

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN NOT KNOWING

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Abstract

Somewhere Between Not Knowing is a 14-minute single channel installation that recounts the life of a queer Afghan-Canadian boy who grows up in a society not fully equipped to witness his becoming. With a voiceover that borrows from David Wojnarowicz's 1990 photo-text collage *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)*, the film serves as a cathartic love letter to myself, post-coming out, bathed in the gentlest reminder that even plants without water can grow. While the work is faithful to elements of my own coming-of-age, my goal is to recall—with emotional precision—a series of deeply familiar moments of queer awakening that have imprinted my past, and those of other queer people; moments of curiosity, wonder, excitement, rejection, and pain; moments felt in the heart as much as in the body; moments that fuelled countless nights of agony, fear, and prayer. By recontextualizing Wojnarowicz's text through the fragile register of a child's voice, the installation reframes his iconic call against queer erasure into a diasporic narrative of survival, extending his legacy while situating it within my Afghan-Canadian experience.

Dedication

As the wonderful contemporary poet Ocean Vuong penned in his own address to his mother, “I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.”¹ I too, dedicate this paper to my mother who will admittedly never read it (or even begin to be able to). A woman who was born in the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan, fleeing the country many years later, armed only with her children and little tangible prospect for the future. She carried her kin into a world that asked her to surrender her language, her history, and nearly every certainty she knew. I thank her wholeheartedly for her unwavering acceptance and truly unconditional love. I have not experienced a greater love in life.

¹ Ocean Vuong, “A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read.” *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/a-letter-to-my-mother-that-she-will-never-read>.

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And finally to my younger self: cheers. To your courage, your sensitivity, and your “unmistakable softness.”²

² Leo Herrera, “Unmistakable Softness,” *Post* (If They Lived, 2023).

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Introduction

A few years ago, I wrote and directed an 18-minute narrative short film entitled *One Day This Kid* (inspired by David Wojnarowicz's photo-text collage of the same name), which recounted three pivotal life stages—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—of an Afghan-Canadian man coming to terms with his queerness.



Image 1: Still from my previous short film, *One Day This Kid*, 2024

The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, won the Grand Jury Prize at SXSW and was circulated widely through festival exhibition and broadcast. While the project was deeply rewarding, I am now able to reflect on some of its limitations, or missed opportunities. Although the short was inspired by Wojnarowicz's poem, I never truly pursued the chance to integrate his text in a more honourable way. At the time, omitting voiceover seemed a pragmatic choice—making the film more accessible, palatable, and programmable for the kinds of festivals I hoped to reach. Yet as the festival run continued, I grew increasingly regretful for abandoning my initial instincts with the incorporation of Wojnarowicz's material. With each screening, I imagined ways the film might be deconstructed and recontextualized in non-

theatrical, more experimental settings—settings not unlike Wojnarowicz’s collage, which itself exists in multiple editions displayed in institutions such as the Yale University Art Gallery, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. My gravitation towards unarchiving, reshaping and reworking the film into a less linear and more experimental framework grew steadily more compelling.

In creating *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, I discovered a lineage of artists who actively remix and re-present their work in new contexts. This practice of self-sampling or “appropriation” (Baron, 102) transforms prior artists’ material into a palimpsest: new layers accumulate while traces of the original remain visible. The Tate Gallery describes these artists aims as creating “a new situation, and therefore a new meaning or set of meanings, for a familiar image” (Tate). American artist Bruce Conner, for example, worked regularly with external archival material to create multiple versions of his iconic 1958 film *A Movie*, all released with multiple titles and different distribution strategies, meant to challenge themes around authorship, originality and what many deem to be the “final” version of a film (Goldsmith, 2016). Conner asserted that “if co-optation was inevitable, supervision must be perpetual,” turning “reuse into rebellion” through the practice of reclamation (Beckstrand, 2025). This approach to making work reiterates a filmmaking adage I hear often as a professional Editor—that art is never finished, only *abandoned*.

