Building Bridges with Bullshit: Authenticity and Performativity in Assessment

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We all Bullshit: I Guess That's a Bridge, Right?

I feel it fair to start this paper with a confession: I wanted to write a paper on bullshit, not bridges. Shortly, I will describe how bullshit first presented itself to me conceptually, but first I need to connect bullshit and bridges. Surely bridges connect and bullshit divides, right? What if there is a counter-intuitive possibility that this is not true? Webster's Dictionary defines the noun form of bullshit as "nonsense, especially foolish insolent talk."[1] If we frame bullshit as departing from sense and speaking with bold insolence then it seems a pretty unifying concept, despite its perceived vulgarity. It seems, as we move through increasingly tumultuous times, that one idea that does seem to feel unifying is that the "other side" is full of bullshit.

I start with bullshit because you know exactly what it means, at least in the phenomenological realm of the natural attitude. Even if not familiar with Frankfurt and his piece *On Bullshit*, bullshit already forms a bridge for many because it is a term that many use—use without thinking and use to demean that which we perceive as going against *common sense*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that "one can begin only with a natural attitude, complete with its postulates, until the internal dialectic of these postulates destroys them."[2] What follows is a phenomenological reduction of bullshit by considering the term's usages in the natural attitude, adding the counter intuitive assumption that bullshit might, in

fact, look more like a bridge than a barrier. I will look at bullshit simultaneously through both queer theory and assessment, once again bridging two topics that on the surface seem to have little in common.

Wow, I could really bullshit your class

Bullshit and assessment presented themselves to me in the form of a comment from my husband while I was grading projects. The assignment was open ended and required students to create a visual response to a prompt guided by conceptual standards. I was examining a mason jar decorated in translucent colors and symbols, filled with sand and various household objects. While contemplating the piece, my husband walked past, giggled, and said, "Wow, I could really bullshit your class." I was striving for work that was "artistic, inventive, speculative . . . [that] should embrace the abstract," and this unsolicited response gave me pause.[3]

I spent some time reflecting on how many of my students had reacted to receiving the assignment; I had often heard frustration from students as to why I would not tell them "what I was looking for," beyond the skills and concepts that I wanted them to imaginatively demonstrate. I became drawn to the question, "Have we lost the capacity . . . to imagine beyond that which we know?"[4] I wondered just how many students approached this assignment by "bullshiting it." Further, I could not help but wonder what it even meant to bullshit and to be *bullshittable*? To what extent were my students questioning the authenticity of the assignment, and further to what extent was my husband questioning the authenticity of the product?

I found myself looking for a concrete definition of assessment in a number of contexts, and was drawn to a description of assessment that was defined by the 1999 Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (APA/ AERA/NCME, 1999) as "any systematic method of obtaining information from tests and other sources, used to draw inferences about characteristics of people, objects, or programs."[5] I felt, based on my training and years of teaching in both K-12 and university contexts, that my assessment certainly fit the criteria of this definition. The problem seemed to have a great deal to

do with perceptions of objectivity and how these might relate to authenticity. I saw myself creating authentic assessments in my classrooms, and yet it was the lack of this very authenticity that the use of the term bullshit seemed to be alluding to. There was gap here, and I really did not see how to bridge the two disparate perceptions.

<p style="text-align:center">Are you really gay, or are you just bullshitting?</p>

Turning to queerness and queer theory, I reflected on a college friend who accused me of pretending to be gay to "pick up women." I long ago stopped allowing this type of comment to bother me, but as I recollected it I recognized that the experience of queerness in its noun form often invited the questioning of authenticity.[6] I thought about phrases I had heard throughout my life directed at members of the queer community. Phrases like: *are you really gay?*; *how do you know that you are gay?*; and, *bisexuality is just a phase, trans people are confused, delusional, or mentally ill*, and *they are doing it for attention*, are so pervasive that a significant part the experience of queerness seems to be constantly fighting to be seen as authentic. A part of the experience of being a member of the LGBTQAI+ community is to have the authenticity of our identities questioned, and I am drawing on this experience of queerness as an epistemological method by which to examine assessment. Queer theory may help challenge normative assumptions and social practices to build a conceptual bridge between bullshit and authenticity.[7] If to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things, I wanted to bring a queer perspective to authenticity, bullshit, and assessment.

