

# **Day for Night**

**In Play-Doh's Cave**

Eleanor Foy

This body of work is dedicated to the memory of  
Simone Mele  
1991 – 2025

I remember the conversation but you'll have to forgive the paraphrase – "How do you make work? No, like, *how do you make work*? Where does it come from? Whenever I write a poem I feel like I black out." I'm sure I'll never know. See you on the other side.

## Recipe

When we add two like liquids  
together it is called marrying.  
When we add two dislike liquids  
together it is called a mistake.  
When the mistake tastes good  
it is called temperance. Tempering  
yolks prevents a custard  
from breaking. Breaking  
is the separation of a liquid's  
fats from proteins. Curds from whe

-rever. When we whisk the yolks the  
whisk is a wheel that turns her world around it.  
The center of the bowl is the center.  
Then the machine wheeling the air  
into it: I mean it: the world. This too we call  
temperance: a magician tricking the tongue.

– Simone Mele

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## I. "THE WEST"

An account of my work begins with my attachment to the iconography of the American West: a constellation of scenes, songs and archetypes that share little beyond the imaginary landscapes they inhabit. In the hapless yearning of Hank Williams, the stark scenery in Wim Wender's Paris, Texas, and even the campy self-reliance of Kirk Douglas in Lonely are the Brave, I find a dream version of myself. In all these examples, a figure both strong and pathetic provides a template for engaging with the sublime. Fraught emotions are framed by implausibly reductive structures of plot and chorus and verse; here, my loneliness and irreconciliations are profound. Aimless wandering through awesome and varied landscapes is self-evidently purposeful.

The mythology of the American West, as it exists in popular culture, is a fiction of adventure, antiheroes and inevitability. Historian Richard White credits its fabrication and popularization to army scout-turned-showman William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, whose long-running and wildly popular stage performance, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, helped originate familiar tropes and narratives inherent to the Western genre. For one, the *image* of "cowboys and Indians," although certainly not the image's underpinning philosophy, first appeared in Cody's show. By omitting and distorting the sociopolitical context, Cody's West framed white Americans as noble underdogs forced to defend themselves against an onslaught of cunning and barbaric Indians. White claims, "Buffalo Bill created what now seems a postmodern West in which performance and history were hopelessly intertwined. The story Buffalo Bill told gained credence from his claim (and the claim of many of the Indians who accompanied him) that he had lived part of it."<sup>1</sup> Indigenous people like Sitting Bull, who participated in the historical events fictionalized by Cody, "now inhabited their own representations... imitating imitations of themselves."<sup>2</sup> Hay-o-wei, a Cheyenne warrior, was slain in July 1876 by Buffalo Bill himself, who wore his stage costume on the battlefield. Hay-o-wei's scalp was displayed as a prop in Cody's Wild West.

What seems like a given totally dissolves under any amount of scrutiny; narratives of American history that seemed so definitive and secure are only an illusion.

In his book Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot does much to deconstruct this illusion, beginning with its semantics. "In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened."<sup>3</sup> Already, we are dealing with a fractured concept.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994), 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 2.

Although the history of the American West is not the focus of Trouillot's study, its overt fictionalization provides an illustrative example:

Before and after Hollywood's long commitment to the history of cowboys and pioneers, comic books rather than textbooks, country songs rather than chronological tables filled the gaps left by the westerns. Then as now, American children and quite a few young males elsewhere learned to thematize parts of that history by playing cowboys and Indians.<sup>4</sup>

History is learned not only from historians, but also, if not mostly, from images and narratives that pervade popular culture. Like a hall of mirrors, each successive version of "that which is said to have happened" is a further distortion of "what happened," ultimately revealed to be completely subjective and virtually impossible to pin down. The hollowness and inconsistency of these images continually congeal and dissolve again into other forms. I find the illusion of a stable past to be hypnotic, like a fire: endlessly fascinating in its propensity for nostalgic warmth or destruction.

Mark Fisher's writing provides a useful lens for understanding my personal vision of the Western aesthetic, particularly his conception of "the eerie:" a distinct feeling that results from a breach of mundane reality. A clear example is an "eerie cry": what makes it so is the unknown nature of its source. What, or who, produced the cry – and why? According to Fisher, an experience is eerie when it is beyond our ability to grasp. Therefore, "the eerie necessarily involves forms of speculation and suspense,"<sup>5</sup> because we are only able to guess its source or intentions. "The eerie concerns the unknown; when the knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears."<sup>6</sup> When the mystery is solved, it evaporates.