This thesis reflects on the effects of time, exhibition, and reception on my earlier film, while exploring the artistic aspirations that emerged in the making of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*. With this project, I re-engage my earlier work by introducing new variables—poetry, voiceover, intertitles, and installation—to uncover additional layers of meaning within material

once considered *finished*. Central to this reworking is the reintroduction of Wojnarowicz's text, prompting the guiding question: how does this universal poem, when voiced anew, reshape both a queer Afghan coming-of-age story and the visual strategies of my film? American artist Sherrie Levine once wrote "The act of appropriation is not just about taking something that belongs to someone else; it's about taking something that belongs to everyone," (Lee, 2025)—a sentiment that will continue to frame my process of reworking and recontextualizing my work, situating it within a broader practice of queer, intersectional, and autobiographical filmmaking.

Origins

Sometime in 2017, I stumbled across an Instagram story of David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (One Day This Kid)*, a photo-text collage from 1990 at the height of the AIDS crisis. With its nursery-rhyme cadence, the text unfolds as a retrospective glimpse into the life of a young boy marked for persecution—ostracism, the stripping of rights, unfathomable abuse—simply for desiring to “place his naked body on the naked body of another boy.” Within the

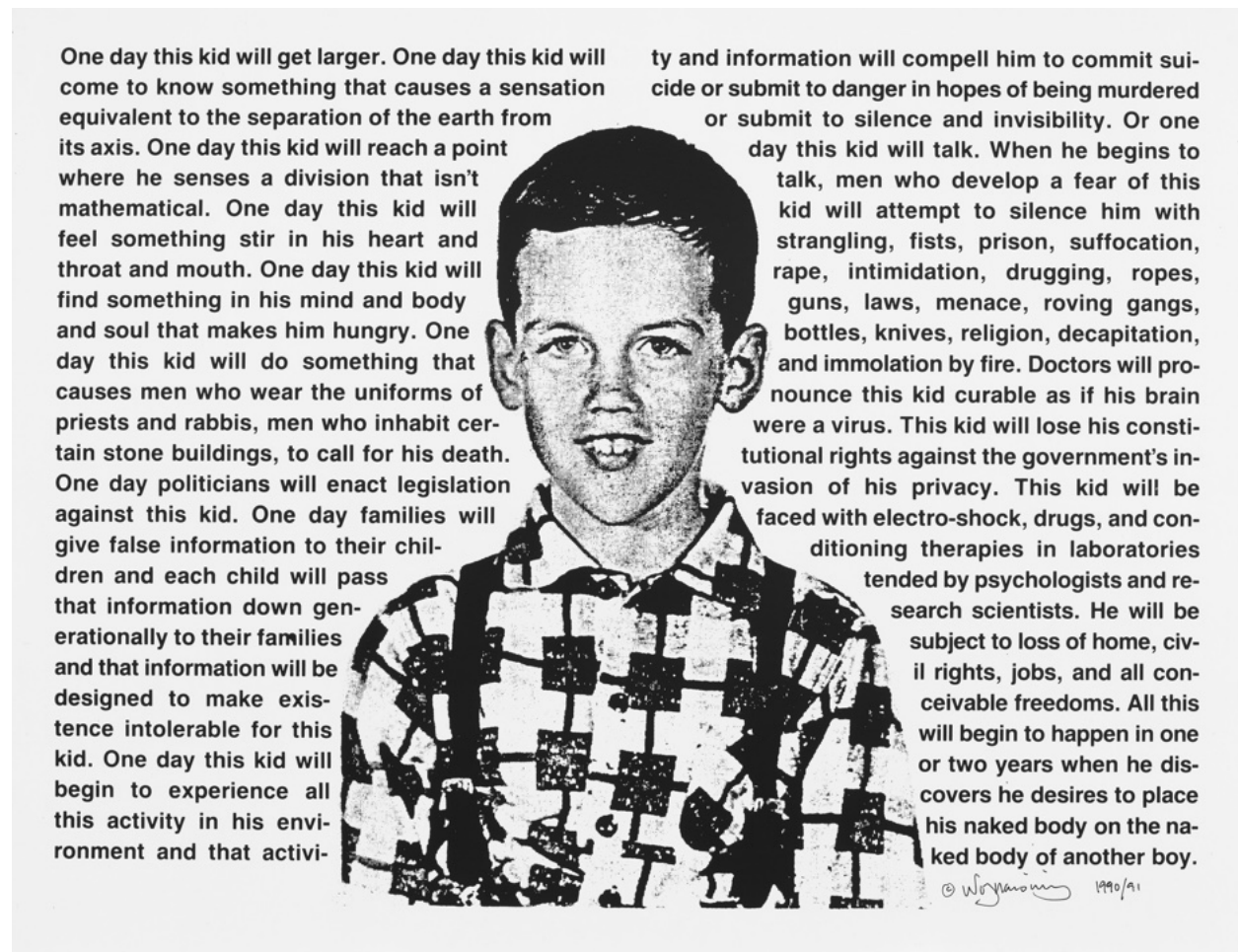


Image 2: *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* by David Wojnarowicz, 1990

artwork itself, the text tightly encircles the image of Wojnarowicz as a child donning a toothy grin and his Sunday best. The contrast here—between the seemingly idyllic Picture Day-ready smile of the young boy, paired with the brutal prophetic surrounding text—lays bare how the

American dream, and the institutions upholding it, were complicit in queer oppression. The work adopts Wojnarowicz's personal narrative of vulnerability into a searing critique of a national idea that systemically failed to protect—and rather actively persecuted—its queer citizens. In this sense, the work embodies what José Esteban Muñoz calls “a glimpse of queer futurity”—an invitation to imagine a life otherwise, even in the face of inevitable erasure (Muñoz, 2009).

I can still recall the lump in my throat when I first read the text, an uneasiness that submarines each time I return to the work (or introduce it to others). I felt arrested by the dread and despair that starkly reminded me, with such heaviness, of the challenges posed by young people growing up in their queerness. Each reading conjured new images: some drawn from my own life, others from people I know—some blurred, some vivid. Wojnarowicz's words became a vehicle through which I replayed my own queer becoming—what *was*, and what *could* have been. Over time, I found myself living in the spaces between his lines, constantly seasoning my relationship to the poem with each film I watched, each text I read, each song I heard. Around Pride month that year, I discovered Leo Herrera's viral ode “growing up Gay with a flaming capital G”—a litany of gestures, humiliations, and soft rebellions that felt instantly familiar:

