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Against the tyranny of the fact: Autofabulation as a queer strategy of resistance

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Abstract

Queerness has always had a particularly vexed relationship to evidence. Because the latter has historically served to discipline the former, José Esteban Muñoz suggests that anecdotes can become queer acts of resistance against the 'potential tyranny of the fact'. Drawing on this argument, this article examines the ways in which American artist, filmmaker, and AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz uses autofabulation to destabilise evidential discourses in his performance practice. Specifically, it looks at 'Some Styles of Masculinity' (2017-ongoing), a series of anecdotal monologues in which Bordowitz reflects on the formation of his identity as a queer Jewish man living with HIV.

Keywords: Gregg Bordowitz, fabulation, AIDS activism, lecture performance, queer politics

Over three days in September 2021, the American artist, writer, and activist Gregg Bordowitz delivered a series of performance lectures on the top floor of MoMA PS1 in Queens, New York. Before an intimate audience, he stood by a sukkah – a leafy hut built for the Jewish festival of Sukkot – and offered a testimony of sorts. 'Nothing is as it appears, and everything is significant' he repeated throughout his monologues. This motto curiously brings to mind a famous verse by seventeenth-century French poet Jean de La Fontaine: 'Les fables ne sont pas ce qu' elles semblent être' ('fables are not what they seem'). Upon reflection, if there is anything at all that unites these otherwise contrasting figures, it is that both are indeed skilled fabulators. Much like La Fontaine, Bordowitz is committed to

discursive methods that favour metamorphosis over evidence, challenging the dominance of mechanistic thought.

In this article, I revisit some of Bordowitz's works – from film to performance – through the prism of autofabulation as a politicised and discursive technique of the self. Specifically, I explore the potential of hearsay as a mode of address that queers conventional notions of evidence. As such, I argue that autofabulation is a potent strategy to resist the potential tyranny of the fact.

Autofabulation as a queer practice

Born in 1964 to a Jewish working-class family in Brooklyn, New York, Gregg Bordowitz is an artist, educator, and critic. To this day, he is perhaps best known for his work as a filmmaker and AIDS activist as part of ACT UP, which he joined in 1987. During that time, he was instrumental in setting up a number of video collectives which produced films for educational and counter-representational purposes.[1] Together, these groups contributed to the expansion of what Alexandra Juhasz has termed 'alternative AIDS media'[2]: a direct, immediate, and product-oriented activism which materialised in the form of social, educational, and community-related videos. These works involved the video documentation of protests – which could also provide visual evidence of police brutality against demonstrators – interviews of activists, talking heads, and critical segments from mainstream broadcasting programmes. They were largely distributed and screened in museums, film institutes, cable television, and so on.

At its core, alternative AIDS media wanted to position video producers, subjects, and their audiences in the same locale: one defined by self-proclaimed difference and marginality. As Bordowitz writes, 'the AIDS movement, like other radical movements, creates itself as it attempts to represent itself.'[3] By doing so, alternative AIDS media was committed to challenge and disrupt the stigmatising representation of people with AIDS by mainstream media. In other words, it was about producing media by and for the communities most affected by the health crisis. This objective was aided by the democratisation of video material and camcorders which enabled activists to reclaim the means of discourse and, by doing so, to displace its authorial source.

Bordowitz's film *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) marks a notable departure from the activist, educational, and community-driven focus of his early video practice. Given the

climate of the time, this shift is hardly surprising. It was the peak of the AIDS crisis and, as the 1993 International AIDS Conference in Berlin announced a growing global spread of the virus with no predictions of effective treatments, Bordowitz believed it would be his last film. 'It was made at a very low point,' he notes, 'when video activists were forced to rethink our practices because our strategies were exhausted.'[4] Instead of focusing on producing positive images of PWAs (People With AIDS), the artist turned to his own personal experience. Infused with wry humour and a soundtrack of Klezmer music, Fast Trip is a 56-minute-long experimental autobiography examining the artist's identity as a queer Jewish man living with HIV. The film combines footage from ACT-UP protests; archival images of crashing cars; mock interviews of bogus public figures; made-up television talk shows; personal meditations and candid conversations with the artist's parents and friends. Altogether, this unlikely collage serves to interrogate the codes and subgenres of alternative AIDS video, many of which are incorporated and subverted within the film: the activist tape; the cable-access show; the experimental media critique; the safe sex prevention campaign; the documentary portrait and the support group video.[5] Appropriately, Juhasz has dubbed it 'the first meta-AIDS video'.[6]

