The Teacher's Tomatoes:

The Mess of Queer Pedagogy in the English Classroom

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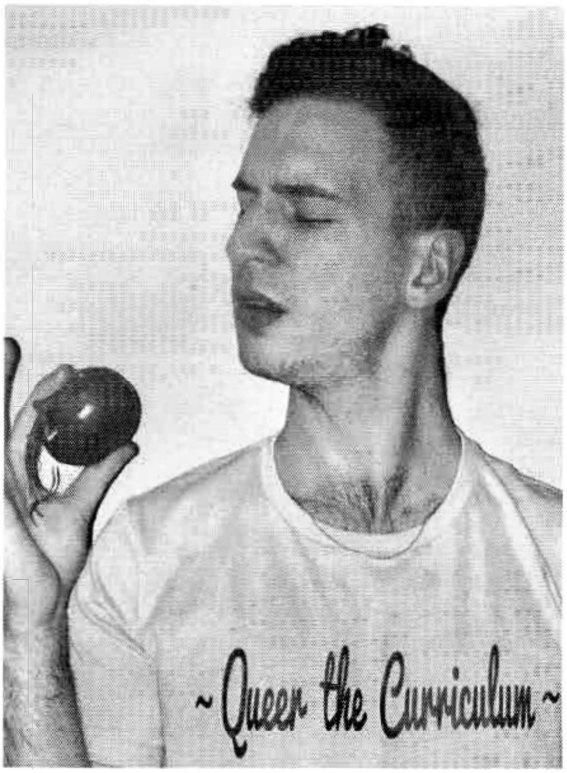


In this visual creation paper, I want to introduce a series of short philosophical essays, or as Anne Carson (2015) describes them "short talks," with stories that represent my time teaching (and learning to teach). I'll use narrative photovoice (Sutton-Brown 2014; Simmonds, Roux and Avest 2015) as an artistic methodology to communicate the messiness, queerness and affectively charged performative life of teaching—all through eating a tomato. Drawing heavily on Jaarsma's (2019) podcast, *The Learning Gene*, I will, like Jaarsma, use a multiliteracy (the visual) to make a mess out of queer pedagogy. I define queer pedagogy from Halberstam's (2011) idea of failure, that as a queer pedagogue I already am failing the reproductive futurity of youth and education by bringing my queer, nonreproductive body into the space.

I use the term *tomatoes* to describe the process of pedagogical choices teachers design and employ (Jaarsma 2019). To me, tomatoes are particularly concerned with classroom affects, and as a critical educator, the affects that circulate, sting and are "sticky" (Mulcahy 2016). I find tomatoes to be a generative metaphor for reflecting on my own practice: tomatoes are messy, disgusting and tasty, and dependent on your experience with tomatoes, they hold a story. Just like our own education journeys, our early years thinking through and with tomatoes (pedagogy) teach us what tomatoes taste like. To some, early memories of ripe grape tomatoes sprinkled over a summer salad during a neighbourhood barbecue come to mind. For others, tomatoes may have been slowly cut for their three younger siblings' lunches late on a Tuesday school night, when they were only 10 years old, acting as a caregiver for their siblings while their parents were away.

Tomatoes, like pedagogy, are full of sticky affects when you eat them without cutting them first with a long straight knife. Diving in and eating a tomato with your hands and body requires a mess, stickiness and some repulsion. This paper will analyze the ripe red desire of tomatoes, their disgust and their taste in a messy food fight of stories crossing my time as student and teacher, queering the temporality of my educational experience. Second, through narrative photovoice, I am attempting to "archive the ephemeral" (Kumbier 2014). Queer mess (Campbell and Farrier 2015), as I will later theorize as the politically affective classroom,

cannot be archived, published or cited. Queer mess is "formations of knowledge that sit outside long-standing institutional hierarchies" (p 83). I extend Campbell and Farrier's definition by adding that queer mess in the antioppressive classroom queers curricula's linearity and requires a responsivity of the teacher's messy hands.