The unknowability of the history that contextualizes Western narratives aligns with Fisher's definition of this aesthetic. Even more broadly, however, the very concept of the Western frontier is an embodiment of the eerie. Historian Patricia Nelson Limerick calls this phenomena the Boone paradox: "Daniel Boone found civilization intolerable and escaped to the wilderness. His travels blazed trails for other pioneers to follow, and Boone found himself crowded out."<sup>7</sup> The idyllic frontier, brutal, beautiful, and procurable, is short-lived and ever-receding. The tension between immaculate "wilderness" and inevitable "civilization" come to destroy it serves as the backdrop for all Westerns. The cowboy archetype exists in the strained liminal space between the two, as harbingers of progress, or ruin. When the West is settled, the West disappears.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 90.

As it functions in my imagination, “the West” has little to do with any one history, film genre, or geography. It’s a sense of doom within landscape, a quest for something that once attained is destroyed.

## II. TRICK PONY

Although I’ve long made work that references Western landscape and iconography, my first exploration into the illusionistic qualities of historical narratives culminated in a body of work titled Trick Pony. I constructed a series of ceramic shapes in the forms of hearts, horses, geologic formations, and other familiar silhouettes. Most no larger than 12 inches in any direction, they resemble miniature theater flats, totally reductive in their mimesis. The horse and mountain forms simultaneously fail to represent with any accuracy and leave no question as to what they are supposed to resemble. Hearts and banners, imposed with text, are like storefront signs or faded billboards.



These objects are carefully constructed from slabs of clay. Airbrushed with matte pastel glazes, the directional spray of color exaggerates the clean angles. Red, beige,

and speckled clay surfaces are barely hidden by this glaze treatment: dusty, faded, and wind-blasted.

Although each form is discrete, Trick Pony is necessarily an installation. Collectively, the individual objects create a rudimentary landscape, like a model train set or chess board.

My ideas about installation are informed by Catherine Taylor's essay *Image Text Music*. Throughout, she conducts an imaginary conversation with Roland Barthes, debating and dissecting the claims he makes in his own essay (*Image Music Text*, the scrambled namesake of Taylor's). She identifies a major formal strategy: the tableau.

A tableau is a moment of time impossibly stopped, an image of something temporary, something partial, which contradicts our lived experience – both our inability to control the flow of time, and our knowledge that no one sighting tells the whole story. In this way, a text built on such a series of deliberately discrete scenes – particularly one whose gaps are emphasized, one without the clear explanatory connective tissue of cause and effect (as in plot) or of evidence that builds through the logic of “because” (as in argument) – gives us both glimpses of the world and draws attention to the poverty of those glimpses.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of the tableau reminds me of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, a living diorama of the history of the American West. The comparison ends, however, with the show's narrative, which provides the “connective tissue” and “evidence” necessary to convince the audience of the story's veracity. I am interested in drawing attention to the poverty of such storytelling mechanisms.

Inherent to the elasticity of storytelling is the function and limits of language. Most of the forms in Trick Pony are imposed with text. The tension between glimpses of the world and the poverty of those glimpses is now doubled; disbelief must be suspended to connect the forms to a referent as well as to make sense of the relationship between the forms and the text on their surfaces.

I use an X-acto knife to incise letters from a slab of clay, traced from printed or hand-drawn typefaces. These meticulously cut components are then affixed to the leather-hard surface of my sculptures, forming words in positive relief. So, yes, like a billboard or a storefront sign, but in scale and material also like a tombstone, a quiet monument for something just out of reach.

Most of the text are singular words of only three or four letters, like “pony” or “dust.” Many forms have different words on either side, the meaning shifting depending on the perspective of the viewer. These vague nouns, arranged on the silhouetted forms in a tabletop landscape, invite the viewer to imagine relationships between them, projecting meaning onto literally flat objects with little context of their own. The deadpan

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Taylor, *Image Text Music* (London: SPBH Editions, 2022), 110.

presentation of text as an object charges the invisible distance between the shape of the word and what we intend the word to mean. A horse form that reads “dog” on one side and “pony” on the other manifests the performance indicated by the idiom. Hearts that read “stud” and “baby” suggest pet names or stereotypes, leaving the relationship or agency between these roles open-ended. Although there is humor in the disjunction between word and form, the static permanence of ceramic and the meticulousness of the ceramic process imbue the objects with a certain amount of gravity. The word feels less flippant when its presence is the end product of hours of exacting labor.

In investigating the illusion of storytelling, Trick Pony explores the limits of language’s ability to communicate meaning, while enjoying its clunky necessity.



