways that it has rarely achieved previously.

While not without risk, to live out the positionality of the critical researcher in this way also creates new room for disagreements *internal to that which we critique* and, hence, builds a set of relations that may gift critical security studies greater sociopolitical credibility.

Ultimately, acknowledging that credibility is a temporary assemblage also underlines that only working towards assembling *credible* alternative realities can work to undermine truth claims we disagree with. Deconstructing and debunking is never enough. Put differently, contemporary flux over the status of knowledge and truth claims across the world demands that the doing of critique is injected with a type of self-renewing imagination. Critical security studies and cognate fields cannot rely on classical modes of accumulating credibility to remain relevant to social affairs. Instead, novel means of articulating critical knowledge claims must be invented, and supported across the field. Discovering these novel approaches, however, requires that we accept that critique is produced, to some degree, symmetrically across social spheres, rather than privileging a closed, bounded, and only superficially 'autonomous' critical field. Once this is appreciated, we are forced to imagine how critique might be generated from within the complex interiorities of companionship, which sometimes implies engaging with companions of critique that some might deem ethically problematic. By critiquing from within the positions we object to, without moralistic posturing, we might assemble new forms of critical credibility in ways that might more effectively disrupt those damaging tools.

Companionship, reflexivity, and style

Studying the practice of critique through companionship reorders not only our understanding of how its knowledge is assembled and, thereafter, does or does not achieve credibility, but also its reflexive situation. If meaning is constructed both at the level of action *and* observation, then reflecting on the avenues through which we construct critique in collaboration with companions is key (Guzzini, 2000: 162). Within critical security studies, reflexivity has largely been imported via a combination of a feminist-standpoint epistemology (Hansen, 2000; Sjoberg, 2009; Wibben, 2016) and the Bourdieusian injunction to always 'objectify the objectifying subject' (Bourdieu, 1984: xii). By seeking to dig into the 'scholastic unconscious' (Bourdieu, 1997: 50) and by implicating the *homo academicus* in the existence of that which she critiques, reflexivity has always been seen as key to critical self-awareness.

However, there is growing concern that reflexivity is being transformed into a rote obligation, a mere footnote to critique, or – more strongly – into what Bourdieu (1997: 49) called 'self-indulgent narcissism'. In particular, there exists a risk that the 'privileging' of certain voices works only for the critical 'self-presentation of moral purity' (Srnicek and Williams, 2015: 23) rather than any truly normative or emancipatory end. Of course, the need to maintain the amplification of subjugated perspectives is also, as discussed earlier, one of the central objections to symmetrical forms of analysis: does not rendering the world symmetrical, even if only analytically, silence voices yet again? To conclude our discussion of the critical purchase of companionship in the doing of critique, we thus now move to exploring how appreciating critique in this way can also reorder our understanding of reflexivity in novel ways.

To begin, it is important to realize that the reflexive injunction to take a certain social or political position is in itself always fraught. For instance, each of the contributions in this special issue uses the personal pronoun *I* or *we*. The risk associated with the use of *I* or *we* is that of reducing reflexivity to *self*-reflexivity and critical position-taking as a form of virtue-signaling, rather than pursuing sustained companionship or broader reflexive projects. The difficulty here relates to something 'that can be seen in every scientific article and that is of interest in the practice of publishing ... every scientist addresses himself or herself to colleagues who are "keeping vigil"' (Despret, 2016: 156). The decline of critique as a *civil* exercise, which means the creeping abandonment of critical debate outside the university, text, or a community of scholars, suggests that critical reflexivity is no longer adequately focused beyond the academic field. And this can often cause its own violence. The memoires of an escapee of a North Korean prison camp, taken from his time at university, makes this point clearly:

> One day, a discussion with a student member of *Hannnchongnyon,* the university's leftist
> organization, grew rather heated. I was being bombarded with would-be intellectual
> arguments about class, domination, and imperialism, featuring references to people such as
> Pierre Bourdieu. Onlookers had surrounded us. Whose side were they on? Did they agree with
> my interlocutor when he said that I had a 'subjectivist' point of view and that my personal
> experience [was irrelevant]? (Chol-Hwan, 2001: 228)