Within the rise of the increasing pressure to monitor, archive and record teaching practice to be valid research, pedagogy-in-the-moment refuses to be under surveillance. I close my door and the show begins—unrecorded and unarchived.

Taking the unarchivable affect as the gravitational nucleus of the critical classroom, pedagogy-as-performance is always in the moment and always leaving and arriving to us. Within the rise of the increasing pressure to monitor, archive and record teaching practice to be valid research, pedagogy-in-the-moment refuses to be under surveillance. I close my door and the show begins—unrecorded and unarchived. In this way, we cannot archive the tomato. We can reflect on it, after the fact, but in reality, this paper can only attempt as a photovoice and performance art piece of a pedagogy that has already come and gone, and becoming anew as it is experienced now by you, the reader.

The image on the first page of this paper represents the *investigative*. The investigative tomato is the first day of class, both as a teacher and as a student. You are investigating the space, the teacher, your classmates, the syllabus and making a decision (will you take a bite?). As a student, you might be wondering if you should stay in the course or if you should drop it. In my master's, we used to call this "shopping," where we would go to several different seminars in the first week of the semester to decide afterward which we would keep in our timetables and which we would drop. Just like at the grocery store, the ripest tomatoes are put at the top of the pile. None of the mess, the disagreement or the rot can be seen. As you decide which tomatoes to put in your shopping cart, you investigate which tomatoes are the highest quality.

My First Day as a Drama Student

I remember my first day of my undergraduate degree at the University of Alberta. It was a drama class titled Oral Communication. It was also a 200-level course (a fact that as a first-year, I never let my friends forget at the time). I had reviewed, colour-coated and examined my timetable at least six times on the bus to campus. I had my first-day-of-school outfit planned; it was a scholar-chic ensemble that consisted of a cardigan, burgundy shirt (casual smart was my Pinterest search) and black skinny jeans (a habit I still can't kick). I walk into a circular room with a sunken centre and 20-somethings filing in with their Starbucks while my panic increased. Do I look too young to be here? I shouldn't have taken drama.

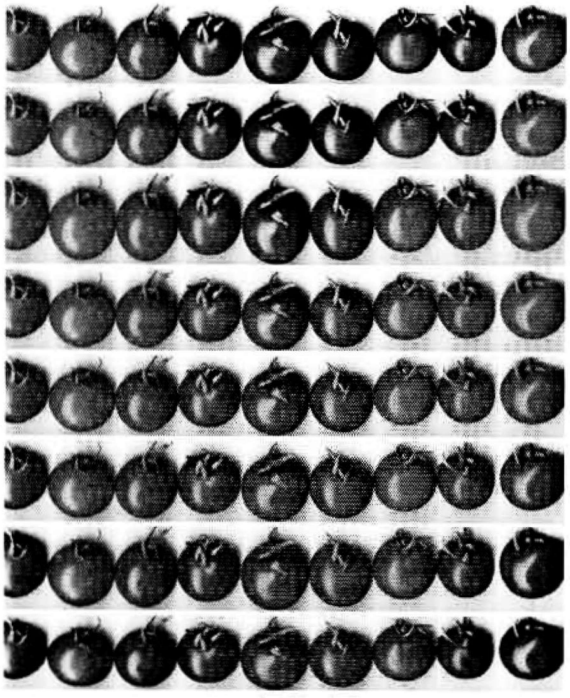
I have been a performer my whole life. From poetry to stand-up comedy I have always enjoyed the stage, which is probably why I enjoy the performance of teaching so much. But I had always avoided the drama classroom—it was a clear (and hidden curriculum) sign that any male-presenting student in drama class had to be queer. In an effort of absolutely-not-a-damn-chance, I had to avoid all costs of being read as gay in my Catholic hockey-culture high school in suburban Alberta. I used to take 20-minute bathroom breaks in Grade 12 and pass by the open-doored drama room and see them acting, playing improv games and laughing. I policed my body to perform straight maleness all day; I wouldn't risk it for one performance in the school play. Once I got out of here and to university I would take drama.

