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Taking 'nonsense' seriously: Hoaxes, spoofs, and the epistemic cultures of geography

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Abstract

The 'Grievance Studies Affair', a deceptive publishing project launched in 2017, offers a revealing lens through which to see beyond simplifying polarizations and establish more constructive relations among geography's wide range of 'epistemic cultures'. This article places the Grievance Studies Affair in the context of other hoaxes and spoofs and draws upon speech act theory to pin down how such deceptive publications are supposed to work. The core of the argument concerns the epistemological interpretation of instances where writings purported by their authors to be 'nonsense' have nevertheless been seen by other scholars – even when it is clear that a hoax or spoof was intended – as sense-bearing, valuable, or potentially fruitful. These instances shed fresh light on two epistemological issues: the role of authorial intention in academic arguments, and how much we really need to know about other epistemic cultures to form serious judgments about them. Attending to these points can enhance the possibility of respectful and constructive conversations between epistemic cultures in geography.

Keywords

Epistemic cultures, geography, grievance studies, hoax, speech act theory

Introduction

In a recent critique of the 'geoscientisation' of geography departments, Julie Cupples observes that 'the intellectual and epistemological tensions that result from geography's position between the physical sciences and the humanities are both long-term and ongoing' (2020: 4; cf. Castree, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Lave et al., 2014; Massey, 1999; Matthews and Herbert, 2004; Zimmerer, 1994). Cupples' contrasting of the physical sciences and humanities follows the pattern of C. P. Snow's famous 1959 Rede Lecture on the 'Two Cultures', which has sometimes been enlisted explicitly to describe geography's internal divisions (Snow, 1961; Viles, 2005). As Burnett (1999) notes, however, even in the years immediately following Snow's lecture, his binary distinction between science and the humanities was recognized by critics as too simplistic.

The wide range of research on the genealogies of the natural and social sciences only reinforces the insights that a more fine-grained optic is needed

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(some landmark works include Barnes et al., 1996; Canguilhem, 1991; Daston and Galison, 2010; Fleck, 1981 [1935]; Foucault, 2001 [1966], 2002 [1972]; Latour, 1987; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Haraway, 1989; Shapin and Schaffer, 2017). This work suggests that it makes sense to see the vast landscape of scholarship not as divided into two regions but as a complex mosaic of more specific 'epistemic cultures' (Knorr Cetina, 1991, 1999, 2007).

Karin Knorr Cetina defines epistemic cultures as 'those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms – bonded through affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence – which, in a given field, make up *how we know what we know*' (1999: 1). The term is intended to bring into focus 'the content of different knowledge-oriented lifeworlds, the different meanings of the empirical, specific constructions of the referent (the objects of knowledge), particular ontologies of instruments, specific models of epistemic subjects' (Knorr Cetina, 2007: 364).

Knorr Cetina focuses in her research upon the very different cultures of high-energy particle physics and microbiology. But in many disciplines, it makes sense to identify an internal variety of epistemic cultures. Geography is clearly home to a range of cultures beneath and cutting across the human/physical split (distinguished, for example, by field vs. laboratory vs. modeling or theoretical work; grant-based vs. activist research; etc., all of which aligns imperfectly at best with the borders between content-based subdisciplines). In the face of this variety, why do relatively simple polarizing constructions continue to attract attention?

A starting assumption of this article is that moments of polarization are performative and occasional: they arise in connection with specific events. The experience of 'geoscientisation' – the transfer of a formerly free-standing geography department into a faculty of geosciences or engineering – can be one such event (Cupples, 2020). Another is the subject of the present study: the perpetration of hoaxes such as the famous Sokal Hoax of 1996 (Sokal, 2000a [1996a], 2000a [1996b]; Editors of Lingua Franca, 2000). Unlike geoscientization, hoaxes are often deliberately aimed at furthering polarization.

Although it is unhelpful in many ways, the polarization of scholarship into 'two cultures' is not an act of pure, groundless invention: diverse epistemic cultures can be martialed into a smaller number of opposing camps in part because there are indeed broader underlying commonalities linking many of them. These commonalities include, for example, shared reference to a set of well-known cultural theories within the social sciences and humanities, or familiarity across the natural sciences with the hypothetico-deductive method and associated concepts such as confidence intervals.

The overall thesis here is that hoaxes offer particularly fascinating windows on relations between epistemic cultures. While they often originate in – and seek to highlight – fairly simplistic, polarized perceptions of alien epistemic cultures, the very work necessary to prepare and carry out a proper hoax harbors important lessons for the overcoming of needless polarization. Hoaxes and spoofs have the potential to raise important questions about two epistemological issues in particular: the role of authorial intention in the production of knowledge within an epistemic culture, and standards for the formation of a serious opinion – as a non-expert – about other epistemic cultures. Attention to these epistemological issues can help geographers construct and maintain a more adequate 'shared vision of which forms of knowledge creation [are] valid' across different epistemic cultures (Viles, 2005: 33).

The chief empirical example drawn upon here to illustrate these points is the so-called 'Grievance Studies Affair', an elaborate deceptive publishing project prepared and carried out in 2017–2018 and targeting a range of academic journals in the broad area of cultural studies. The relevance to geography of recent hoaxes and spoofs is not simply generic. To begin with, geography is directly involved in the Grievance Studies Affair itself. One of four intentionally deceptive papers published by the Grievance Studies authors, on 'rape culture' in dog parks, appeared in the important geographical journal, *Gender, Place & Culture*. Human–animal relations (and dogs in particular) were the subject of another recent hoax paper in a German history journal (Heitzer and Schultze, 2018; Schulte, 2018 [2015]; Schulte and Freund, 2016). The recent prominence of more-than-human themes in geography suggests that we should be attentive to these

episodes. Furthermore, another of the Grievance Studies papers (never published) was explicitly inspired by work in 'critical physical geography'. Research crossing traditional boundaries between 'the human' and 'the animal' or 'the natural' appears to attract special critical attention.