While the introduction of a first-person discourse contrasts with earlier activist media, *Fast Trip*'s autobiographical promise is corrupted from the outset. Mostly, this rupture operates through Bordowitz's appearances both as himself and as an alter-ego named Alter Allesman. As Douglas Crimp notes, one character – Bordowitz – is 'funny, sad, lonely, searching, fatalistic,' while the other – Allesman – is 'cynical, defiant, furious, dangerous'.[7] If the distinction between both characters is tangible early on in the film by means of name captions and noticeably different haircuts, as the film progresses, this distinction becomes blurry, as if both men merged into one. 'The real truth,' Crimps justly observes, 'is that the true self is both personae, or lies somewhere between the two, or in the constant back and forth from one to the other.'[8] Allesman is an anti-hero of sorts who rejects mainstream media's othering discourse. Through this figure, Bordowitz teases out the contradiction between minoritarianism and universalism (this tension is embedded in the etymological roots of the character's name: alter comes from the Latin 'other' and allesman from the Yiddish 'everyman'). There is a dispersal of subjectivity at play or, as Bordowitz writes, 'splitting myself into two characters enabled me to act out versions of myself that I was afraid to show'.[9]

In one darkly comic scene, Allesman is being interviewed for the fictional late-night television programme 'Thriving with AIDS'. When the moustachioed host Henry Roth (Bob Huff) compassionately questions his guest about his experience of living with the virus, Allesman pauses. Then, after a long silence, he explodes:

LOISEAU

> Fuck you. Fuck – You. I don't want to be yours or anyone else's fucking model. I'm not a hero, I'm not a revolutionary body, I'm not an angel... I'm just trying to reconcile the fact that I'm going to die with the daily monotony of my life. How do you live with AIDS? Huh?

Frustrated with the anchor-man, Allesman turns to the camera, gesturing at the film crew to zoom in:

> I want to speak to the people with AIDS. I know you're out there. Aren't you sick of this shit? And, people who are healthy: people who presume themselves negative. How are you living with AIDS? Huh? How do you live with AIDS? Why is it my burden? Why is it my responsibility to survive and thrive, to get through this ok?... Aren't we all living with AIDS?

Pointing to the plurality of the Barthesian essayistic model, Roger Hallas argues that this 'split' corresponds to a wish to 'do damage to the concept of autobiography in its conventional sense'.[10] Further, Hallas claims that this model 'strives to write autobiography against itself, to perform the self rather than embody it'.[11] Indeed, *Fast Trip* is unapologetically deceptive: it transgresses the autobiographical contract. As Bordowitz writes, the figure of Allesman serves as a 'fictional ruse', one which allows the artist 'to provoke scepticism' about the veracity of his own claims.[12] This fictional ruse, I will argue, is a particularly potent queer strategy.

Fig. 1: Still from *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, courtesy of Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Vincent Colonna's notion of autofabulation (fabulation de soi) is relevant here. Critiquing the traditional enunciation of autofiction as a mere postmodern literary genre engrained in psychoanalytic discourse, Colonna suggests that autofabulation constitutes instead an ancient 'posture', an assemblage of narrative strategies whose first notable example appears in Ancient Greece with the satirist Lucian of Samosata.[13] Like the literary tradition of the fable, the word 'fabulation' derives from the Latin fabula: 'words of the crowd' or 'conversations'.[14] It denotes a certain falsehood which intentionally troubles narrative elements taken to be true. In fact, it is hardly a coincidence that the popularity of seventeenth-century poet Jean de La Fontaine's animal-filled fables surged in opposition to the advent of Cartesian mechanistic thought.[15] For fabulation pertains to the realm of metamorphosis, where poetic and scientific knowledges collide. This idea is certainly encapsulated in Bordowitz's claim: 'doubt can be productive; it forces people to wrestle with truth'.[16]