What does sexuality or gender identity have to do with assessment? Recognizing that "modalities of desire are not only effects of social operations but are at the core of our very imagination of the social and the political," I seek to consider novel reimaginings of assessment, drawing on the imaginings and reimaginings of experiences of queerness.[8] Knowing that we have so heavily reified what it means to bullshit assessment, I embrace the queer as "the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence," remain "obstinate in our dissent from new normals" and draw from queerness's capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought.[9]

Let's queer the bullshit

What would it look like to apply experiences of queerness to trouble authenticity in assessment? To approach this I recognize the field of assessment is very much about applied philosophy and draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* considering, "I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it . . . [b]ut this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us."[10] This statement is both frightening and hopeful, as he suggests that clashes are inevitable because of our phenomenological inability to perceive exactly as another person perceives, but that we have to clash before we can recognize the uniqueness of perception and how this uniqueness might draw us together rather than separate us, building bridges of togetherness as unique beings in the world. In the pages that follow, I will use Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological frame along with the queer theorizing of Judith Butler as a vehicle to trouble the bullshit, and to break down reified understandings of objectivity, authenticity, and finally performativity.

These three concepts matter greatly when considering bullshit. I want to begin by drawing on Harry Frankfurt's analysis *On Bullshit* to set the scene for a deeper queering of bullshit thinking about these concepts. First, consider the objectivity of bullshit. If bullshit was lying or the falsification of an objective truth, one would simply call it lying. Bullshit, at least on a continuum, is at least a step down from lying.[11] While pretense might exist in some instances of bullshit, pretense, in lived experience, is not necessarily present in every case of bullshit.

If bullshit isn't necessarily always essentially untrue, might we divorce bullshit from falseness as an ontological concept? If so, what if we considered bullshit from a more correlational perspective, or rather bullshit as the projection of self as communicated to others?[12] This may be one of the most important distinctions that Frankfurt makes about bullshit: the bullshitter is not trying to communicate something about the truth in the world. Rather, the bullshitter might be trying to communicate something about the truth they see in themselves.[13] Here, we might begin to think about bullshit as authentic, not because of its relationship to the world but its relationship to the individual.

The final piece is thinking about bullshit and performativity. To perform is to act, and Frankfurt thinks of bullshit as both a category of speech and a category of action.[14] As Frankfurt parses through the "shit" part of the word, he relates back to the phenomenological roots of shit: to emit or dump.[15] With the queering of bullshit, therefore, I begin with the performance of bullshit. Frankfurt suggests a distinction between a masculine notion of bullshitting and a feminine one, with masculine bullshit being that which is with pretense and seems to allude to a feminine version of bullshit, one which might exist without pretense.[16] It is this possibility of a performative, feminine, and potentially queer bullshit, separated from some false sense of objectivity and authentic to self that I will be exploring in the following pages.

Who Says Bridges Have to be Straight?

We live in a straight world, dominated by straight people, straight norms, straight spaces, and even straight structures, assessment being one of these. Spaces, however, are not naturally straight, they have become straight over time; "spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them."[17] Because these spaces have become straight, the bodies that inhabit them also become straight. "Bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects, such that they acquire their tendencies, as an effect of this tending toward."[18] The heteronormative and cis-normative culture we currently inhabit tends toward this straightness, and we have created opportunities to demonstrate our straightness, and this plays out in public spaces such as classrooms insofar as, in the western Eurocentric world we have proms, Valentine's cards, pageants, and curricula that assume straightness. Even physical buildings are set up for straightness and binary gender thinking, from gyms, to bathrooms, to play spaces, and in these spaces, "the production of an unequal landscape in schools . . . [make] weird/queer subjects marginal, both in their visibility and invisibility.[19]

To locate queerness solely within the purview of LGBTQIA+ identities is problematic as it creates a false binary between straightness and queerness. This negates an important aspect of queerness; queerness, and by extension queering and the practice of a queer politic is more connected to one's relationship to power than a homogenized identity.[20] For this reason, I believe that I

could find similar relationships toward bullshit in other marginal communities.