A final recent point of contact between geography and hoaxes concerns the heated discussions around the publication in *Third World Quarterly* – and subsequent withdrawal – of Bruce Gilley's (2017) paper, 'The Case for Colonialism'. Geographer Reuben Rose-Redwood responded to this debate by sending a hoax proposal for a special issue entitled 'The Costs and Benefits of Genocide: Towards a Balanced Debate' to 13 editors who had signed a petition defending the right of academic journal editors to publish 'any work – however controversial' (Reilly, 2020; Rose-Redwood, 2018). Rose-Redwood wanted to see whether they were prepared to take such an uncompromising stance regarding submissions to their own journals. It turned out that while all 9 of the 13 editors who responded rejected the idea, only one took a clear stance against it on ethical and political grounds.

All of these points of contact between geography and hoaxes attest in different ways to the sheer breadth of the discipline. The practice of hoaxing depends, as discussed below, upon the existence of a variety of epistemic cultures; a fundamental trope of hoaxing is the position of the 'outsider' operating deceptively within a specific epistemic culture. With its cross-cutting divisions in terms of objects, methods and modes of argumentation, and its involvement in multiple interdisciplinary discourses (such as climate change research, critical cultural theory, critiques of colonialism, or more-than-human approaches), geography is clearly home to a more elaborate mosaic of epistemic cultures than most disciplines. Thus, the potential for harmful *internal* polarization, and correspondingly, the importance of respectful, constructive interactions between different epistemic cultures, are arguably greater than for most other fields.

The present study is structured as follows. The first section gives a brief initial overview of two episodes that provide some context for the Grievance Studies Affair (the Sokal hoax of 1996 and Neil Smith's 'sleep' spoof of the same year), and a more detailed account of the Grievance Studies Affair itself as well as the role of geography in it. The second section draws upon speech act theory to offer a more detailed characterization of deceptive or spurious publication practices and the multiple audiences connected with epistemic cultures.

With this as background, the third section zeroes in on an interesting pattern: in all three of the hoaxes or spoofs under consideration, arguments viewed by the authors themselves as 'absurd', 'ludicrous', or 'nonsensical' have been treated by other scholars as eminently 'sense-bearing'. This pattern, I argue, is particularly useful in pinpointing divergent, unnecessary assumptions that continue to plague attempts at talking across the divides between epistemic cultures in geography. The final main section offers two suggestions, based upon the phenomenon of serious reception of purportedly unserious arguments, for a constructive rethinking of our typical epistemological assumptions.

Three deceptions

Academic hoaxes, spoofs, and parodies are neither new nor particularly rare (May, 2019). Most, however, go entirely unnoticed by larger academic publics outside the specialized fields in which they appear, not to mention by the much wider, non-academic public. The Sokal hoax of 1996 is certainly the most well-known and important exception to this general obscurity, and the Grievance Studies Affair seems to be its heir apparent for the twenty-first century. The summaries presented here are primarily for initial orientation and describe only the spurious publications themselves.

The Sokal hoax

In late 1994, Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, submitted a paper to the influential journal, *Social Text*, entitled, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' (Sokal, 2000a [1996a]). Sokal

had been inspired, in reading about what at the time were known as the 'science wars', to write a 'parody of postmodern science criticism, to see whether it could get accepted as a serious scholarly article in a trendy academic journal' (Sokal, 2008: xiii). The argument of the hoax paper was summarized by Sokal as follows when he revealed the hoax in the summer of 1996:

> Basically, I claim that quantum gravity – the still-speculative theory of space and time on scales of a millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a centimeter – has profound political implications (which, of course, are 'progressive'). In support of this improbable proposition I proceed as follows: First, I quote some controversial philosophical pronouncements of [founders of quantum theory] Heisenberg and Bohr, and assert (without argument) that quantum physics is profoundly consonant with 'postmodern epistemology'. Next, I assemble a pastiche – Derrida and general relativity, Lacan and topology, Irigaray and quantum gravity – held together by vague references to 'nonlinearity,' 'flux' and 'interconnectedness'. Finally, I jump (again, without argument) to the assertion that 'postmodern science' has abolished the concept of objective reality. Nowhere in all of this is there anything resembling a logical sequence of thought; one finds only citations of authority, plays on words, strained analogies, and bald assertions. (Sokal, 2000b [1996b]: 50–51; see Sokal, 2008: 5–91 for a detailed annotation of the original paper)

Sokal revealed the hoax – somewhat earlier than originally planned – in the May–June 1996 issue of *Lingua Franca*, a (now-defunct) irreverent US trade magazine for academics (Sokal, 2000b [1996b]). He highlighted his consternation at the willingness of *Social Text* to publish work so sloppily – and in important ways falsely – argued and bemoaned the fact that it so clearly subordinated the search for truth to political ideologies. More broadly, he criticized the apparent dissociation of the Left from its crucial one-time ally, science. In 1999, Sokal and Jean Bricmont, a French physicist, followed up the hoax with a book-length critique of the way science had been interpreted by poststructuralist philosophers (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999).

The Sokal hoax has continued to color perceptions of cultural theory, both among physical scientists and among members of the broader reading public, long past the ebbing of explicit commentary. It set in place the basic palette of responses through which the more recent Grievance Studies Affair has been received. That the Sokal hoax was more than just the brainchild of one person is suggested by its almost exact but little-known contemporary in geography.

'Rethinking sleep'

In 1996, just after the Sokal hoax was revealed, a short intervention by the geographer Neil Smith – clearly written before the Sokal paper was published – appeared in geography's premiere social theory journal, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (Smith, 1996). Entitled 'Rethinking Sleep', the piece lamented 'the privileging of consciousness and conscious action over other states of being' (Smith, 1996: 505). Smith briefly traces the inadequate recognition of the political potential of sleep in the thought of Marx, Lenin, Freud, and Lacan, then proposes to turn the marginalization of sleep on its head:

> What if sleep is retheorized as a site of quintessential social inventiveness, of gain rather than loss, of political creativity rather than simply responsiveness, of active political transgression rather than simply a mire of psychosocial discontent? … Sleep alone, in fact, facilitates the unfettered exploration of alternative subject positions. The ultimate deterritorialization, it is in some senses the perfect expression of power. Sleep, then, can reasonably be scripted as *the* major locale of transgressive, counterhegemonic imagining and therefore of political strategy. (Smith, 1996: 506)

Unlike Sokal, Smith was a prominent figure in human geography, already well known, among other things, for his critiques of poststructuralism. Thus, 'Rethinking Sleep' was more of a spoof than a proper hoax, was doubtless understood as such by

the journal's editors, and was recognized as at least potentially unserious in the two published responses by Chris Hamnett (1997) and Steve Pile (1997). The difference between a hoax and a spoof, however, is not central to the argument presented here. Either a hoax or a spoof can be taken seriously by other scholars in the field despite their knowing that the authors consider it nonsensical. This is the focus of interest in the third main section of this article.