To contextualise his notion of autofabulation, Colonna turns to French philosopher Henri Bergson, who popularised the concept of fabulation in continental philosophy with his 1932 essay on social theory, 'The Two Sources of Morality and Religion'. For Bergson, fabulation – or 'the fabulatory function' – is a central component of the social organisation of religious communities which he calls 'closed societies'.[17] Fabulation, then, consists in a

dangerous tendency of the mind to ascribe agency to natural phenomena, creating hallucinatory fictions that bring forth spirits and gods in acts of phantasmic representations. In other words, Bergsonian fabulation is a governing principle which ensures the social cohesion of religious communities through the uncritical adoption of irrational beliefs. He argues that 'a fiction, if its image is vivid and insistent, may indeed masquerade as perception and in that way prevent or modify action'.[18] Drawing on Bergson's concept, Colonna suggests that autofabulation corresponds to the fabulatory function which 'has taken itself as its own object'.[19] Thus, autofabulation functions as a mimetic instrument of immersion: it carries a specular quality which causes its subject to split.

Bergson is a curious reference here, for the primary function of his fabulation is to reinforce restrictive power structures. Instead, I propose to turn to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari whose reclaiming of the concept – both in their individual and collective works – appears best suited to queer and minority politics. For the pair, fabulation constitutes a 'visionary faculty' which is exercised freely and with agency in art and literature with views to create 'giants' or a 'people to come'.[20] Fabulation, they claim, corresponds to a collective assemblage of enunciation: it connects the individual to a collectivity, rendering it immediately political. In Cinema 2, Deleuze states:

> Fabulation is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a speech in act, an act of speech through which the character continually crosses the boundary which would separate his private business from politics, and which itself produces collective utterances.[21]

In other words, if Bergsonian fabulation represents a force of social regulation, Deleuzo-Guattarian fabulation, on the other hand, is a technique – a 'speech-act' – which leads to the production of both individual and collective subjectivities. As Deleuze claims, 'we ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabulation and give it a political meaning'.[22] In turn, I propose to take up Colonna's notion of 'autofabulation' and give it a political meaning, too. Only then can we begin to understand Bordowitz's dispersal of subjectivity as a queer strategy of resistance, one which troubles dominant epistemological frameworks.

Performance as an architecture of time

A certain disillusionment with regard to the politics of representation is palpable in *Fast Trip*. As Hallas observes, the work questions 'whether film and video media can engender relationality at that historical moment and not merely reinforce the othering of people with AIDS'.[23] In other words, *Fast Trip* puts itself on trial: it is a film about AIDS which grapples with the impossibility of adequately representing AIDS. It is hardly a surprise then that

Bordowitz has since largely resisted addressing the virus in subsequent films.[24] In fact, the artist has increasingly moved away from the moving image altogether, favouring instead live art and performance. In the past decade, a great deal of his artistic focus has revolved around 'lecture performances': a hybrid format rooted in the Western avant-garde of the 1960s and which troubles the distinction between art and its discourse.[25] For Pablo Helguera, the lecture performance is 'a live presentation imparted by an artist who takes advantage of his or her artistic license and of the conventions of academic pedagogy to create a work that straddles fiction and reality'.[26] Helguera further notes that irony and satire are central components of such performances, whose irreverent take on academic discourse establishes a natural connection to institutional critique. 'Like other hybrid art genres,' he writes, 'its very name illustrates the awkward juxtaposition of two modes of speaking that never entirely blend'.[27]