“Cheers to growing up Gay with a flaming capital G. To the limp wrists in our childhood photos, to telling on ourselves before we could talk. To tears streaked in playground dirt, to the bullies who told us what we were before we knew. To slurs we picked up, dusted off and made our own. To trying on our mother's heels. To their fear we'd die of AIDS. To the tender disappointment of our fathers, if we were lucky. To the girlfriends whose hearts we broke when our Gaydar beeped for the first time. To waiting for a same-sex kiss on TV, only to watch the camera pan away. To that quality straight actors win Oscars for, but can never get quite right. To our private, dirty humor, so acerbic it can melt chrome. To “*is he... you know?*” To our cackle. To identifying one another in a packed subway and dark park with a glance. To that swish, to that lisp, and *contrapposto*. Cheers to our unmistakable softness.”

Texts like Herrera’s, whether baked into an Instagram infographic or superimposed on a TikTok reel of baby photos, articulated a shared history of otherness and reminded me how media itself could extend visibility and healing, offering solidarity where institutions had failed. His words and others like them inadvertently helped me feel more encouraged to use my work as its own piece of media, to bring comfort and catharsis to the queer collective at large.

Another example that felt significant in my development phase follows my re-watching of Barry Jenkins’ film *Moonlight* (2016), where I felt a core memory unlocked. There is a specific scene in the film that involved two ten-year-old boys playfully rough-housing in a football field. Jenkins’ camera floats between them, extending their exchange by a few extra seconds beyond what may have been considered a natural cutting point—instead, capturing the spark of curiosity, softness, and otherness that so often marks queer boyhood. To me, the scenes felt like they could pair with Wojnarowicz’s text in natural harmony. As a result of these



Image 3: Screenshot from *Moonlight* by Barry Jenkins, 2016

imaginings, “this kid,” as Wojnarowicz imagined, became my proxy of sorts. His words, while decontextualized from the AIDS crisis era in which they were conceived, continued their journey

of appropriation in my work. That is to say, In *One Day This Kid*, I re-inscribed his prophetic text into my own audiovisual recollection of queerness—an archive of curiosity, shame, and acceptance—while locating myself within a broader queer artistic tradition that insists on memory, repurposing, and survival.