Words like these show the risk of critical inquiry becoming a process in which people cannot 'control what is written and said about them' by 'parasitic scholars' (Deloria, 1972: 96). Interestingly, and as that particular example attests, this tendency is often embraced by

scholars who hold the goal of emancipating the oppressed but who do not actively cultivate a broad form of companionship founded on kindness and hope rather than distrust and skepticism. While distant or 'externalist' critique is sometimes necessary, the violence it risks is obvious. And there is no easy solution to this tension. Nonetheless, we would suggest that critique has typically remained too selfish in its use of reflexivity, despite recent efforts to downplay one's own expertise. Reflexivity as articulated within critical practice still commonly and self-indulgently takes without giving back.

The 'self-indulgence' of critique as exercised today is most obvious in its *style*. Indeed, the usual form that critique takes can be associated with the literary style of spy or detective stories, where mysteries, conspiracies, or crimes are uncovered, explored, and solved (Boltanski, 2014; Ginzburg, 1980). Analytically, Felski (2012, 2015) has described this style as being founded on a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. This style is based on the desire to hermeneutically unveil (deliberately or not) previously hidden aspects of the world by being suspicious of everything we see, hear, or read about. Hence the analogy to spy and detective stories. Overall, it is a form of critique that treats its object as an enemy that needs to be exposed, rather than as a companion to be engaged. And a great majority of work within critical security studies and critical international relations has indeed followed this rhetorical style (Austin, forthcoming).

The risk that the hermeneutics of suspicion poses is not only related to silencing the voices of its objects of analysis (its companions), but is also that it reinforces the earlier discussed problem of conceptualizing critical knowledge production as occurring within an elitist vacuum. As Felski (2012) writes, critique has always liked 'to have the last word' and to do so stylistically by employing difficult, slow, and complex words (Bové, 1992). For Sjoberg (this issue), much of this difficulty can be related to how we are socialized into critique through the dominance of Anglo-Saxon debating style, which is absolutist in form. This argumentative style is self-assured (Latour, 2004) and again oriented at exposing 'invisible' causes of domination or misunderstanding to be denounced (Dascal, 1997; Felski, 2012). But, with Michel Serres, we ask, 'Why does philosophy ... take the role of public prosecutor? The role of denouncer?' (Serres and Latour, 1995: 147). Why *must* it be suspicious in tone (Austrin and Farnsworth, 2005; Zourzani, 2002)? Indeed, is not 'judgemental reason ... an extremely weak form of thought, precisely because it is so sure of itself' (Massumi, 2002: 221)? And does not the very decline in critical credibility discussed earlier demonstrate this weakness only all too well?

Central to an understanding of critical practice focused on companionship is, therefore, reordering the style of critique beyond these modes of judgmental reason. Doing so is important not only for the ethical problems posed by that form of reasoning, but also for the very survival of critical security studies itself. Seeing the practice of critical knowledge production as fundamentally related to style, rhetoric, and form, rather than solely method, reason, and theory, immediately assists in symmetrically flattening traditional knowledge hierarchies. It demands we accept that the decline in critical credibility is related, to some degree, to the ways in which other actors have co-opted the philosophy of critique but altered its stylistic modes of articulation. Altering the styles of critical security studies may, therein, be crucial to recovering its own credibility. And a starting point towards this latter goal can be derived through an explicit embrace of the 'exhibitionist' qualities of critique. As Vinciane Despret (2016: 35) writes, if social scientists came to consider their places of work as 'places of exhibition', rather than closed fields of practice, they would also be forced to appreciate the stylistic or aesthetic dimensions of their work. Eventually,

> researchers would explore new questions that would have no meaning other than to be welcomed by those to whom the propositions are made. Each experiment, then, would become a true performance and would require tact, imagination, consideration, and attention. (Despret, 2016: 35)