Calling out some perceived bullshit on identity, whether saying one is "not queer enough," or one is "not black enough," seems to be rather queer, as it is more of the purview of marginal identities than normative ones. One rarely hears about one's whiteness, maleness, or cisness being called into question. And although one's straightness may be called into question, this seems an extension of ascribing some aspect of bullshiting to queerness, as if one is bullshiting in order to hide one's queerness. I highlight this not only to avoid a straight-queer binary, but also to posit that this paper is not about how assessment impacts X group, but rather how the experiences marginal groups X, Y, and Z might provide ways to contemplate assessments differently.

Thinking more broadly about queerness allows us to think more broadly about straightness, and it allows us to connect straightness to the structures straightness creates. There is a correlation between these straight spaces and the straight constructs designed to govern them: "The design and methods used to analyze this social fabric cannot be separated from the way reality is construed."[21] Assessment, then, is tied to the constructions that the assessment is designed to measure. Straightness, in its objectivity, requires that these qualities be reflected in anything that might measure it, and this is why we "are so easily convinced that what happens in the classroom is best understood as objective, transparent, [and] measurable."[22] From a philosophical standpoint, assessment carries out a longstanding platonic epistemological legacy that requires that which can be known to be measurable, quantifiable, and, well, *straight*forward.[23]

Assessment is both figuratively and literally straight. Figuratively, assessment is often couched as object oriented and straightforward: "Becoming straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant".[24] Literally, assessment privileges normative bodies: consider naming procedures which often require transgender students to deadname themselves (use a name associated with a gender or identity that they do not possess) on a summative examination because this is the name on

their permanent record.

Returning to the aforementioned definition of assessment as "any systematic method of obtaining information from tests and other sources, used to draw inferences about characteristics of people, objects, or programs," the wording here deserves further analysis.[25] That definition immediately creates a distinction between people and objects. And yet, what does assessment do if not use the mentioned inferences to create objects out of people? While assessment inferences are not the people that they infer, they certainly become representations of the people as standalone objects to be measured. If we take as truth that "I never fully become an object in the world" traditional assessment cannot fulfil its promise, as one can describe and categorize an object, but not a fully realized subject.[26] Given the shortcomings of traditional assessments, such as standardized tests and quizzes, surely, there must be a better alternative that allows for authenticity, perhaps even queerness?

Authentic Assessment: Stable Category or a Bridge to Nowhere?

Alternatives to traditional assessment often appear more subjective, meaningful, and even liberatory. Indeed, definitions of authentic assessment typically include language related to performance, meaningful work, and real-life tasks.[27] Using the language of authenticity always seems to feel promising. After all, our current interest in diversity and inclusion seems to be concerned with allowing people to be authentically themselves. In this section, however, I will trouble the notion of authenticity because authentically "being yourself" in the context of your identity OR your assessment leads to the problematic backlash of being labeled as bullshit. I will trouble authenticity by considering the instability of modes of authentic categorization, both in assessment and in queer identities.

If traditional assessment draws philosophically from the platonic tradition, it seems clear that authentic assessment draws liberally from the father of authenticity himself, Martin Heidegger. Writing about both authentic living and authentic thinking, Heidegger was interested in this notion of being-in-the-world and in context, creating the conditions to "let learn" and "learn thinking."[28]

Indeed, authentic assessment is based on the assumption that in claiming our own possibilities as a way to strive for authenticity, we draw on our everyday understanding of our involvement in the world and our expectations of those possibilities.[29] The existential language here is precisely what I seek to trouble, however, because the personal pronouns do not allow me the space to consider how my own possibilities, my own understanding, and my own expectations can form any type of meaningful bridge with yours. We are living in a moment when authentic beings-in-the-world are at dangerous tense loggerheads. The mantra of the *truth that is true for me* becomes justification for increased sights of marginalization and conflict, and these play out in schools, as well as public political spheres. Allowing students to authentically engage with a task might seem a democratic and liberating choice, but what does evaluation look like?[30] Certainly, we could pursue authenticity to its totality and allow students to assess themselves in entirety, but where then are the possibilities of interruption, radical discover, and discomfort? Consider giving a student an open-ended assignment on civil rights, and they use the space to argue for white supremacy. What does the teacher do, especially when giving a poor grade on an open-ended assignment might well be met with accusations of bias and singling the student out for "differing beliefs"? This might lead one to asking the question: Well, is it all just bullshit, then?