Background

At the risk of extending the lifespan of a very trite sound bite, *I always knew I was different*. For years, I'd imagine and hope that whatever made me different would fade away, if not completely elude me overnight. I came of age in Queensborough, a contained slice of suburbia in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, a bridge between New Westminster and Richmond. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Queensborough was an immigrant haven—a cultural mosaic of mixed racial identities and socio-economic backgrounds. Outsiders derisively called us “ditch kids,” a reference to the ditch-lined roads with no sidewalks or barriers. Much of our youth was spent almost exclusively outdoors, roaming in flocks of friends.

I had little to no reference point for queerness, aside from the occasional episode of *Will & Grace* or the caricatures paraded on (the very problematic) *Jerry Springer Show*. My early teenage years were spent dodging the highly inventive use of “faggot” or “pussy” rampant across the schoolyard—only to play second and third fiddle to the epidemic of “that’s so gay.” As many millennials might recall, those mid 2000s were saturated with the performance of masculinity: competitive sports, fist-fighting, shoplifting, objectifying women. The schoolyard often felt like a relentless audition for manhood.

Over time, my own performance grew exhausting. Wading off my family’s questions about girlfriends or romantic experiences with go-to aversions (“I’m focussing on school”) grew more and more untenable. As American writer David Gerrold describes:

“Something went klunk. Like a nickel dropping in a soda machine. One of those small insights that explains everything. This was puberty for these boys. Adolescence. The first date, the first kiss, the first chance to hold hands with someone special. Delayed, postponed, a decade's worth of longing—while everybody around you celebrates life, you pretend, suppress, inhibit, deprive

yourself of your own joy— but finally ultimately, eventually, you find a place where you can have a taste of everything denied.”

His words resonate sharply with my adolescence: milestones delayed, joy deferred, authenticity suppressed. And with so little (if any) real queer representation in my environment, the prospect of coming out felt unimaginable; truth be told, I had no desire to pioneer said uncharted ground.

A decade later, the costs of that silence became undeniable. I lost a dear friend— the only other gay Afghan person I knew—to suicide. Both of us were closeted during our friendship. His death at twenty-five forced a terrifying recognition: that his fate could easily have been my own. This harsh realization accelerated my coming-out journey, primarily to myself and subsequently to family and friends—in a very meticulously timed and orderly fashion. This time of my life was the most defined “line in the sand” I’d ever experienced, continuing to anchor both my life and my artistic practice.

Despite what felt like a regularly-scheduled flood of emotions growing up queer and Afghan, I still manage to *pedestalize* the past. Throughout the years, I have always maintained keen affinities to times that once *were*, drawn constantly to these memories—the smell of a high school hallway, for instance, or the first few notes of K-Ci & JoJo’s “Crazy” that headlined almost every 2000s prom. My mother still implores me to get rid of dog-eared sixth grade textbooks, defunct mp3 players, old wood-shop projects and movie ticket stubs whose smudged ink remnants could only *suggest* a film’s title. For reasons continuously under investigation, I’ve continued to hold on to this nostalgia. And while I am not a monolith for any intersectional queer and brown existence, I can only interrogate my own experiences, knowing they are always in flux. As Ocean Vuong writes, “I kept quiet for so long I forgot what my voice sounded like.”³

³ Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Penguin Press, 2019.

His words capture the silence of my earlier years and the artistic drive that now compels me: to give form, texture, and voice to what once could not be spoken.

Context

2025. I know. We're quick to say it's a *different* time. With exponentially significant strides made in media representation, queerness has become woven into the cultural zeitgeist. The aforementioned *Moonlight* won Best Picture nearly a decade ago; Ryan Murphy occupies the prodigal throne of "golden age" television; openly queer NFL players continue their careers without expulsion. Reality television has produced offerings as specific as Out TV's lauded *For the Love of DILFS*, while *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchises its 23rd country and 58th season. Entire destinations from Mykonos to specialty travel platforms like MyGayGetaway.com openly market to queer clientele. Even the minutiae of lifestyle—iced coffee, for instance—has been humorously coded as a gay cultural touchstone. We've painted a pride flag with so many colours and hieroglyphics, it may soon demand a legend.