I want to argue that autofabulation is the technique which allows the politicised subject to travel critically across these modalities and intensities. To further this argument, I will focus on Bordowitz's performance series 'Some Styles of Masculinity' (2017-ongoing). The artist began working on this series in the wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in Summer 2017, which saw neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching with torches while chanting 'Jews will not replace us'.[28] Premiering at the New Museum in 2018, the piece was conceived as a trio of monologues, each addressing the intersection of formative figures of masculinity: the rabbi, the rock star, and the comedian. Autobiographical in nature, these 'lecture performances' – as the artist himself calls them – are humorous fables of assimilation, metamorphosis, and self-invention which draw on activism and Jewish thought. While the work has been adjusted for different occasions and venues (mostly contemporary art centres), its core concept has remained the same: mimicking the codes of a variety show, Bordowitz hosts a trio of hour-long autobiographical monologues under his Hebrew name, Benyamin Zev. In its latest and most ambitious iteration to date[29] – which featured special guests and a live Klezmer band – Bordowitz performed inside and around a sukkah: a hut covered in patterned fabrics and topped with leafy decorations. The temporary structure is traditionally used during the week-long Jewish festival of Sukkot. It symbolises the shelters in which the Israelites dwelt while wandering the desert after their exodus from Egypt. 'I wanted the set to have a wandering-Jew-unpacking-his-library feel', Bordowitz told an intimate audience, of which I was part.[30]

The precarious-looking structure was crowned with a pink and yellow sign which read 'The Benyamin Zev Show' in a Hebraised font. 'We're the same – they're the same', the artist affirmed of his double. 'But each name is a different portal through which you enter into the world.' Autofabulation, then, is the practice of navigating these portals, a kind of nomadism,

as Deleuze would argue: 'a perpetual displacement of intensities designated by proper names, intensities that interpenetrate one another at the same time that they are lived, experienced, by a single body'.[31] Unlike Alter Allesman, Benyamin Zev is firmly grounded in reality: it was the name that a young Bordowitz was known as at his synagogue in his youth. Yet, much like Allesman, Zev provides an alternative entryway into the world: ways of acting out versions of oneself. Both names connote Jewishness in ways that contrast with Americanness. As the artist notes: 'Gregg is the result of assimilation and divorce'.[32] When his grandparents arrived in the United States from Eastern Europe, the artist recounts, their immigration papers stated their race as Hebrew. 'How'd we become white?' Bordowitz-Zev asks. 'That's the story I'm telling tonight.'[33] The tension between otherness ('alter') and assimilation ('allesman') serves as the premise for the performance.

If autofabulation in film can transgress the autobiographical contract, it is in performance that it finds its truest form. That is because fabulation is a speech act which exists within the confines of the here and now: it aspires to be a temporal practice. In her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan argues that performance constitutes 'a means of resisting the reproductive ideology of visible representations'.[34] That is to say that performance troubles the assumed connection between representational visibility and political power. The visible real, Phelan states, is merely employed as a truth-effect to perpetuate a discourse of the real based on representation. Far from advocating for the continued invisibility of the disenfranchised, Phelan argues that there is a certain power in remaining invisible or, indeed, 'unmarked'. That is because visual representation – as a political goal – faces some serious limitations: it risks resulting in voyeurism, fetishism, and a colonialist appetite for possession.[35]

While recent scholarship has contested these cautionary notions as 'dated'[36] or as an idealised escape from 'all forms of recordings and representation',[37] they are contemporary with Bordowitz's disillusionment with the visual representation of AIDS. As such, they constitute a contextual marker within his practice. By turning to performance, the artist seems to revolt against an 'ideology of the visible' which is synonymous with a capitalist ideology of (re)production. Of course, the dualism advocated by Phelan between the live and the mediated poses a number of problems in today's media-saturated ecosystem. How should we approach Bordowitz's filmed performances, as some of them were? As Phelan notes, once recorded, performance 'becomes something other than performance'.[38] Yet, 'other' does not mean they are any lesser, but that their ontological nature has been transformed. This only seems appropriate for 'Some Styles'. As a variety television show-inspired performance, its performative quality is no more damaged in film than its filmic nature is compromised by a live audience. In keeping with the queer ethos of

the lecture performance – which destabilises the modality of discourse – the live and the mediated both cancel and reinforce each other in equal measure. What happens when the monologues are turned into a book? Well, just like we have relied on Socrates' disciples to access his thoughts, we may also have to trust Bordowitz's editors and students.