While "Queer theory insists that identities are in flux," we remain steadfast in our cultural framework of providing an ever-expanding range of identity descriptors to the point that the LGBTQIA+ acronym might be out of date by the time this paper reaches its audience.[31]

Current identity descriptors will not stay stable and may even become problematic in the future, and attempts to use catch all terms such as queer will always be somewhat flawed.[32] The result of this could seem anarchic, but for the queer theorist it is simply a result of the dynamic flux of queerness, and the need to dialogue and develop relationships with individuals to both learn with and learn from, drawing from queer experience that these terms are fluid, and all identity is forever in flux might well help illuminate ways to reconceptualize authenticity in the face of the judgment of bullshit. The final section of this

paper will address this queerer path.[33]

Building the Bridge While Crossing it: Queer Performativity and Assessment

If authentic is too existential, might we posit the term performative instead? By performative I am not referencing performance-based assessment, rather the philosophical notion of performativity developed by Judith Butler. This final section will not contain templates, best practices, or posit the creation of new assessment models. Rather, we will parse through four theoretical components of this performativity: acts, identity, history, and style. I suggest this as an alternative frame because, in many ways, assessment is like gender: individual performances in multiple acts, in evolving styles, occurring over time. The actor, stage, script, and audience vary from performance to performance in a way that seems to allude both an "objective" and "authentic" assessment model.

An act might be described as how social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign, or "the formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted."[34] This phenomenological assertion is radical because it turns the subject/object dichotomy on its head, suggesting not that we as a subject create an act, the object, but rather, perhaps, we are objects formulated by the subject, our actions. As opposed to the Heideggerian assumption that we as subjects existentially, authentically, and individually live in the world and give it meaning, Butler suggests we perform acts together with others in a collective temporal duration within a performance and that acts are a shared experience and collective action, which is opposed to the individually oriented notion of authenticity.[35] If we start playing in this particular space pedagogically, we might see teacher/student as not actor/audience, but as actor/actor, performing together. Thomas Romer puts this into action by seeing both the act of performing and the act of evaluating in assessment as a mutual performance "to find out what the student has actually stated, and toward what end his moves are heading, the teacher must represent the text of the student in a variety of language games, visiting other perspectives, and playing with the possibilities inherent in that text. In this perspective any assessing activity (as far as it is educational) must

be part of a more communal or even global act of reflection."[36] On its own, conceptualizing assessment as an act or even as a series of acts isn't particularly groundbreaking, but in context with identity, history, and style we can begin perhaps to see a bridge beginning to form.

Butler next considers how acts connect to identity. Butler conceptualized this with gender and/or sexuality, but we could extend this to pedagogical possibilities. Gender and sexuality are both instituted through acts that are internally discontinuous. That is to say, acts are not essentially interrelated with each but rather become interrelated through a seemingly fluid performance that we might begin to call identity.[37] The appearance of an essence, whether gender or aptitude measured by assessment, then, is a constructed identity, an accomplishment of the performance in which the audience and fellow actors come to believe and to perform in the mode of this belief.[38] For Butler, the ground of gender identity is the repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity. Shortly, we will see that these acts become stylized, but it is the acts themselves that create the style over time.[39] This matters significantly toward our concern when Butler speaks of gender transition and how the possibilities of this gender transformation are found in the fact that there is really an arbitrary relation between acts, and that a subversion of style is in fact possible.[40] What if we were able to conceptualize assessment in this same way? Imagine if we could subvert style in the performance and evaluation of assessment. Imagine what might be transferable in this framework: the teacher and the content being taught could be seen as governed by modes of style that are infinitely changeable.

Imagine the bridges that could be built if we were able to view assessment as performative, subversive, and mutually transformational. In short, might there be something real in the mutual performance of bullshit?

