

Another Gaze



By [Gabiella Beckhurst Essays, Reviews](#) August 20, 2020

Against Inheritance: Stanya Kahn's 'No Go Backs'

Stanya Kahn's latest short film 'No Go Backs' (2020) opens with two teenage boys peeing into the grassy scrub with their backs to the camera as the Sierra Nevada looms large in front of them. A central component of Kahn's recently reopened exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts, the film follows two teenage protagonists played by the artist's son Lenny Dodge-Kahn and his friend and neighbour Elijah Parks as they travel through a California landscape assailed by sun, wind and snow. The teens move out from Los Angeles by bike and on foot via the hollow of the Los Angeles River through historic sites of California's Water Wars, a route that allows Kahn a range of opportunities to scrutinise the symbolic and material power structures that have shaped, if not sabotaged, the region. Touted as a "compressed allegorical epic" about the false inheritance of Generation Z, 'No Go Backs' uses Lenny and Elijah's journey to map, in reverse, the extensive network of diversions that redirected water into Los Angeles for much of the last century, diminishing agricultural prospects in the Owens Valley in the process. The scene where the boys float in the serene waters of Mono Lake conjures boyish larking, but the history of this ancient saline lake is more turbulent; after fifty years of systematic drainage by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, it has only recently been partially restored following an extended activist campaign. Likewise, the Sierra snowpack that acts as a compass to the teens' movements is more than backdrop, given that it is [a barometer of drought in Southern California](#). The current that pulls the film along is thus a study of inheritance both for landscapes inscribed by extractive technologies and for those who wrestle with the legacies, structural and representational, of life turned into conveyable and disposable assets.^[1]



In the guide that accompanies the exhibition, passages from Robinson Jeffers' 1925 poem 'Shine, Perishing Republic' and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a work chillingly recognisable in its prognosis of political leadership in the 2020s, introduce the abuses of racist, patriarchal and capitalist systems of governance. Like these bellwether texts, 'No Go Backs' muddies the line between fiction and actual events. When the kids veer off the road into protected wilderness sites such as Red Rock Canyon, it is the shot of a whirling helicopter overhead rather than any calculated dramaturge that reminds us that end-of-the-world fiction

needn't exaggerate present fascisms. Kahn continues with these inferences without drawing conclusive rings around them. Indeed, while the casting of Kahn's son and friend as proxies for Gen Z implies the ways in which such oppressions threaten the futurity of a younger generation, the specific circumstances that have brought Lenny and Elijah out into this landscape of extremes are never explicitly addressed in the film. Their haphazard preparations (revealed to us in a series of flashbacks in which we see them packing meagre provisions in their bedrooms) confirm that the boys are clearly no preppers, just teens who have been forced to think about this stuff. This emphasis on the piecemeal is a welcome departure from the all-out disaster exodus; during these scenes Kahn hones in on scattered figureheads of teenage hero worship – the Thor and Wolverine comic books, the gnarly pro surfer – that stage the aesthetic and cognitive dissonance of a Herculean resolve and its practical enactment. Wexner curator Lucy I. Zimmerman's description of the film as a compressed epic feels fitting here, but where classical tales of strife typically focus on triumphant gains, Kahn gives room to the makeshift ways that a younger generation might plot its own path forward.

Most of 'No Go Backs' is shot with a long-focus lens that instates physical distance between the filmmaker and her protagonists. Kahn uses this method to float a 'praxis' of mutual respect: "to see and acknowledge difference without invading, assuming to know, or attempting to co-opt."ⁱⁱⁱ With this, she echoes filmmakers who have theorised distance in relation to their own practice, from Artavazd Peleshian's notion of "distance montage" to Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of speaking nearby rather than for her subjects. In 'No Go Backs', dialogue is absented in favour of the seesawing rushes of a soundtrack to which Lenny and Elijah contributed their own music and ideas. These aural sojourns operate powerfully in the film, with tracks by ELI.SO.DRIPPY, Alexia Riner, Insect Ark, Lil Peep and Brian Eno also scattered throughout. That the sound design shifts the pessimistic mood of postapocalypse to one of gradual possibility feels a significant part of Kahn's direction, as if meant to extend an sonic force field around the teens' passage forward.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