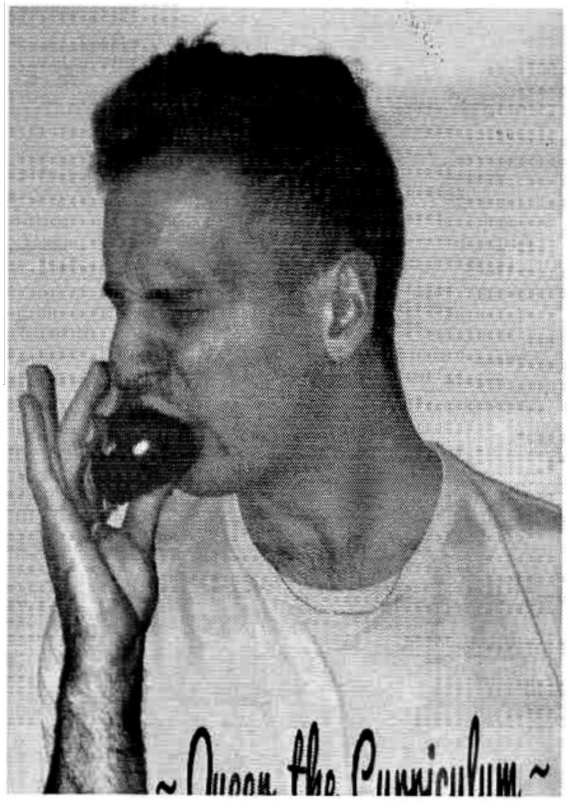
My First Day as an English Teacher

My first day teaching junior high English I was reviewing my lesson plan for my Grade 7s that I'd written perfectly in my new leather-bound notebook. I had no sleep the night before. I was up all night on PowerSchool (the eLearning system) reviewing student photos so that they would be impressed that I already knew their names on the first day. I was student-teaching at an arts-focused high school, and my presteamed outfit screamed COOLBUTSMARTENGLISHTEACHER. I had my curriculum planned tightly, but the "curriculum-as-lived" (Aoki 2004) had different plans for that class. The students smelled me out. Was my

tomato authoritative? How would my pedagogy taste? As the "shoppers'" gaze reversed on to me, I was now on stage to perform the best tomato for them. Different than my own experience shopping for classes in graduate school, K–12 students were getting the tomatoes they got handed regardless of choice. They couldn't switch out. They weren't buying the tomato (paying tuition). But, because of this compulsory requirement of both of our bodies forced to stay in the room, they tested me. A sniff. A little bite. A squeeze. When would it pop? I stood round, red, perfectly shaped, and only one small dig into my thin tomato skin would pop my gooey insides all over. And pop I did. I screamed at a student, "Get out of my class!" after he tipped a bookshelf over. He cried and ran out. I hid my tearing eyes as I ran after him, leaving the rest of the class alone in shock.

Below, each line of tomatoes represents a class I have taught, a workshop facilitated or a lecture given. After years of teaching, the students look the same to us—row after row—they start to blur together when you scroll quickly through this document. On pause, we see each tomato as unique. Sometimes a tomato repeats, but each tomato when seen slowly in these images is its own shape, and likely a different makeup of seeds, juices and texture underneath the skin; consequently, each tomato, when eaten slowly, has a different taste.