The grievance studies affair

In 2017, James A. Lindsay, a writer, mathematician, and cultural critic, and Peter Boghossian, a former assistant professor of philosophy at Portland State University, joined some months later by Helen Pluckrose, a writer and cultural critic with a background in English literature and early modern studies, embarked on an ambitious project. They described the project as a 'reflexive ethnography – that is, we conducted a study of a peculiar academic culture by immersing ourselves within it, reflecting its output and modifying our understanding until we became "outsiders within" it' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.). The 'peculiar academic culture' they targeted was an updated version of Sokal's 'postmodernism': a range of social science and humanities disciplines in which poststructuralist understandings of knowledge and power have become well established and often underpin research aimed at furthering social justice.

Boghossian and Lindsay (the latter under a pseudonym) had already published a hoax paper arguing that 'the conceptual penis' is actually a social construct 'isomorphic to performative toxic masculinity' (Boghossian and Boyle, 2017). Though happy to have published the paper, Lindsay and Boghossian felt that the entrepreneurial online journal in which it appeared, *Cogent Social Sciences*, had been too easy a target. The subsequent papers – with Pluckrose now on board – were submitted with the goal of establishing that the three co-conspirators 'had become fluent in [the] language and customs [of cultural theory] by publishing peer-reviewed papers in its top journals, which usually only experts in the field are capable of doing' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.).

They gave their targeted fields of research the collective label 'Grievance Studies', because these fields all share the 'common goal of problematizing aspects of culture in minute detail in order to attempt diagnoses of power imbalances and oppression rooted in identity' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.). Four of the 20 papers they submitted did get published before their scheme was revealed:

- Helen Wilson (pseudonym) (2018), Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity in Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon. *Gender, Place and Culture* (retracted)
- Richard Baldwin (borrowed identity) (2018), Who Are They to Judge? Overcoming Anthropometry Through Fat Bodybuilding. *Fat Studies* 7(3) (retracted)
- M. Smith (pseudonym) (2018), Going in Through the Back Door: Challenging Straight Male Homohysteria, Transhysteria, and Transphobia Through Receptive Penetrative Sex Toy Use. *Sexuality & Culture* 4 (retracted)
- Richard Baldwin (borrowed identity) (2018), An Ethnography of Breastaurant Masculinity: Themes of Objectification, Sexual Conquest, Male Control, and Masculine Toughness in a Sexually Objectifying Restaurant. *Sex Roles* 79 (retracted).

As Reilly (2020) points out, it is possible to quibble with the claim that these are really 'top journals' in their fields. Nevertheless, they are all established, peer-reviewed publications.

In addition, three other papers had been accepted but never went to publication after the hoax had been revealed. Two of these three papers deserve special mention because they show that the conspirators pursued a quite sophisticated two-level strategy that went beyond that of Sokal. The first of these papers, 'Our Struggle is My Struggle: Solidarity Feminism as an Intersectional Reply to Neoliberal and Choice Feminism', by Mara Gonzales and Lisa A. Jones (both pseudonyms), sought to bolster the indirect message of the hoax by arguing for the superiority of 'grievances' over more positive principles of empowerment as a basis for feminism (Lindsay et al., 2018). The argument was formulated in part by swapping current

'buzzwords' into passages from Adolf Hitler's infamous *Mein Kampf*, probably the most important and damaging 'grievance' text ever written (thus the phrases 'our struggle' and 'my struggle' in the title).

Another of the three accepted papers, slated to appear in the prominent feminist journal *Hypatia*, was cheekily entitled 'When the Joke Is on You: A Feminist Perspective on How Positionality Influences Satire' (again by Richard Baldwin, an ally and retired professor who knowingly lent his name for use). This article argued that 'academic hoaxes or other forms of satirical or ironic critique of social justice scholarship are unethical, characterized by ignorance and rooted in a desire to preserve privilege' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.). Had it been published, this article would have anticipated the very arguments by which the hoaxers would later be criticized once the deception was revealed, adding an extra layer of cleverness to the project.

The strongest connections between the Grievance Studies Affair and geography center on the dog park paper published in *Gender, Place & Culture*, which Lagerspetz describes as '[t]he project's flagship' (2021: 413). In addition to being published, this article was singled out by the journal's editors as an especially strong piece to be featured in connection with the journal's 25th anniversary. One of the editors wrote to the fictional author 'Helen Wilson' to ask permission to feature the article, explaining that it 'draws attention to so many themes from the past scholarship informing feminist geographies and also shows how some of the work going on now can contribute to enlivening the discipline. In this sense, we think it is a good piece for the celebrations' (cited in Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.). This praise seemed to confirm the hypotheses that the 'nonsensical' or 'absurd' arguments they were able to publish were not just isolated slip-ups in the editorial process of a few journals but said something more general about entire discourses. The dog park paper was also the occasion for the premature revelation of the deception in the summer of 2018 (Lindsay et al., 2018).

The inspiration for another of the bogus submissions had come from an article in *Progress in Human Geography* entitled, 'Glaciers, Gender, and Science: A Feminist Glaciology Framework for Global Environmental Change Research' (Carey et al., 2016). The Grievance Studies authors recount their thought process upon seeing this article: 'Feminist Glaciology? Okay, we'll copy it and write a feminist astronomy paper that argues feminist and queer astrology should be considered part of the science of astronomy, which we'll brand as intrinsically sexist. Reviewers were very enthusiastic about that idea' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.). The feminist astronomy paper had received a 'revise and resubmit' from *Women's Studies International Forum* when the hoax was revealed.

In general, the deceptive exercises briefly reviewed here all trade very heavily on the purported obviousness of the distinction between 'sense' and 'nonsense'. Looking more closely at the sense/nonsense distinction will cast a useful light upon the lingering barriers between different epistemic cultures within geography. To do this, however, it will be helpful first to determine more exactly what hoaxes, spoofs, and related forms of deception are, and how they are supposed to accomplish what they accomplish.