It's hard to refute that things are different—that The Culture has been reset, as they say. But has it? Despite our own online chambers echoing the same "*it's Britney, bitch*" sound bite, it's important to recall, with empathy, that the four walls in which we grow up are not always reflective of the world beyond. A particularly poignant reminder comes in Vuong's poem "Not Even This," from *Time Is a Mother* which captures one of the paradoxes of being a queer artist today—the simultaneous visibility of queerness in cultural discourse and the enduring precariousness of queer lives outside of it:

"Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brooklyn for an "artsy vibe," a young woman said, sipping her drink, *You're so lucky. You're gay plus you get to write about war and stuff. I'm just white.* [Pause] *I got nothing.* [Laughter, glasses clinking]. Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold. Our sorrows Midas touched. Napalm with the rainbow afterglow. Unlike feelings, blood gets realer when you feel it."

As a fellow artist defensive of others reducing my work as opportunistic or solely concerned with identity politics, Vuong's sentiments ring loud and true. The commodification of oppression reflects a frustrating tendency among artists to cheapen the lived experiences of historically marginalized folks who risk scrutiny, trivialization, and persecution by sharing their stories.

LGBTQ+ cinema has developed an overt, progressive slant towards “unapologetically queer” characters. That is, characters who exist in storylines that are not driven by their queerness, closeted or otherwise. Instead, characters whose motives and behaviours may be *informed* by their sexual identities, but not utilized as driving factors of the story. While I celebrate the movement towards queer characters who just *are* queer, I do not attribute less to the coming-out stories that reflect the coming-of-age of so many queer people (of colour, specifically). I did not live decades of my life in fear only to bury or forget the anguish and struggles that so tirelessly riddled me. This unique premise is what roots *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* as an adaptation and exploration of Wojnarowicz's poem, through my lens and its intersections—gay, Afghan, Muslim-raised, middle-class, and so on.

As an addendum to this section on context, I would be remiss to exclude my trepidation of the installation being referred to as the Afghan version of *Moonlight* as it is, similar to Jenkins' film, exploring a man coming into his queerness against the backdrop of three separate decades. While I knew comparisons like this would be inevitable, my core reason of wanting to explore this subject matter stemmed from the desire to marry Wojnarowicz's text with my own uniquely intersectional upbringing, which naturally spanned a number of years. In any case, what an honour it would be to share the same breadth of space with a Best Picture that served to be so masterfully human, delicate, and touching!

Pre-Production and Production

The processes outlined in the subsequent sections recall the preliminary research and development that went into creating what would become the source footage of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*. While the initial intent at the time of development in 2023 was limited to the prospects of the short film, it is worth discussing the journey through which the seeds of the material were planted, watered, and grown before being revisited and remixed with a perspective that incorporated all the learnings gleaned from the early days.

Writing

When I initially put pen to paper on my previous film *One Day This Kid*, sometime in 2021, I used Wojnarowicz's text from "Untitled (One Day This Kid...)" as a voiceover narration of the film. Each portion of the film, often broke into single sentences, acted as a vehicle through which I would depict a visual vignette. For instance, "One day, this kid will get larger" was visualized with a young nine-year-old boy, Omar, on school picture day in the early 1990s. "One day, this kid will feel something stir in his heart and throat and mouth" was visualized with Omar, now 13, anxiously undressing in an all-boys locker room. "One day, families will give false information to their children... and that information will be designed to make existence intolerable for this kid" was visualized with Omar, now 22, sitting around a dining table, frozen at the sight of a news headline "Orlando Shooter from Pulse Massacre Names US Citizen of Afghan Descent."