Consciously acknowledging the exhibitionist quality of critique might thus allow us to play with its doing and mediating in a way that avoids self-indulgence, actively engages its companions, and transforms its own knowledge. Rather than following a strict form of logical argumentation, exhibitionist methods would allow for what Sjoberg (this issue) calls the 'inherent messiness, difficulty, strife, and even failure' of critique to be embraced and actively articulated in the 'outputs' of the field. Likewise Burgess's (this issue) discussion of how critique is itself 'fundamentally a moment of insecurity' can only be captured in a stylistic form that escapes the now obsolete certainty of judgmental critical reason. As he writes, 'the position from which critique is exercised can neither be self-supporting nor self-certain', but is instead invested in the 'ultimate precariousness' of both its nature and its mission. With these words, Burgess ultimately supports a reform of the rhetorical styles that have long characterized critical thought in critical security studies, and beyond.

Indeed, it is notable that the critical methods employed by the majority of contributors in this issue are about altering the style of critique. Lisle and Johnson's (this issue) use of the photo-essay is based on loosening the critical writer's grip on their text's argumentative form

and, instead, engaging the reader affectively and emotionally. This auto-ethnographic style is echoed in the articles by Sjoberg (this issue) and Leese et al. (this issue), where the exercise of scientific authority through methodological or technical specialization is loosened in favor of a more intimate engagement with the authors' companions. Across these interventions, it is also notable that a kinder form of critique is embraced, one premised on listening, hearing, and softly engaging with the world, while reserving harsher suspicion only for the academic field itself. All are critical, but their politics rests not in knee-jerk denunciation, favoring instead the cultivation of 'another way of being' (Kohn, 2013: 14). In this regard, the ultimate goal of altering styles of critique is to focus our attention on how our studies might or might not be 'interfering' in social relations and so to consider 'what is a good way of doing research, of going about the assembling and the handling' and the composing of 'material' (Mol, 2002: 151). In this view, reflexivity is less about acknowledging the struggles of critical companions, so much as to actively interact with and mediate critique with them. Put simply, reflexivity becomes about re-mediating the doing of critique in more thoughtful, respectful, and caring directions.

Conclusions

Critique is a specter. It is something, to adapt Jacques Derrida (2006), that we can never fully know: not because of ignorance, but because critique is a 'non-object' to which no fixed definition can ever be attached. And yet we are invited to 'address' the specter (Derrida, 2006: 13) and to enter in conversation with all the possible forms that make critique possible. Of course, today the specter of critique haunts us especially strongly – we have suggested – because we have for too long been too certain about what critique contains. In an effort to reconsider the practice of critique, as well as its contemporary dilemmas, this article thus applied the traditional tools of critique to critique itself. In doing so, we have questioned the utility of its hermeneutics of suspicion, its reliance on archaic modes of credibility, and its practice from inside closed academic fields and elitist positions. However, in making these criticisms, we are not seeking to undermine critical social science. Again, our concern is solely with an understanding of critique that is too fixed, too solid, too self-assured.

Our conclusion is thus that critique must always be fitted to its times and, today, that changes are needed. There are many ways in which this process of change might be achieved, of course. Herein, we have offered just one reading of critique that might help a little in moving it beyond its contemporary aporia. Reading critique through companionship, we have

sought to rearticulate its strategies in positive and affirmative terms. The goal has been to see critics and their companions as forming a larger *we* that requires constant, long-term, and interactive engagement. This 'we' refers to a collectivity who, despite forming 'heteroclite' and often even mutually opposed 'crowds', nonetheless find themselves 'in the same boat' (Pignarre and Stengers, 2011: 8). Critical engagements must thus become more caring, recognizing the debts they owe to other objects, whether near or far. Critical companionship implies constructive notions of activity centered around this inclusive *we,* as well as embracing discomfort, failure, fragility, and the mundane. From this perspective, critique does not only mean being concerned with judging the positive or negative state of the worlds we inhabit. In the spirit of companionship, critical knowledge is something produced collaboratively – sometimes smoothly, sometimes painfully – but always *together* with the 'matter of concern' we face (Latour, 2004). As such, critique becomes action; it becomes about its *doing and mediating*.

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Note

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