### III. “THE INEVITABLE GAP”

One thing that charms me about the Western genre is its adherence to form: with little variation, we can expect a macho lonesome drifter to sacrifice the comforts of domestic life in order to ensure “good” prevails over “evil.”

I’m fascinated that the same story told over and over again continues to be meaningful. Revising her earlier claim that photographs of violence numb their audience to the subject over time, Susan Sontag writes in Regarding the Pain of Others, “...there are cases where repeated exposure to what shocks, saddens, appalls does not use up

a full-hearted response...People want to weep. Pathos, in the form of a narrative, does not wear out.”<sup>9</sup> The narrative structure provides a familiar and comforting catharsis.

Curious about the longevity of the archetypal Western narrative, I turned to its earliest version: Homer’s Odyssey.

Reading translations gave me a new way to think about the shortcomings of language that I had begun to explore in *Trick Pony*. Regarding the contemporary style of her translation, Emily Wilson writes in her preface to The Odyssey:

The use of a noncolloquial or archaizing linguistic register can blind readers to the real, inevitable, and vast gap between the Greek original and any modern translation... All modern translations of ancient texts exist in a time, a place, and a language that are entirely alien from those of the original... The question facing translators and their readers is whether to try to disguise this fact...or to underline it, and thereby encourage readers to be aware that the text exists in two different temporal and spatial moments at once.<sup>10</sup>

In my sculptural work, I seek to underline the “inevitable gap” between what is said and what is understood. Impossible to depict directly, this enduring tension drives my practice.

Translator and poet Anne Carson names the distance between the thing and the perception of the thing Eros: the epitome of desire. Connecting this directly to language, she writes, “The words we read and the words we write never say exactly what we mean. The people we love are never just as we desire them...Eros is in between.”<sup>11</sup> There is nothing so alluring as that which is eternally beyond our reach: my argument is that everything outside ourselves is beyond our reach, and I want to make that visible.

Novelist Elvia Wilk is also preoccupied with “the inevitable gap.” Specifically, she is interested in black holes as a literary subject. The phenomenon illustrates another of Mark Fisher’s aesthetic categories: the weird. Defined as “that which does not belong,”<sup>12</sup> the weird is an experience in which the norm is disrupted by the unfamiliar. Writes Wilk, a black hole “is not a metaphor, it is a real thing happening in the universe, and yet I find it very hard to reconcile the explanation with my understanding of physics based on, say, my experience of daily life.”<sup>13</sup> The weird challenges our ability to understand the world around us by forcing awareness of the limits of our understanding.

In discussing stories about black holes, Wilk provides some connective tissue between Fisher’s weird and Carson’s Eros:

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Wilson, introduction and translator’s note to *The Odyssey*, Homer, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018), 87.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Dallas, Dalkey Archive Essentials, 2022), 122.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Elvia Wilk, *Death by Landscape* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2022), 153.

...Weirdness provides a sort of methodology for reading stories that lead toward the black hole...This is fiction in tension with itself, which uses the human technologies of language, story, and description to forge an aesthetic encounter that transcends the explicability those tools are supposed to provide. It is a fiction that triangulates desire by creating absences at the center of the plot that cannot be resolved.<sup>14</sup>

Like Wilk, I am drawn to stories that acknowledge the shortcomings of the medium.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot also addresses “the inevitable gap.” He writes, “Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded.”<sup>15</sup> I always return to the tension between that which is left out and that which is recorded. Negative space is charged and unstable: here is the eerie again, here is where things shimmer.

This negative space, and its perception, are of course linked to power, as Trouillot fruitfully argues. Beyond an aesthetic theory, the stakes of the eerie are high. Fisher writes, the eerie “turns crucially on the problem of agency...it is about the forces that govern our lives and the world.”<sup>16</sup> This is oppression, this is heartbreak. Scholar and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa frames such gaps as borderlands, and connects them directly to the lived experience of those who exist within them. “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line...The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”<sup>17</sup>

Who decides the normal? After *Trick Pony* I wanted to find a way to talk about power dynamics: to control perception and point to the mechanism of control.

#### IV. PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography, more than any other medium, deals explicitly with the power dynamics of representation, and has always been an important part of my studio practice. Like most everyone, I began photographing as a tourist. My fascination with the West originated with and endures because of the Western landscape. It has always captured my imagination. Photos taken on vacation with disposable cameras or an iPhone have long been important formal references for my sculptural work. I photograph to remember the

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<sup>14</sup> Elvia Wilk, *Death by Landscape* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2022), 153-54.