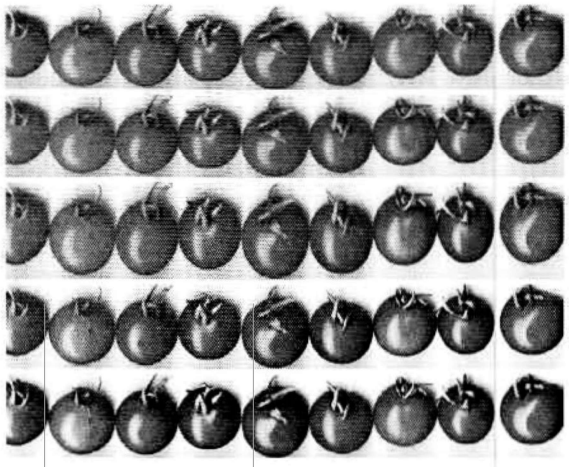


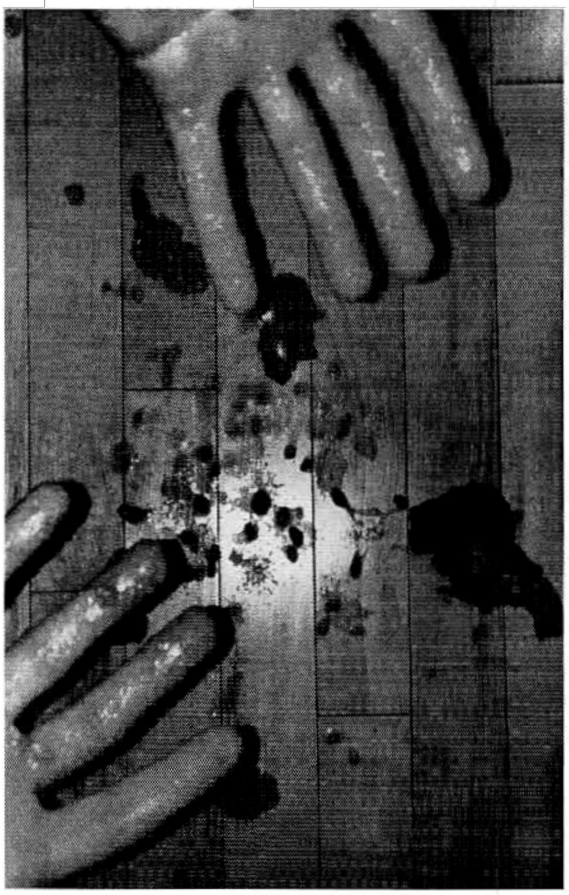


The Second Stage of Tomatoes Is *The First Bite*

In *The First Bite*, both student and teacher dive in. Usually the teacher takes the first bite and offers a taste to the class. The teacher starts talking at the beginning of the class because somebody has to eat or else we will all starve. Within seconds you know the type of tomato you've gotten here. It's immediately sour to your taste buds, but to someone else, immediately savoury. Rotten, ew! Or delicious, fantastic. The first bite is a risk—a jump. In *The First Bite* photo (image 2), I am diving in to risk before I learn. The risk proceeds learning; the learning doesn't proceed the risk. This first bite is so many things. The first day I taught, the first day of a PhD, the first time I was in drag at an academic conference, the first kiss. These moments were all pedagogical. Tomatoes, in this sense, represent the eating done outside the classroom. The first bite when mom wasn't looking. The "Send" on an e-mail to a journal publisher of a risky, research-creation piece where I talk about feeling as pedagogy. Like in the photo, the eyes are always closed on the first bite. All senses stop other than that of taste.

This semester I taught my first undergraduate university class. I had set up a red apple and a crisp yellow pencil on each student's desk since I teach in a teacher education program. These apples represented something similar to a tomato: they held a cultural sign of a teacher, they symbolized the purity of a proper teacher. But as red as it looked on the outside, I was never an apple. I was a tomato. I was not Ms or Mrs or Mr, ever. Like my cisgender and straight educator peers, I was red and round on the outside, reading as cisgender man, a strong, Gala-apple teacher. But one sniff, one touch of my skin (one sound of my gay voice) reveals the first bite won't be like an apple. The tomato is the apple-gone-queer, the apple-gone-sour, the rotten apple. Seeds of infertility drip out of the tomato on the first bite. A mess you did not expect, a mistake you made, but is already here. Disgust. I have become so comfortable in my body I forget the disgust and discomfort that people feel when near a flamboyant, flaming, femme gay man. This disgust is "wound up in particular social relations" of power (Ahmed 2004, 85). I think of disgust here as generative disgust. We just have to look at the disgust and sit with it, however ugly it is. Whether that disgust be within ourselves or within our world, the tomato brings about a pedagogical disgust where we are stuck with the queer teacher and must ask, after the initial repulsion has subsided, "Why does this taste the way it does?"