Butler recognizes that we are not simply actors performing acts starting at a particular moment. We have been in other places and have had encounters with other people who were also somewhere else previously. Here we encounter Butler's phenomenon of history and its importance for gender performance, and also for our work and understanding the context of assessment authenticity and

bullshit. While Butler states that "sex, gender, and heterosexuality are historical products which have become conjoined and reified as natural over time," we might just as easily imagine assessment, proficiency, competency, intelligence, learning styles, even cognitive abilities and executive functioning, as historical products that have also become conjoined and reified as natural over time.[41] Knowing that history produces the effect of natural essences on the body, bullshit is beginning to seem less nonsensical and insolent, and perhaps feeling a little more like defiance in the face of reified truths that constrict, limit, and confine.

Butler goes on to contend that not only is the body a historical idea but a set of possibilities that can be continually realized.[42] Consider the liberatory power of a pedagogy that is centered on an assessment style that is performative and recognizes that we all find ourselves as historical situations as opposed to fixed and finite beings. What sort of mindset could allow us to discover these possibilities? What kinds of creative intellectual play could facilitate the rewriting of our historical situations? It is time to consider the possibility that bullshit is not just becoming legitimate, but potentially, even revelatory, bridge building.

As I chose my clothes for today, it occurred to me that not enough emphasis is placed on style. I don't mean this superficially. When you chose your clothes this morning you were working within a particular framework of style that you've developed over time, whether or not you were mindful of that. Our acts become stylized over time, and each and every minute detail of our working through the world is both a reoccurring product and producer of this style. My choice to provocatively play with bullshit is a nod to style—both in the choice of the crass word and in the recognition that there may not really be a non-crass alternative that captures bullshit's style. Judith butler points out that to do, dramatize, and reproduce, all seem to be elementary structures of embodiment.[43] She goes on to suggest that this *doing* is not merely a way in which embodied agents are exterior, surfaced, and open to the perception of others. Rather, embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being or Foucault, 'a stylistics of existence.' Style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities."[44] What if we can take this framework and consider bullshit

as an interruption of stylistics, as opposed to foolish nonsense? Perhaps if we go back to the moments in which people "call bullshit," we might reframe what it is they're calling out. Perhaps they are calling out a challenge to the stylistics of their existence. Perhaps a teacher who has lived within a stylistics of ten-page papers and multiple-choice tests sees my decorated mason jar as a challenge to this stylistics. Likewise, perhaps the student who creates an unconventional piece of work sees even their own action as bullshit because it is a challenge to their stylistics of what it is to be assessed. What if an understanding of assessment that allows for the possibility of challenging our own stylistics as we perform acts in collective spaces can build bridges?

Bridges from Bullshit: It Can Be Done

My high school physics teacher once said, "If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with them with bullshit." I also remember number of other things about that particular physics teacher. Over the course of the year our graded assessments included separating out a bag of salt mixed with sand, building hot air balloons, and creating a device that would allow an egg to drop from the top of the school without it cracking. He was also the first person that I had encountered up to that point who explicitly stood up for LGBTQAI+ rights in his classroom (a feat for the early 90s). When I reflect on my experience in his classroom, I think he was probably telling the truth: he never tried to be brilliant, but he filled each day with plenty of bullshit and for that I am grateful. He realized the vital importance of how "Self-definition is importantly wedded to social process. Thus, how students come to understand themselves—their worth, abilities, and potentials— can be vitally affected by their school experiences.[45] He allowed us to work through the bullshit together and realized that behavior and performance are "dialectical, dynamic, fluid, living phenomena existing in specific contexts and perceived and understood from specific perspectives."[46]

As a final thought, I want to speak to the way in which I view queering in this process.

The experience of queerness has not been used as a metaphor to explain a way of conceptualizing assessment. Individual identities are real and not metaphorical, but queer identities can and should also be considered as rich sights of epistemological understanding.

Performing in this world with an identity that is seen by some as bullshit can be troubling, wearying, and traumatic, but through the lived experience of queerness we may begin to sincerely reclaim bullshit as an imaginative, revelatory, and even liberatory approach to building bridges in troubled times.

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