But there is something else at play here: a mystic gesture which nods to the notion of Judaic time. Evidently, Jewish thought plays a central role in Bordowitz's work, and 'Some Styles' is no exception. Unsurprisingly, the question of representation resurfaces during his rabbinic monologue. Bordowitz-Zev claims that he is most interested in 'negative theology': what God is not. The Talmud, he says, is punctuated with debates about the representation of divinity, the relationship between images and ideas. 'G-d is what you can't describe' he concludes. 'G-d exceeds representation.'[39] According to Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, representation is first and foremost a spatial question. He believes that civilisation gives too much importance to 'things', and 'things' – including images – belong to the realm of space. As such, he considers it a weakness to resort to the imagination, for the imagination reigns in the empire of space to sustain beliefs through the visual representation of gods, as if there could not be a god without an image.[40] Heschel believes that this tendency must be resisted, for it only reinforces our dependence on space as opposed to time.[41] It is only because we do not know how to approach the immateriality of time – what Bergson would describe as la durée – that we are constantly trying to grasp it through our relation to space.[42] As such, he proposes that Judaism should seek the sanctification of time and that its rituals thus constitute 'an architecture of time'.[43] In fact, the holiness in space is represented by the sukkah, which the Jewish people received an order to build after they had succumbed to the temptation of objects.[44] Thus, it is through the architecture of time – built through the performance of rituals in the here and now – that access to what Franz Rosenzweig calls 'eternity' becomes possible. The perpetuation of eternity – for Rosenzweig and many other twentieth-century Jewish philosophers – is sustained by a present-time messianism which represents the constant anticipation of redemption in the experience of rituals.[45]

Fig. 2: Gregg Bordowitz, 'Some Styles of Masculinity', performed at the New Museum, New York, 19 January 2018. Image courtesy of the New Museum. Photography by Chloe Foussianes.

Here, queerness and Judaism intersect in rather productive ways. Like Phelan, Bordowitz is suspicious of visual representation as a political goal in and of itself: 'the trap of the visual'[46] as Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton best describe it. But where Phelan warns of visibility's 'colonialist appetite for possession', Bordowitz reframes such possessive desires based on spiritual imperatives tending towards a messianic temporality (the figure of the religious grandfather who works at a clock factory is particularly meaningful, for it is with the money he made building time into objects that he sent his grandson to Hebrew school). If images belong to the realm of space, as Heschel observes, then the fleeting and irreproducible nature of performance appears as a strategy for the subject to mark itself within time. More than resisting the ideology of the visible, live performance becomes a ritual which can recur as different iterations. Finding its material setting in the symbolic space of the sukkah, it is concerned with an architecture of time and tends towards eternity. For Bordowitz, the ephemerality of performance appears as the remedy to representation's dubious promises – whether political or spiritual.

Fabulation is relevant to this shift from space to time. As previously evoked, Bergson too warns us of the representations which bring forth gods and produce superstitions.[47] However, he notes that such phantasmic representations are not the work of the imagination but, rather, of fabulation or 'myth-making'.[48] The same dynamic recurs in Heschel's imagination and in Bergson's fabulation: both are myth-making machines which bring forth gods within the realm of the visible. Now, as I have previously stated, the concept of

fabulation takes on a different meaning with Deleuze and Guattari. The pair abandons the
restrictive power structures of Bergsonian fabulation to focus instead on its potential as a
visionary faculty which is 'freely developed in art and literature' and serves to fabricate
'giants'.[49] Deleuze and Guattari famously consider that every work of art is a 'monument',
one which has little to do with memories of the past but, rather, with fabulation: 'a bloc of
present sensations'.[50] If Bergson established a distinction between imagination and
fabulation, Deleuze and Guattari reclaimed such distinction in the service of a
monumentality of the present time. In 'Some Styles', autofabulation becomes Bordowitz's
line of flight out of visual representation and into the realm of time.