Hoaxlike deceptions as speech acts

One difficulty in defining hoaxes and their near neighbors is that they have been perpetrated in practically every genre of writing (as well as broadcasting). Parodies can be clothed in the stylistic conventions of literature, natural science, social science, the humanities, journalism, travel writing, or any one of a wider range of genres (Fleming and O'Carroll, 2010). Hoaxes have a history stretching back at least to ancient Mediterranean cultures (Fredal, 2014) and have been motivated by all manner of serious intentions as well as simply by the desire to have fun. I will adopt the term 'hoaxlike deception' originally coined by Schnabel to encompass the variants discussed here (Lagerspetz, 2021: 406).

While they do not constitute a distinctive genre (Reilly, 2020), hoaxlike deceptions can be characterized as distinctive speech acts. Speech act theory is a tradition within the philosophy of language that focuses upon what it is that the use of language concretely *does* – its 'performative' dimension, rather than primarily upon the use of language to transmit

substantive knowledge – its 'constative' dimension (Austin, 2023 [1955]; Grice, 1989; Searle, 1969). Paradigmatic illustrations of the fact that language can be a form of effective action include the official opening of a meeting or ceremony, a blessing by a priest, or declarations of the sort, 'I now pronounce you husband and wife'. In all these cases, speech accomplishes something beyond communicating semantic content (Austin, 2023 [1955]; Searle, 1969). Some basic analytical categories of speech act theory help to render more precise aspects of hoaxes described in other recent accounts.

Geographers have taken up speech act theory in ways that often stress the variety of contexts and embodied performances through which speech acts do things (McGeachan and Philo, 2014). Livingstone's (2005) analyses of specifically scientific or scholarly speech acts are a potentially relevant example here. In a recent synthesis, Miles Ogborn seeks to move beyond this focus on variety, to 'define the broader characteristics of the ways in which speech works as a power-laden and space-making activity' through 'regimes of enunciation' (2020: 1125). Although it would be possible to do so, the present article does not engage this work in detail, as the connection it seeks to make between speech act theory and geography is an indirect one. What follows is thus merely a brief explanation of those foundational principles from early texts of speech act theory adequate to the characterization of hoaxes and spoofs, supplemented by some more recent work focused on their peculiarities.

In his early, programmatic sketch of speech act theory, J. L. Austin already made the argument that – while not as obviously as in a marriage ceremony – practically every utterance involves a performative dimension. Promising, wishing, even apparently just stating something, but in a particular way, all carry what he termed 'illocutionary force'. If 'locutionary force' can be thought of as the basic act of uttering something, illocutionary force is the context-dependent, rule-related dimension of accomplishing something in and with the act of utterance. Austin also identifies a third dimension, which he terms 'perlocutionary force' – that is, the effects an act of speech has upon its audience (Austin, 2023 [1955]: 93, 98–99, 101).

Both illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of speech point to the crucial importance of interactive contexts. Paul Grice argues that the range of messages communicated in speech without being said can be thought of as 'implicatures'. For implicatures to be understood, participants in conversation must, according to Grice, accept and uphold the underlying 'cooperative principle', which recognizes that conversation is a cooperative process (1989: 26).

Broken down more systematically, the cooperative principle implies a set of 'maxims'. The appropriateness of speech in conversation depends upon 'quantity' (neither too much nor too little), 'quality' (non-deceptive and, to the extent possible, evidence-based utterances), 'relation' (relevance) and 'manner' (clarity) (Grice, 1989: 26–27). Importantly, while these maxims are present in some form in all epistemic cultures, their exact meaning can vary widely. Non-deceptiveness is a broadly shared principle, though it can involve different levels and kinds of personal commitment to the validity of knowledge produced, depending on the 'specific models of epistemic subjects' at work (Knorr Cetina, 2007: 364). 'Relevance' and 'clarity' are probably more variable.

Grice (1989) acknowledges that there are many situations, even in ordinary speech, in which these maxims are deliberately violated (as in cases of deception), participants opt out (refuse to contribute further to an exchange), different maxims may clash (as when, for example, limiting the quantity of what is said may preclude giving enough evidence to establish its quality), or maxims are openly flouted (demonstratively ignored).

This brief sketch of some of the basic concepts of speech act theory and conversational implicatures already enables a rough initial definition of hoaxlike deceptions, which will then be refined with the help of more recent work on hoaxes and spoofs. Of course, an entire academic paper constitutes a much more elaborate kind of 'speech act' than the fleeting oral performances originally studied in speech act theory. However, like literal speech acts, an academic paper involves non-explicit, performative dimensions and implicit communicative commitments on the part of the author closely analogous to those at work in a classic speech act.

The hoaxlike deceptions discussed here can be understood as having a multi-layered, time-dependent structure (Fleming and O'Carroll, 2010; Reilly, 2020; Secor and Walsh, 2004). First, a paper is published which appears, in illocutionary terms, to be a serious attempt to advance knowledge within the publishing conventions of a particular epistemic culture. However, in a second stage, the invented or bogus character of the hoax paper is either revealed by the hoaxers or exposed by others, leading to the belated realization that Grice's maxim of 'quality', which includes the admonishment 'Do not say what you believe to be false' (Grice, 1989: 27), was actually violated by the authors.

The revelation of the spuriousness of the initial paper also shifts the framework for grasping the initial publication onto a different level. It now becomes clear that the revelation, too, is part of the speech act. The illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effects the authors intended to produce attach not to the initial publication alone, but to the compound sequence including the revelation. At this level, what the whole compound project is intended to 'do' (its illocutionary force) is not to 'advance knowledge' within an epistemic culture but to 'expose' or 'discredit' its publication practices or academic standards (discrediting would then be a desired perlocutionary effect).

An important point made by Marie Secor and Lynda Walsh (2004: 76) is that hoaxes 'split their readers into two groups', those who are fooled, and those 'co-conspirators' who recognize the spurious nature of the work. Herbert Clark and Thomas B. Carlson offer a more systematic elaboration of this point, arguing that in speech acts, speakers 'perform illocutionary acts not only toward addressees but also toward certain other hearers' (Clark and Carlson, 1982: 333). These other hearers include 'participants' (what Coulouma 2012 calls the 'genre community', or the epistemic culture in Knorr Cetina's sense) and 'overhearers', who are not involved in the exchange but nevertheless are 'informed' through it (Clark and Carlson, 1982: 333).