Then there is *the mess*. And all the queer mess of disgust (at that opinion he said) and anger (about why you are talking over her) that comes with it. Suddenly curriculum-as-lived is nonlinear; a student has cried in class, I have cried in class, a student misgenders me repeatedly, and I become red and the tomato drops. The pedagogy and its inherent performance have been puked back up and is now all over the floor. I look around, and regardless of who started this food fight, the only hands that are messy are mine.

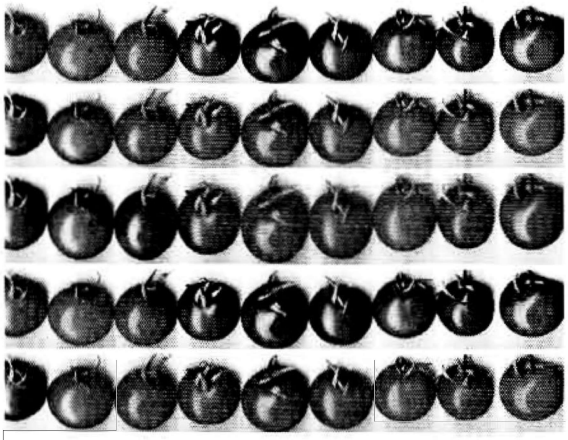
In the mess we can choose one of two paths. We can reorient ourselves and straighten out the classroom back to order, and move on with the next slide, ignoring the racist comment (or whatever began the affective food fight). As we hit the right arrow key and read the title of the next topic, the affect stays in the room. Its transmission is here lingering underneath (Manning 2019), and we can perform clean pedagogy, or we can move to the less-pretty-to-look-at option two: We stay in the mess. We don't discipline. We lay inside chatter and chaos, and don't summatively assess. We resist the need for perfectly well lined up tomatoes and get into the affective work underlying antioppressive pedagogy that is always already there. In the mess the teacher's hands are soaked in not responsibility to straighten out the class, but rather, a responsivity to continue the food fight. "My anxiety

is loud today, and that triggered me." "I know I am your teacher, but that hurt my feelings that you said 'that's so gay'." "No, it's not OK to say that about immigrants, regardless of who you cite."

Why not bring the always-already messy feelings into the room? Isn't that the only way we can truly digest this "difficult knowledge" (Pitt and Britzman 2003)?

After all, it's only tomatoes.

Like I said, it's only tomatoes.



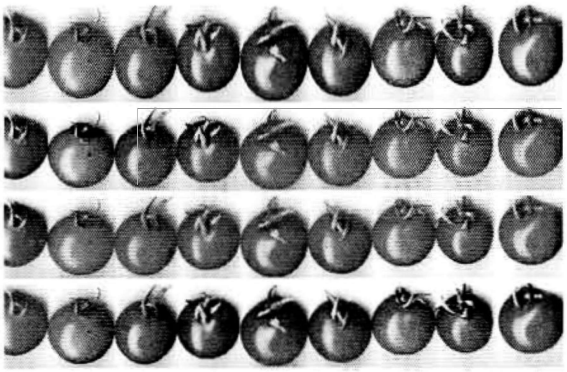
And because much of affect theory tends to be critical of "good" and "bad" feelings, we often, as critical pedagogue's, err on the side of "bad" affects. We look at sadness and depression (Cvetkovich 2012), cruelty (Berlant 2012), killjoy feminism (Ahmed 2010), which are all necessary "scholactivism" (Ramsey 2018) that trouble, happiness and good affects as curricular (and state) goals. But messy affects can be funny, silly, and it can be relieving to laugh amid the performance of pedagogy both the learner and the teacher are doing for one another (Jaarsma 2019, 26:40). Take for example the hilarity in *Matilda* when Matilda uses her powers to overthrow the tyrant Ms Trunchbull. The peak of the scene is when all of the other students start throwing food at Ms Trunchbull too, while laughing and shouting. This scene acts as a metaphor for food fights as the messy of revolutionary education and can put the power back in the students' hands when we all realize we are full of the mess too. Here, the performance of authority pauses and humanity leaks through the sticky coating, and the release of this heaviness comes in the form of a laugh (DeVito 1996).