Hearsay and the queering of the evidential

Earlier, I evoked the etymological origin of fabulation – fabula – to which the literary
tradition of the fable owes its name, too. If the seventeenth-century fable was the antithesis
of mechanist thought, I want to argue that fabulation equally resists evidential discourses. In
that sense, hearsay is a particularly potent tool, one which Bordowitz masters brilliantly.
'Some Styles' is constructed through anecdotes. From the artist's memories of his childhood
drag act to his obsession with Lou Reed and his grandfather's homophobic remarks,
autobiographical anecdotes punctuate Bordowitz's monologues to illustrate how his identity
was shaped by religion, sexuality, and popular culture. To frame my argument, I will turn to
Jane Gallop's notion of 'anecdotal theory' which considers personal accounts of interesting
incidents as suitable material for writing theory.

Anecdotal theory, Gallop argues, is located at the intersection of poststructuralism and
feminism, with the general aim to produce theory with humour while honouring the lived
experience.[51] During one of his monologues, Bordowitz-Zev tells his audience that, in his
childhood, male relatives would kiss on the lips to greet each other at family gatherings –
which he explains is customary in Eastern European-descended Jewish families. By the time
he was a teenager, however, he had come to understand that this practice was frowned upon
outside his own domestic context. 'But, somehow, I hadn't quite absorbed the larger lesson',
the artist says. 'I hadn't realised that the norms of my Jewish enclave didn't apply
elsewhere.'[52] So, one day, when visiting the clock factory where his grandfather worked,
Bordowitz – then a young adult – planted a kiss on his lips, much to the shock of fellow
factory workers. Calmly, his grandfather corrected him: 'that's not what men do.' Bordowitz-
Zev goes on to explain how this early display and policing of same-sex affection informed his
identity:

LOISEAU

> Only after I started to identify as queer did I experience men kissing like this again. When I was in the AIDS movement, we greeted each other by kissing on the lips. We wanted to combat homophobia and, importantly, prove to ourselves that there was no reason to fear infection through kissing.[53]

Through this anecdote, a certain connection between queerness and Jewishness resurfaces, one which is governed by principles of disclosure and concealment. As Boyarin & Itzkovitz & Pellegrini state: 'there may just be something queer about the Jew…and something, well, racy about the homosexual'.[54] They point to a long-standing belief that Jewishness coincides with nonnormative sexual and gender categories. The effeminisation of Jewish masculinity has historically constituted a form of oppositional discourse. Under the Roman Empire, for instance, the 'softness of Rabbinic masculinity' offered a valuable Jewish alternative to the harshness of Roman culture.[55] By the mid-nineteenth century, however, antisemitic stereotypes associated with passive Jewish masculinity became weaponised and grafted onto emerging discourses about race and sexuality based on a biologisation of differences. As such, an affinity between the emergence of the categories of the modern Jew and the homosexual can be traced. This idea runs through Bordowitz's performances and contributes to his anecdotal theory. 'As a Jewish boy,' Bordowitz-Zev says, 'I had a certain amount of latitude around effeminacy… I started to form an idea of masculinity that merged Jewishness with queerness.'[56]

Whether they pertain to sexuality or ethnicity, many of Bordowitz-Zev's anecdotes point to the politics of coming out. 'Nothing is as it appears and everything is meaningful', the artist repeats like a queer fabulist anthem of sorts. Here, Eve Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet is relevant. Famously, she argues that coming out functions with its own set of knowledge. 'The closet', she writes, 'is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.'[57] While clearly differing in their ancestral linearity – or lack thereof – Jewishness and queerness share a certain 'secrecy' or 'closet' which carries the potential of an intelligible coming out within a heterogeneous urbanised society.[58] According to Sedgwick, the Book of Esther provides a foundational template for the imagining of coming out. Esther the Queen – who had concealed her Judaism from her husband – finally agrees to reveal her identity after being pressed by her cousin Mordecai. 'And if I perish, I perish', she says.[59] For Sedgwick, the prospect of this revelation is comparable to a queer person who prepares to come out to their homophobic parents.[60]