This, in turn, means that speech acts involve a more or less complicated level of 'audience design' (Clark and Carlson, 1982: 342). The two basic audiences Secor and Walsh identify are each necessary for different features of a hoaxlike deception. One audience – ideally, participants or members of the targeted epistemic cultures – must be fooled by the deceptive *violation* of Grice's maxim of 'quality'. The other audience, perhaps including some participants but chiefly composed of overhearers, must recognize the *flouting* of one or more maxims (Secor and Walsh, 2004: 83). A hoaxlike deception must be generally plausible to the targeted epistemic cultures but also 'have clues buried in it' (Fleming and O'Carroll, 2010: 48; Reilly, 2020: 267).

The balance will tilt toward the obviousness of flouting in spoofs, such as Neil Smith's 'rethinking' of sleep, whereas deception remains more important for hoaxes. A key question already lurking in this discussion of audiences is the extent to which non-participants (overhearers) are actually in a position to judge whether a flouting of standards or the production of 'nonsense' has occurred.

Taking spurious papers seriously

The above sketch of hoaxes and spoofs makes it possible to focus now on the core phenomenon that this article seeks to highlight, namely the curious, recurring pattern whereby some academic commentators have treated purportedly nonsensical spurious papers – or key parts of their arguments – as sense-bearing despite their authors considering them to be nonsense. In the terms introduced above, the perlocutionary effects of the hoax diverge, at least for some members of the targeted epistemic cultures, quite drastically from the intended illocutionary force. These readers discount the performative significance of the compound hoax structure and interpret the constative (substantive) argument of the original paper as at least partly valid and valuable. Here I return to the three hoaxlike deceptions sketched above to explore what such responses can imply.

Quantum theory as relevant after all

Contemporary reactions to the Sokal hoax within academia and beyond were extensive and often

heated. Scholars from across the social sciences and humanities, not a few physicists, the editors of *Social Text*, and commentators in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Los Angeles Times* generated a flurry of high-profile opinions and assessments (see Editors of Lingua Franca, 2000 for a compendium of contributions to the public and academic debates).

Direct claims by contemporary commentators that the hoax article was in fact valid were not forthcoming. On the other hand, the general claim at the heart of Sokal's hoax argument – namely that the results of quantum physics may also call into question the assumption of a simple distinction between an 'objective', observer-independent reality and an uninvolved observer in areas other than quantum physics – has by no means been dismissed by subsequent scholars.

Most prominently, the physicist Niels Bohr's thoughts on this issue have been explained and developed in great detail by cultural theorist Karen Barad, who holds a PhD in quantum physics (Barad, 2007). Sokal had distinguished sharply between quantum physics as physics and what he termed the 'absurd extrapolations of ideas from quantum physics to politics, psychology, philosophy and religion' in the writings of Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Max Born, and Wolfgang Pauli (Sokal, 2008: 12, annotation #22). Opposing this view, and drawing on 'more than two decades of intensive study of Bohr's writings' (Barad, 2007: 122), Barad argues instead that Bohr's 'philosophy-physics' must be seen as a unity and makes a detailed case for exactly the statement by Bohr that Sokal quotes in his hoax paper: 'An independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can … neither be ascribed to the phenomena nor to the agencies of observation' (Bohr, cited in Sokal, 2008: 13). Barad indeed goes on to place Bohr's 'philosophy-physics' at the core of their 'agential realism'.

Interestingly, this same Bohrian principle of the inseparability of observer, phenomena, and act of observation was proposed only two years after the Sokal hoax as a basis for a new way of understanding research in geomorphology. Stephan Harrison and Phillip Dunham argue that 'the uncertainty that geomorphologists recognize in landscape evolution' can be understood in quantum-theoretical terms as the result of the entanglement of observer and observed (1998: 507).

That something like a general logic of entanglement between observers and observed might also be seen to apply to social reality should not be so surprising. Most social theories of whatever stripe rest on the insight that human individuals, groups, or institutions participate in shaping (reproducing or changing) social reality through their practices and activities, and that these practices and activities are, in turn, based – at least in part – upon the misleading but pragmatically helpful assumption of the externality of the social world we are constantly helping to shape. This is not so far from Barad's argument that materially mediated 'acts of measurement' generate the split between observer and observed that we take as an already accomplished fact.

Rethinking 'rethinking sleep'

Responses to Neil Smith's spoof were likewise divided. In this case, the 'willfully' serious reading of purportedly spurious arguments is more direct and explicit. While Chris Hamnett celebrated the send-up of poststructuralist writing in more or less standard terms familiar from the appreciative responses to Sokal's hoax (Hamnett, 1997), Steve Pile deliberately took Smith's call to 'rethink sleep' seriously. Pile pointed out, for example, that working-class struggles around the length of the working day in the nineteenth century had often been understood as attempts to defend the right to an adequate amount of sleep (Pile, 1997). Smith seemed (and probably was) delighted at having his intervention taken seriously (Smith, 1997).

In 2008, Peter Kraftl and John Horton – explicitly acknowledging both Smith's spoof and Pile's serious appropriation of it – argued more broadly for a geographical research program centered on the many dimensions of sleep as a social and embodied phenomenon that plays a significant role in shaping social spaces (Kraftl and Horton, 2008). Among many avenues of engagement, they suggest that the architectural design of spaces for sleeping, and the role of, for example, hotels in

the urban built environment, can deepen our understanding of the interplay between social orders and spatial orders at the heart of much human geography.

Grievance studies: An argument for reinstating a withdrawn paper

The journals that actually published the four spurious Grievance Studies papers withdrew them quickly, citing breaches of publication ethics by the authors; the accepted but not published papers were dead in the water, as were those still in some stage of revise and resubmit. Surveying the range of Grievance Studies papers strengthens an impression already visible in Barad's affirmation of theses Sokal considered nonsense, and in Pile's and Kraftl and Horton's take-up of Smith's spoof, namely, that a well-executed hoax or spoof can end up calling into question the very distinction between serious and unserious scholarship upon which it relies.