<sup>15</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 17.

specificity of geologic features, the typography of a gas station sign, the color of a pool of water, the strangeness of a museum diorama.



Because my family and I are from the West, I felt free to play with and distort the mythic iconography of the region. I reconsidered this approach after moving to Georgia and turning my attention to the Southern landscape; confronting the fraught mythology of the American South as a bright-eyed newcomer felt both presumptuous and hollow.

In her collection of essays *On Photography*, Susan Sontag famously claims that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.”<sup>18</sup> On a material level, photography literally objectifies a subject, transforming its likeness into something possessed by the photographer.

Photography is especially sinister because it can appear convincingly objective. Sontag writes, “despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth.”<sup>19</sup> The manner in which photography controls the viewer’s perspective is so much quieter than other types of representation, in which the artist’s hand is impossible to deny. Photographs are necessarily an edit, as Trouillot points out about historical narrative. In my view, photography shares the same illusion of objectivity and truthfulness.

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” in *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Literary Classics, 2013), 529.

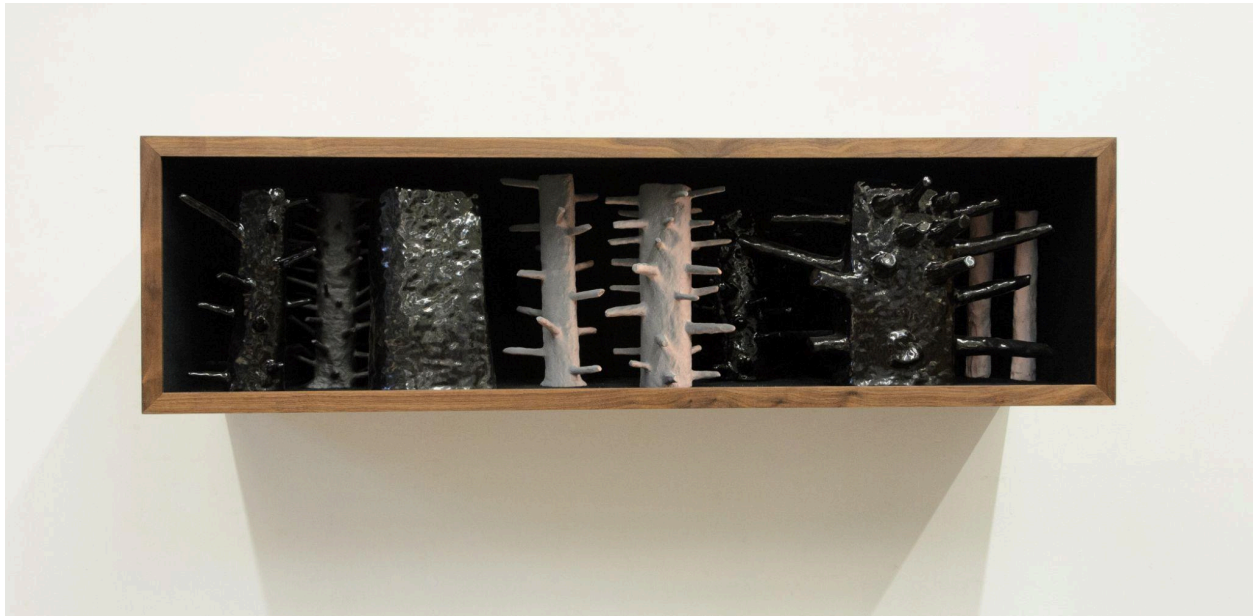
<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 531.

Although my photographic subject matter has changed little since moving to the South, engaging with this shift in landscape through a camera lens has forced me to contend with the power dynamics inherent in all representation.

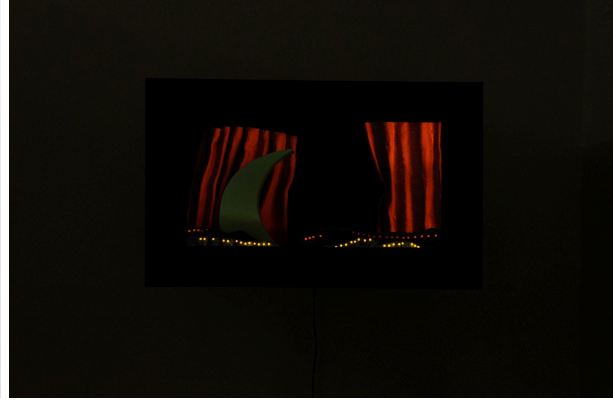
## V. "ABSTRACT CAPACITY"

"Day for night" refers to the technique of simulating a night scene filmed in daylight. Before digital cameras, film was tinted blue or underexposed in post-processing to imitate moonlight. You see this in a lot of Westerns. It's usually an ineffective illusion – an appropriate title for this body of work.