In 'Some Styles', both an actual and a conceptual coming out are at play. Bordowitz reminiscing about his identity as a queer Jew to an intimate audience very much feels like a mise-en-abyme. 'Here I am,' he proclaims at one point, 'offering testimony'.[61] If a confession is unfolding, it is unclear whose exactly it is, for the artist has muddied the waters

from the outset. Is this the testimony of Gregg Bordowitz? Benyamin Zev? Alter Allesman? Are they any different? His identity appears as unstable as the epistemological framework which produces it. For the format of the lecture performance – two modes of speaking that never entirely blend – and its resulting anecdotal theory trouble the very status of information. The hybridity of this format may appear as the pinnacle of a postmodernism – merely affirming the fragmentation and disappearance of the self[62] – but, as I have already suggested, it is an old trick. Indeed, both the Platonic corpus and the Babylonian Talmud embed moments of grotesquerie in an effort to confuse their avowed seriousness: the 'seriocomical', as Boyarin[63] best puts it, noting that its first-known practitioner – like Colona's autofabulation – is Lucian of Samosata.[64] By constantly shifting these modes of address, Bordowitz casts a shadow of doubt: his discourse carries little evidential value, yet it provides a deep reflection on truth.

Undeniably, the staging of doubts is a fitting queer strategy. For the fleeting nature of anecdotal discourse travels like gossip: 'the one true living archive', as Vaginal Davis claims.[65] According to Gavin Butt, hearsay is critical to the formation of a discourse about queerness. While using gossip as a valid form of knowledge risks being seen as trivial, any discourse on homosexuality risks being seen as gossip. He notes: '[g]iven that historical events have conspired to make homosexuality a subject of scandal, then gossip, as that 'low' discursive practice drawn to scandalous subjects, has come to enjoy a peculiar affinity with homosexuality.'[66] That is to say that rumours, gossip, and other forms of hearsay provide 'nonnormative' or 'deviant' forms of evidence, as opposed to authoritative discourse.[67] Because hearsay does not conform to traditional rules of truth or falsehood, Butt argues that it carries a certain queer epistemic status, one which – however unreliable – can bear witness to historical events.[68] The testimonial power of hearsay lies in making evident that which could not be seen: it is a clandestine language as much as it the language of the clandestine. Therefore, Butt advocates for a queering of our understanding of the evidential.

Clearly, this ambition is central to Bordowitz's lecture performances. Much like the unmarked nature of performance, hearsay resists economies of reproduction and counters the authoritative truth-claim of conventional fact-based discourses. As Muñoz points out, 'queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence'.[69] Because evidence of queerness has historically served to discipline queer desires, queerness is rarely complemented by evidence. Instead, Muñoz suggests that queerness exists as 'innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere'.[70] Much like Gallop, Muñoz suggests that anecdotal

speech constitutes a queer act – a 'methodology without merit' – which serves to resist what he describes as the 'potential tyranny of the fact'.[71]

Autofabulation is a potent strategy to resist the potential abuses of evidential discourses. It is an ancient posture, a technique of the self which utilises a fictional ruse to denote falsehood and critically travel across different modalities and intensities. It is a way out of restrictive power structures. If autofabulation first emerged in Bordowitz's experimental autobiography *Fast Trip*, it expanded in his later performance work into a mystic practice which grapples with the here and now. It moves away from the limitations of space to mark itself within time and, by doing so, aspires to eternity: the promise of an indefinite life robbed from Bordowitz and his peers. Like nomadic thought, autofabulation travels through anecdotes: it builds a metamorphic time where poetic and scientific knowledges collide.

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Notes

[1]   'Testing the Limits' (1987-1995), 'DIVA TV' (1989-), and the Gay Men's Health Crisis' cable show *Living with AIDS* (1988-1994).

[2]   Juhasz 1995.

[3]   Bordowitz 2004, p. 39.

[4]   Ibid., p. 249.

[5]   Hallas 2009, p. 136.

[6]   Juhasz 1995, p. 240.

[7]   Crimp 2002, p. 268.