The possibility of finding some sense in the purported 'nonsense' of the Grievance Studies papers can be approached initially as a matter of different levels of generality. In the case of the dog park rape culture paper in *Gender, Place & Culture*, for example, the general hypothesis that it is possible to learn something about social-geographic phenomena or processes by studying how humans interact with or make spatial accommodation for animals is not at all absurd. Anyone who has spent even a few moments observing dog owners in public spaces would consider this hypothesis more than plausible. A 2013 paper in *Geoforum*, in fact, reports the results of media analysis, surveys, and interviews regarding urban dog parks in Kansas City, Missouri, asking, among other things, 'what is the place of dogs in the conceptual identity of urban residents?' (Urbanik and Morgan, 2013: 292). Where the bogus dog park rape culture paper becomes suspect is in the details of the description of how the research was done. As the Grievance Studies authors point out, 'claiming to have tactfully inspected the genitals of slightly fewer than 10,000 dogs whilst interrogating owners as to their sexuality' should have been a tip-off (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.).

The situation is similar to another of the four published papers, on 'breastaurant masculinity' (Baldwin, 2018). Here the general claim is that 'not only are breastaurants [most famously, the US chain 'Hooters'] natural sites in which sexual objectification is maintained, they may also be environments that reproduce themes of male dominance over women'. This claim is (or should be) completely uncontroversial, as the real, empirically grounded academic literature cited by the authors strongly suggests (Baldwin, 2018: n.p.n.). Clues that some 'flouting' is going on appear here and there, for example in the use of quantitative terminology ('$n = 4$') in describing the demographics of a set of research participants far too small to allow any sort of remotely representative conclusions. The data, apparently invented, are described by Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose as 'clearly nonsense' (2018: n.p.n.). However, these data, though fabricated, are broadly consistent with real empirical data from the current social scientific literature on masculinity. They clearly violate publishing ethics, and thus disqualify the paper, but they are not 'nonsense'.

The most thought-provoking case of seeing sense in purported nonsense concerns a Grievance Studies paper that did not involve any invented data. Published in the journal, *Fat Studies*, the paper, entitled 'Who Are They to Judge? Overcoming Anthropometry Through Fat Bodybuilding', recommends the establishment of 'fat bodybuilding' as a counterpart to classical, muscle-centered bodybuilding. Reframing fat bodies as themselves 'built', and showcasing fat in a positive way, so the paper argues, could help combat the negative cultural associations attaching to fat in 'adipophobic society' (Baldwin, 2018: iii). Whereas classical bodybuilding glorifies muscle and demonizes any trace of fat, fat bodybuilding would balance the scales, seeing muscle as 'just another tissue of the body' and fat as an equally legitimate focus for competitive body presentation (Baldwin, 2018: ix).

In 2021, Geoff Cole, a neuroscientist, published a paper in *Sociological Methods and Research* arguing that the fat bodybuilding paper should be reinstated (Cole, 2021). Cole points out that, by their own admission, Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose had not fabricated any data in writing the paper, which

was theoretical in nature. Cole himself had found the argument persuasive and argues that others might as well, including people who self-identify as fat, and would welcome this initiative in the larger project of overcoming shame and developing a more positive body image. Cole presents a detailed case that the intentions of the authors, and their description of the paper as 'ludicrous', are ultimately irrelevant to the question of whether the paper was persuasive (Cole, 2021: 1905). He also criticizes their methods in various ways.

In a response published in the same issue of *Sociological Methods and Research*, Pluckrose et al. (2021) agree with Cole's assertion that their intentions didn't matter and join his call to reinstate the fat bodybuilding paper. This position is consistent with their contention that their 'reflexive ethnography' should not be seen as a 'hoax': 'Rather than trying to "trick" the journals into accepting papers they would not have wanted to publish, had they been paying proper attention, we wanted to get into the system, understand how it worked, allow ourselves to be directed by reviewers, and produce precisely what was required' (Pluckrose et al., 2021: 1919).

If the papers are not hoaxes, though, what are they? They resemble hoaxes in that they are deceptive (they violate Grice's principle that one should communicate what one believes to be true), and accordingly also involve a moment of revelation. Additionally, they serve a didactic purpose similar to that of hoaxes and spoofs. As Mikko Lagerspetz notes, 'when the authors heed the reviewers' advice and adjust their papers accordingly, the border between a hoax and a seriously written paper gradually becomes more and more blurred' (2021: 414). From this perspective, when the Grievance Studies authors write, '[t]he biggest difference between us and the scholarship we are studying by emulation is that we know we made things up' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.), one might well ask, '[s]o what?' Making up data is unethical, but 'making up' interpretations of data is not – indeed, in an important sense, all interpretations of data, whether seriously intended or not, are 'made up'. The subsequent life of these interpretations does not depend on whether their authors believe them.

Insights at the vanishing point of hoaxlike deceptions

In his in-depth analysis of the ethics of the Sokal hoax and the Grievance Studies Affair, Reilly ultimately judges both to be examples of a 'dubious critical project' in which the disruptive and divisive effects of deception and public shaming tend to outweigh whatever positive lessons they might offer (2020a [1996a], 2020b [1996b]: 277, 279). He holds up Rose-Redwood's 'case for genocide' hoax as a more constructive alternative, because it was carried out in a way that avoided shaming or discrediting individual colleagues.

My sense is that while polarization, shaming, and discrediting were the most prominent initial effects of the Sokal hoax and the Grievance Studies Affair, digging deeper into their mechanics can bring us to more constructive insights.

Hoaxes and authorial intention

The epistemic cultures called out and implicitly lumped together by the Grievance Studies Affair can be seen roughly to encompass what is only imperfectly but serviceably captured by the term 'critical human geography'. Since the pointed critiques of this label by Castree (1999) and Blomley (2007), it has arguably become more difficult to draw a sharp line between more poststructuralist-oriented and more political-economic, anti-racist, or feminist scholar-activism. To the extent that this amalgamation is provisionally valid, critical human geographers need, first of all, to recognize and accept a point which it is all too tempting to hurry past or skip over: that the Grievance Studies Affair does raise serious questions about our standard assumptions. The most important of these assumptions regard the links between authorial intention, authorial positionality, and the value of arguments. Critical genealogies of academic authorship are not new (Foucault, 1984; Williams, 1977). However, rapidly changing landscapes of publication, and the fundamental issues posed by ChatGPT® and other natural-language Artificial Intelligence software, lend a renewed urgency to these questions. Hoaxlike

deceptions can clarify a piece of this larger puzzle in what they suggest about the role of authorial intention.