As opposed to *Trick Pony*, in which the objects are viewable in the round, the simulated landscapes of *Day for Night* are framed by wooden boxes mounted on the wall. The viewer has no choice but to view the work frontally, flattening the otherwise dimensional composition into some kind of photograph.



*Swamp* was informed by my travels in the South, especially to the black waters of the Okefenokee. I thought the swamp would feel inevitable, like all civilization was sliding toward its fate, but instead it felt fragile. My *Swamp* is a 4 foot-long box lined in black velvet. It is both a window into another world and a container of specimens, like an aquarium. Inside are barbed ceramic trees, some a glossy black, but most left unglazed and totally matte. Although there is no lighting mechanism in the box, the pink trees look illuminated, because they are so bright against the void behind them. The black trees fade into the background. This illusion is hypnotic, the negative space is charged and eerie.



*Moon* is similar but uses slightly different strategies to play with perception. The frame of this box is wider and therefore more obvious. The burly walnut looks like ripples in water. I can't even take credit for that illusion – this stuff is everywhere. Curtains establish the scene as a stage, a site of some performance. Small mountains are studded with fine silver or neon plastic – both gleam. A flat yellow moon rises behind them. This staged scene is a site for meditating on illusion. My favorite illusion is a thumbprint that looks like a facet of a rock or mountain when hit with a directional mist of glaze. So easy.

The curtains are glazed with a low-temperature red glaze that glows under ultraviolet light, the source of which is concealed behind the walnut frame. I developed these glazes to exploit the physical instability of perception: literally, how light waves hit the eye. To me these glazes reveal the false neutrality of context. Everything requires certain conditions to be perceived. This story only makes sense when it's told on a stage.

*Desert* is a square box that must be approached in order to see inside. To me, this is a big ask of a viewer – to duck your head and look inside something unknown is to make yourself vulnerable. Here, the perception is most explicitly controlled. The box is made of MDF and coated with walnut veneer. Even this surface is a facade.

Inside, the box is lined with black velvet and lit from within by ultraviolet light. The dust that gets stuck in the velvet is illuminated, and this feels like a real magic trick – it becomes a galaxy in the depth of the night sky. Like a view from an airplane, we see the desert floor below, dotted with plastic pegs that might be bar lights, might be neon signs. This scene most closely resembles the “day for night” of Westerns, in which daylight is filtered blue to look like moonlight, so bright you could read by.

Swan figures, glossy black, overlook the viewers, making explicit the hierarchy of gaze. Although they are hung on the wall like taxidermy, their gazes are pointed. It's unclear what role they play in the story, and thus constitute an eerie presence.



Throughout the development of this body of work, I realized what fascinated me about the American West was not necessarily the content of the mythology but the fact of its illusion. The subject of *Day for Night* is that illusion itself, and the open-endedness of its potential. Mark Fisher writes, “when the stories fail...the question about the machinery that produces them becomes inevitable.”<sup>20</sup> In my study of American history and historiography, it is clear that the stories I have been taught are failures – or successes, depending on your perspective, but fail to represent with any nuance or accuracy “what happened.” Ultimately, I think all stories fail – there are always some kind of unavoidable gaps – but that they are still worth telling, even when their mechanisms are apparent.

In his essay *The Hatred of Poetry*, writer Ben Lerner discusses the inherent disappointment of the art form. We are told that Poetry can change the world, that it is a true expression of the human spirit, but when we read actual poems, we realize this promise is impossible to fulfil. The actual poem can never live up to the promise of Poetry.

Lerner relates this to the experience of going to the movie theater as a kid. “Each time the lights went down and the first preview lit up the screen, I felt overwhelmed by an abstract capacity I associate with Poetry. Not the artwork itself – even when the artwork is great – but the little clearing the theater makes.”<sup>21</sup>

I am compelled by this little clearing, and that, despite the inevitable gaps of knowability, we continue to use the imperfect system of art to tell stories, express feeling, and relate to one another. I am moved by the concurrent effort to bridge these gaps and the understood impossibility of ever truly doing so. This enduring impulse is both tragic and hopeful.

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 71-72.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 83-84.

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