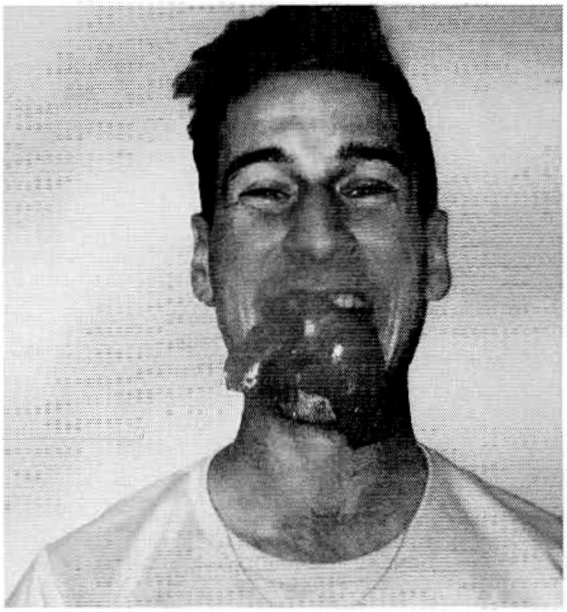
> As much as I respect teachers who follow critical pedagogy's recipe for success, there is nothing like being human, in all its flavours, that helps students learn about how to play in the mud of these difficult and trying times we are in.

Laughter has been so central to my pedagogy. Maybe because I perform as a drag queen and stand-up comic that I have come to understand that through difficult conversations about privilege, oppression and mental illness, laughter is what allows us to play with this difficult knowledge in a creative way, and through this play, we make sense of what this heaviness can mean when we sculpt it, shape it and perform with it (not against it). When we laugh we redistribute the weight of antioppressive pedagogy from our guilty gut into the rest of our body. We mobilize into action and not reaction.

When we play in the classroom, we allow mistakes, failures and wrongness to be pedagogically important—these are all necessary ingredients to any good tomato soup. As much as I respect teachers who follow critical pedagogy's recipe for success, there is nothing like being human, in all its flavours, that helps students learn about how to play in the mud of these difficult and trying times we are in. Play with your students. Tell them about the time you failed a test. Talk about why you are actually taking off early before class ends. Tell them you are new. You are experimenting. The final stage of the tomato is the *playful tomato*. In order for the mess to be pedagogical, we have to play with it.

A student, after my first round of course evaluations, wrote of my teaching, "All I learned in this stupid class was that my prof is a drag queen and that [discriminatory comment removed]." The next student wrote, "This teacher changed my life."





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Brent Saccucci *(they/he) is a high school IB English teacher in Mohkinstsis (Calgary's Treaty 7). Brent is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, where his research program investigates the curricular potential of queering and decolonizing the language arts. At the University of Alberta, Brent was a doctoral fellow while also teaching student teachers in literacy pedagogy courses. As an English education specialist, Brent's research in English language arts has been published in* the Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies, alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage, *and* ZINES: An International Journal on Amateur and DIY Media. *Having taught from Grade 4 to serving as adjunct professor at UBC's Faculty of Education, Brent holds a BEd in English education from the University of Alberta, and an MA in curriculum studies (literacy) from OISE at the University of Toronto where he was a Canada graduate scholar. Brent is passionate about multiliteracies in ELA and social and emotional justice in schools.*