As noted earlier, Knorr Cetina includes among the elements of epistemic cultures 'specific models of epistemic subjects' (2007: 364). For most or all of the epistemic cultures making up critical human geography, these models are versions – with different balances of emphasis – of the 'scholar-activist'. They involve a central role for intention, set within a specific understanding of the social and political context of our research (Routledge and Derickson, 2015). We believe that the intentions behind, as well as the substance of, our research are significantly shaped by the intersecting positionalities from which we undertake it (hence the methodological need for explicit and systematic reflection). We assume that researching and publishing on a social problem or injustice implies an authentic identification or solidarity with those affected by it, and a commitment to prioritizing its solution. Finally, we are committed to the intellectual validity of the research we do, in the sense that it should be based upon evidence and be presented in a persuasive argument.

There is no reason to abandon these assumptions, but they can be more tightly or loosely interpreted. In particular, there can be important benefits to keeping the assumptions about authorial intention somewhat loose. In his argument for reinstating the fat bodybuilding paper, Geoff Cole notes that in experimental fields such as cognitive science and evolutionary biology, researchers' beliefs regarding the meaning of their empirical results are irrelevant. 'The hypothetico-deductive model of theory generation and hypothesis testing is agnostic as to what one thinks' (Cole, 2021: 1901–2). This suggests a possible role for well-executed but deceptive arguments in qualitative social sciences and humanities.

If writers hostile to currently prevailing forms of critical social science and humanities research can nevertheless reproduce it fairly well, it stands to reason that more sympathetic scholars – even where alignment between positionality, intention, and value judgments is imperfect – are capable of producing serious and persuasive contributions to these discourses as well. 'Persuasiveness' in this context is not a question of strict verifiability or falsifiability. It involves evidence and logic, of course, but also the effects of more or less compelling narrative structure and insights or shifts of analytical attention induced by the use of metaphor and analogy (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003 [1980]).

The foregoing account of the Grievance Studies Affair and other hoaxlike deceptions suggests that attempting to write a publishable paper from a perspective the author does not subscribe to could be a salutary exercise for aspiring and established scholars alike. Whether published or not, such exercises might, for example, be a helpful way for doctoral candidates to ensure that their knowledge of perspectives they disagree with is firm and serious, not merely – as is unfortunately still all too often the case – indistinguishable from caricature.

Of course, if this kind of hoaxlike simulation is to become a constructive exercise, its deceptive aspect must be carefully circumscribed. Data may not be fabricated, and authorship must – in line with generally accepted publication ethics – be correctly attributed to the real person or persons who submit work for publication. But belief in or commitment to the argument by the authors, or their identification or genuine solidarity with those impacted by a problem, would absolutely not be necessary. Put differently, the critical social sciences and humanities could follow the hypothetico-deductive methods of the natural sciences in qualifying Grice's principle that one should only argue what one believes to be true. This would be a form of common ground and could be a step in the right direction for those seeking to deepen the engagement between the 'two cultures' in geography.

Appropriation and the extrusion of absurdity

Instances of hoaxlike papers taken seriously also suggest that significant movement in the other direction – that is, by epistemic cultures sharing some commitment to natural science methods – is necessary. Here it becomes important to look from a different angle at the gray area between deceptively intended and non-deceptive scholarship. Two points are important to emphasize. The first is illustrated by the appropriation of ideas central to the

Sokal hoax, the second, by one of the sequels to the Grievance Studies Affair.

The first point is that the sense made by social scientists or humanities scholars of concepts or arguments from the physical sciences *need not be the same kind of sense as that made by natural scientists in order to make legitimate and fruitful contributions to understanding the social world*. As noted earlier, Karen Barad's 'agential realism' is based on some of the same interpretations of quantum mechanics that Alan Sokal presented and then 'revealed' as nonsense in his watershed 1996 hoax. Jan Faye and Rasmus Jaksland argue in a recent paper that Barad's appropriation of some of Niels Bohr's ideas misrepresents important aspects of his thinking and constitutes a reading of quantum mechanics that would be disputed by some physicists. 'Barad's interpretation is at best one among many interpretations of quantum mechanics. In other words, agential realism is not forced upon us by quantum mechanics despite the occasional impressions to the contrary in Barad's writings' (Faye and Jaksland, 2021: 8251). Thus, agential realism is 'neither sanctioned by quantum mechanics nor by Bohr's authority' (Faye and Jaksland, 2021: 8231).

Even if Faye and Jaksland's interpretation is correct, however, *this does not discredit the uses made of these ideas, via Barad's reading, in fields other than physics*. In the closing sentence of their paper, Faye and Jaksland themselves acknowledge this point: 'As social theorizing, Barad's ideas are profound, interesting, and thought-provoking and we have not argued here that agential realism is without any merits. We have only argued that, if any, these do not stem from quantum mechanics' (Faye and Jaksland, 2021: 8252).

For those who have since made use of Barad's approach, an unqualified stamp of approval from other physicists would be 'nice to have' but is not decisive in determining whether their framework is persuasive, because *it is not a framework for explaining the physical world*. If Barad needs a (disputable) reading of Bohr to formulate agential realism, and the latter helps Barad and others understand the social world better, then the disputability among physicists of Barad's original interpretation of Bohr's thought is only of marginal interest. As Mackenzie Wark writes in another context, a key question for theoretical framings of science is not necessarily whether they are 'right' as descriptions that would be accepted by scientists themselves, but rather, whether they can at least be 'usefully wrong' (2015: xx).

Put differently, to judge whether or not Barad's appropriation and translation of Bohr's ideas into agential realism is persuasive, it would be necessary not only to have engaged with Barad's writings in detail but also to acquire a detailed grasp of how it relates to long-running debates on issues of ontology and epistemology *in the social sciences and humanities*. In terms of speech act theory, one would have to invest the effort necessary to remove oneself from the category of mere 'overhearers' and migrate toward membership in the 'genre community' (Coulouma, 2012) or epistemic culture.

One sequel to the Grievance Studies Affair illustrates what can happen when serious time and effort are indeed invested in understanding 'the other side'. The result is a process of what might be termed the 'extrusion of nonsense'. This process is on detailed display in the 2021 book, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody*, by two of the Grievance Studies authors (Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2021).[1] In it, they demonstrate the familiarity they painstakingly acquired in their encounters with postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory, feminist theory, critical disability theory, and fat theory.