[8]   Bordowitz 2004, p. xviii.

[9]   Bordowitz 2004, p. 251.

[10]   Hallas 2009, p. 138.

[11]   Ibid., p. 134.

[12]   Ibid., pp. 251-252.

[13]   According to Colonna, the first notable example of autofabulation is found in the second-century AD with Lucian of Samosata's novella A True Story. See Colonna 2004, p. 70.

[14]   Gaffiot 1936, p. 646

LOISEAU

[15]   Serres 2021, pp. 19-20

[16]   Bordowitz 2004, p. 252.

[17]   Bergson 1935, pp. 90-91.

[18]   Ibid., p. 109.

[19]   Colonna 2004, p. 164.

[20]   See Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 164.

[21]   Deleuze 1985, p. 289 (my translation).

[22]   Deleuze 1995, p. 174.

[23]   Hallas 2009, p. 143.

[24]   With the exception of FTLD's sequel Habit (2001).

[25]   According to Patricia Milder, the history of lecture performances can be traced back to Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*: a 1965 performance in which the German artist gave an exhibition tour to a leporid's carcass resting in his arms. See Milder 2011, pp. 13-27.

[26]   Helguera 2009, p. 6.

[27]   Ibid.

[28]   Bordowitz 2021, p. 29.

[29]   New York's MoMA PS1 in September 2021

[30]   Bordowitz 2021, p. 19.

[31]   Deleuze 2006, pp. 145-146.

[32]   Ibid., p. 85.

[33]   Ibid., p. 20.

[34]   Phelan 1993, p. 31.

[35]   Ibid., p. 6.

[36]   Fournier 2021, p. 46.

[37]   Nyong'o 2018, p. 11.

[38]   Phelan 1993, p. 146.

[39]   Ibid., p. 132.

[40]   Heschel 1957, p. 99.

[41]   Ibid., pp. 100-101.

[42]   According to Heschel, it is no coincidence that, in biblical Hebrew, there is no word for 'thing' or 'object'. Instead, the word Davar means speech, word, or message, which Heschel sees as a spiritual sign. Ibid., p. 103.

[43] Ibid., pp. 105-106.

[44] Ibid., pp. 108.

[45] Mosès 2008, p. 32.

[46] Gossett & Stanley & Burton 2017, p. xv.

[47]   Although he claimed to have lost his faith as a teenager, Bergson was raised in a Jewish family and received a religious education. His relation to Judaism became the subject of debates in philosophical circles throughout the twentieth century. Some interpreted his notion of 'closed society' as a prejudiced reading of Judaism, whereas others saw some significant connections between Bergsonian thought and Jewish theology (see Teboul 2005). For Jankélévitch, Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* determine both the ethical orientation of Bergsonian thought as well as its conciliation with Judaism, at the heart of which lies the notion of time (see Jankélévitch 1933).

[48]   Bergson 1977, pp. 107-108.

[49]   Deleuze & Guattari 1994, pp. 230; 171.

[50]   Ibid., pp. 167-168.

[51]   Gallop 2002, p. 2.

[52]   Bordowitz 2021, p. 221

[53]   Ibid., p. 222.

[54]   Boyarin & Itzkovitz & Pellegrini 2003, p. 1.

[55]   Ibid., p. 2.

[56]   Bordowitz 2021, pp. 32; 35.

[57]   Sedgwick 1990, p. 71.

[58]   Ibid., p.75.

[59]   The Bible (Esther 4:16).

[60]   Sedgwick 1990, p. 76.

[61]   Ibid., p. 31.

[62]   See Collins 1988; Dowd 1991; Gergen 1991.

[63]   Boyarin 2009, p. 7.

[64]   Ibid., p. 13.

[65]   Quoted in Nyong'o 2018, p. 15.

[66]   Butt 2005, p. 4.

[67]   See Rosnow & Fine 1976.

[68]   Butt 2005, pp. 6-7.

[69]   Muñoz 2009, p. 65.

[70]   Muñoz 1996, pp. 5-16.

[71]   Muñoz 2009, p. 65.

LOISEAU