In its portrait of adolescent refusal, 'No Go Backs' has a sideways relationship to Kahn's *Stand in the Stream* (2011–17), a highly-saturated visual narrative that tracks the call to resistance between public and private spaces of participation. Unlike *Stand in the Stream*, which considers how certain moments gain a foothold in the informatic deluge of the internet, 'No Go Backs' is characterised by a thirst for transformation not yet pinned down in words. This likely explains why the teenagers are hard to read throughout, almost entirely opaque to viewers as subjects, but not to each other. As we scramble to rationalise some of the teens' decisions, they are always one step ahead, actively bringing about their future: shade sought out in the dry dust, seeds swiped from a dusty general store or the 'thirsty fruit' Elijah just about keeps alive. Throughout Kahn forms contemporary layers over historic land contestations: the boys travel by bikes instead of carts, northbound rather than along the southerly inroads formed by westward expansionism during the 19th century; they carry plastic water bottles that must be constantly replenished and skate the dusty half-pipe of the Los Angeles River over which surface waters scantily flow. Albeit subtly, 'No Go Backs' never loses sight of the fact that scarcity has been purposefully etched into this landscape.

Lenny and Elijah can only get so far on swiped Gatorade and corndogs, however, and eventually we see them beginning to cultivate their new world, even catching hares by hand. If Kahn's sequencing could be read as an pastoralising of non-urban regions, particularly for 'detached' city kids seeking reconnection, she confronts us with images that evoke the ways in which wild country has become a fractious metonym for the good life imagined elsewhere. Are the stuffed toys littering an abandoned weatherboard any more authentically 'found' than the sleek desert cabin the kids find unlocked? Kahn also refrains from overly romanticising the harshness of the Sierras, instead drawing the viewer into the pitfalls of idealised rusticity imposed when evoking nature as something stable and free-standing. That 'No Go Backs' has been read as [a postapocalyptic vision](#) isn't surprising given the disaster aesthetics it dabbles in. The symbol of the road is at its centre, typically configured as a confrontational site of survival in works like

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as well as the aforementioned *Parable of the Sower*. Yet 'No Go Backs' occupies its own space in the genre. The boys neither return to their warm beds by the end of the film nor are ravaged by exposure; here the unmooring performed by the road, whereby there is "no happy resolution, and certainly no return home",^[iv] pushes us into territory that is difficult to recognise. The survival imperative of 'No Go Backs' should be understood within the present global swell of authoritarianism, but it is not concerned with its strident opposition in the form of energetic youth climate activists. Kahn makes no assumptions about a generation's response. Lenny and Elijah eventually do make contact with other kids who have similarly abandoned cities they had no hand in building, but when two other teenagers appear at the end of the dirt road, the pair's reactions are tentative, suggesting the desire for an alternative communality rather than automatic solidarity.

Given the film's Odyssean stylings, we might then interpret 'No Go Backs''s focus on teenagers improvising their way forward as intended to convey the situation of a generation largely disbarred from 'adult' conversations about life ahead at the same time as having their understanding of difficulty routinely patronised. For a generation that has grown up with widely-circulated images of racialised brutality and political corruption, violence is part of the normative schema of everyday life; as Kahn recently put it: "they're in it, they know it's an apocalyptic state".^[v] The muted resolve of 'No Go Backs' needs to be seen within a context laden with inherited responsibility. And it is here that Kahn is most accountable: If she is practically unable to safeguard their futures as a parent, as a filmmaker she can give the teenagers space to propose their own version of events. She can, and does, resist the metastasising despair that dystopias ordinarily promise. Not going back, then, taps into something of the enduring premise of Butler's dystopic epic about camaraderie as essential to survival. The tenderness of Lenny and Elijah's friendship is the film's central motif but it is also its most elusive. When one warms the other's feet under their jumper against the biting cold it is impossible to determine the extent of Kahn's direction. Moments like this point to the stakes of making a film about generational legacies

without purporting to fix them, and so ‘No Go Backs’ is its most vital when we view the film as the suggestion that sometimes stepping aside is better than passing the buck.

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^[1] On California’s water-marketing coalition see Mike Davis, ‘Water pirates and the infinite suburb’, in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 7:2, 1996, 81–84. ^[2] Stanya Kahn, ‘Notes from Stanya Kahn’, Wexner Center for the Arts, 27 January 2020: <https://wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/notes-stanya-kahn>. ^[3] See Artavazd Peleshian, ‘Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance’, trans. Julia Vassilieva, *LOLA*, 6: Distances, December 2015 (based on Pelechian’s *Moe Kino* (Erevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1988); and Scott MacDonald, ‘Going the Distance: An interview with the Armenian master Artavazd Peleshian’, published on *Moving Image Source*, Museum of the Moving Image, New York, 6 January 2012: <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/going-the-distance-20120106>. ^[4] Helen J. Burgess and Jeanne Hamming, *Highways of the Mind* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 127. ^[5] Zoom Q&A with Stanya Kahn and Wexner curators, Lucy I. Zimmerman and Jennifer Lange, 13 May 2020.

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