There is much to disagree with in the book. The caricatures of the purportedly 'cynical' motivations of critical scholars, who are imagined spending their time dreaming up obscure jargon in order to seem smart, are patently unrealistic and disrespectful (e.g., Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2021: 41, 110, 148). In his 1959 'two cultures' paper, C. P. Snow terms such sniping 'subterranean chitchat' (1961: 6). Furthermore, this chitchat is doubly superfluous in light of Pluckrose and Lindsay's own stated belief – in agreement with Geoff Cole – that the intentions of authors are ultimately not decisive.

Pluckrose and Lindsay also tap into the hallowed anti-intellectual tradition of making lay 'common sense' and the moral self-image of 'good people' the legitimate yardstick of the quality of academic research and writing (2021: 15, 64–65). As Clifford Geertz noted in 1975, such appeals rest upon the often-misleading assumption that 'the really important facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface', and that the ideas of 'professional complicators of the world' who question the 'obviousness of the obvious' are unnecessary or even dangerous (Geertz, 1975: 22).

Denying the apparent 'obviousness of the obvious' is part and parcel of the more general practice of 'defamiliarization', that is, no longer taking aspects of social life for granted. The Grievance Studies authors dismiss defamiliarization as a piece of jargon that really means 'pretending to be mystified' by common experiences and then 'looking for social constructions to explain them' (Lindsay et al., 2018: n.p.n.). Yet *all scholarship, in whichever epistemic culture, is premised upon defamiliarization*. Without stepping back from matters we normally take for granted – whether physical, social, or cultural processes – it would not occur to anyone to study them at all. And no areas of life – neither the inner workings of natural science, nor seemingly trivial details of everyday behavior and custom – are *prima facie* off-limits to defamiliarization.

Aside from these problematic features, *Cynical Theories* is a serious attempt to understand and counter, in detail and on the basis of fine-grained familiarity, recent critical scholarship on the academic left. Most significantly for my argument here, Pluckrose and Lindsay are forced by their own hard-earned, detailed understanding of 'grievance studies' to abandon caricature in favor of point-by-point critique. To the extent that this happens, the purported implausibility of the discourse is 'extruded' to the point where the only group for whom the discourse may seem 'absurd' or 'nonsensical' is the external lay public of 'overhearers'. This public includes neither 'addressees' nor 'participants' in the academic discourses under consideration. The intellectual significance of its judgment of 'nonsense' or identification of 'jargon' is highly debatable.

Of course, the public communication of the results of scholarship is just as important an issue for the social sciences as for the natural sciences (e.g., Downs, 2010; Kerski, 2015; Kitchin et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2005). But in neither case should scholarship in its 'raw' form, chiefly aimed at other experts, be expected to be immediately accessible to readers not familiar in a detailed way with the relevant academic discourses. Especially defenders of more traditional notions of scientific rigor need to realize that they, too, despite being trained academics, begin as lay 'overhearers' of debates in distant fields of research. Accepting and internalizing this is indispensable to the success of any efforts to build cooperative connections across different epistemic cultures.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of hoaxes may be helpful to those geographers initially put off or made suspicious by a growing body of research that has appeared at the linked interfaces of geography's epistemic cultures bearing strange and provocative titles. Titles such as 'Thinking with the Monsoon' (Bremner, 2021); *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Yusoff, 2018); 'Is the Hydrologic Cycle Sustainable?' (Linton, 2008); 'Strategic Positivism' (Wyly, 2009); and, as noted earlier, 'Critical Physical Geography' (Lave et al., 2014) could easily be those of hoaxes or spoofs. To overhearers inside and outside academia, it might be tempting to laugh, roll our eyes, or indulge in some head-shaking. But none of these papers are hoaxes, and this kind of response is unserious.

The research behind many of these works draws upon natural scientific and quantitative methods as well as critical human geography. Much of it does not involve deconstructing natural scientific models or methods but rather contextualizing them in terms of their historical emergence, possible political implications, and modes of representation in textbooks, diagrams, and the like.

The extent to which these efforts can generate wider interest (even if not always complete agreement) among critical human geographers depends upon our openness to exploring hitherto unrecognized areas of

methodological and conceptual commonalities with natural scientific and statistical work, and to reconsider the longstanding wariness that emerged from critiques of the 'quantitative revolution' starting in the 1970s (Johnston et al., 2014). Wider interest and engagement among physical and quantitative geographers (again, not necessarily complete agreement) requires finally dropping the assumption that the value or seriousness of work in human geography can be judged competently by scholars who have not made a serious and sustained effort to familiarize themselves with the relevant literatures.

The overall message of this article is not that all critical human geographers need to acquire deep familiarity with natural scientific methods or abandon our insights regarding the politics of knowledge, nor that physical geographers or statistically oriented human geographers need to immerse themselves for months or years in new literatures in order to understand them from within. To the extent that this kind of cross-pollination takes place, as in recent efforts to develop 'strategic positivism' (Wyly, 2009) or 'critical physical geography' (Lave et al., 2014), it is to be applauded. However, it is unlikely to be the path most of us choose.

The central appeal of the present paper is directed at the majority who do not choose this laborious path. The appeal is to *be more humble about what we think we are in a position to judge* regarding work being done outside of our areas of expertise, particularly about work being done on the other side of the kind of 'two cultures' divide conjured up by hoaxlike deceptions such as the Grievance Studies Affair. Only a stronger humbleness, and the accompanying trust in colleagues that it requires, will allow us to work productively across this and more specific divides.

A crucial context for the cultivation of humbleness and trust is in the informal interstices of everyday academic life: the *sotto voce* hallway conversations, the emails or conference coffees, the few moments we take to flip through tables of contents of journals outside our areas of focus, and the subtle indications to graduate students about what it is worth reading. Ethnographic research has made abundantly clear that such seemingly trivial, peripheral practices can be enormously important in shaping epistemic cultures both within and outside of academia. As geographers, working in a field with such vast scope for mutual incomprehension, we need to pay particular attention to how we 'do' this quotidian realm. Deliberately being more circumspect about what we consider 'nonsense' is a potentially important way to support more constructive, cooperative bridge-building across our rich array of epistemic cultures.

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1 This book was then 'adapted' into a 'reader-friendly remix' by Rebecca Christiansen and republished under a different title in 2022 (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2022).

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