Specifically, the pivotal line "or one day, this kid will talk," needed to reflect a significant shift in the film. At this point, Omar, now 26, meets a romantic interest, Anthony. As the voiceover grows darker and darker, with "when he begins to talk, men who develop a fear of this kid will attempt to silence him with strangling, fists, suffocation..." the viewer witnesses a bright and beautifully blossoming relationship montage between Omar and Anthony—dating, picnicking, singing karaoke, having sex, etc. The stark contrast between the visuals and the voiceover were meant to serve as an act of defiance against the grim fate of the text. The montage and pacing, as I had imagined, would continue to build, cut to a growingly boisterous orchestral score that would set up the final line "all this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy," which

would be visualized by a still shot of Omar laying, eyes open in bed, parallel to Anthony, sound asleep.

This first initial script ran five pages and, upon reflection, felt tonally like it would mirror a commercial sensibility—an audiovisual piece that serves to bottle strong, fleeting emotional moments through time and space, seamlessly traversing between them. The voiceover and musical score underlying the film were meant to anchor the time periods, serving as a tool to glue the vignettes together. I had envisioned that Omar as a character, too, would be played by multiple boys and men, of varying ages and Black and Brown ethnicities, to help support the universal appeal of Wojnarowicz’s original text; that “this kid” can *be* many, many kids.

Re-writing

As I sat with the initial script, I began to recognize its limitations. What I had written felt polished but hollow, resembling the structure of a commercial—an arena I know well as a Freelance Editor. This first script assembled diverse bodies and experiences into an anthemic portrait of queerness, yet it lacked humanity and specificity. If my intention was to use Wojnarowicz's text as a vehicle to explore my own life, why would I dilute it by casting across so many ethnicities to approximate a *generalized* queer condition? The work at hand seemed more concerned with producing an anthem than articulating the intimacy of *my* story.

With these thoughts in mind, I revisited the script and began to write scenes that felt more detailed and full—vignettes that had more of a beginning, middle and end, with (hopefully) more of an emotional shift. I wrote Wojnarowicz's text as a voiceover that was used more sparingly and truncated to specific portions of the poem, rather than the entire text. The film, while still separated across three decades and time periods, fleshed out some more intimate and nuanced moments—the boy in the backseat of the family car, fixated on the ease and control at which his father handles the manual stick shift; or moments later, when his father is teaching him how to pump gas into the car, using the bend-of-latch trick.

My dad was a car salesman, and had an encyclopedic knowledge about anything related to cars. While I could not care less about them, I recall watching my dad pump gas through the rear-view mirror and thinking I would never in my life be able to do that very same thing. In reframing these scenes, I explored how everyday encounters with cars—symbols of control, strength and masculinity—become charged for queer boys who feel themselves outside of that economy of power. Furthermore, there are hundreds of frivolous internet memes about gay men

who are incapable of driving and know nothing about cars. Is this because, at a young age, we were intimidated by the degrees to which cars served as a societal construct (or an *encouraged celebration* of gender) that was imposed upon young boys? These cultural jokes about gay men who cannot parallel park or identify their Uber car's models, though frivolous, reflect a deeper dissonance between heteronormative performances of masculinity and queer modes of relation to the world at large—an idea enthusiastically explored in this next iteration of the script.



Image 4: Screenshot from *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, 2025

Alongside the car motif, I developed the recurring presence of water. The rewrite of the script started with Child Hamed (renamed from Omar), walking hand-in-hand with his father in the community pool. At a certain point, Hamed resists going further while his dad continues on—letting go of his hand—walking further into the deep end to join Hamed's sister. Hamed takes a few steps forward but flounders, revealing that he's unable to swim in the deep end. Instead of partaking in the fun, Child Hamed plays spectator from afar—a theme that would follow him throughout his adolescence. In the rewrite of the script, this scene was bookended with an end scene at a lake, where Adult Hamed is frolicking around (in deep water, this time) with his

boyfriend Waleed. In the distance, Hamed notices a young child, unable to step further out into the water, calling for his dad who comes to his rescue as the two swim into the distance together. This cyclical structure articulated both continuity and rupture, dramatizing Hamed's longing for paternal recognition alongside his new capacity for intimacy.

Yet as *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* evolved, I moved away from some of these father-son metaphors, consciously easing myself more into the weight of Wojnarowicz's text. The pool sequence, which had once anchored *One Day This Kid*, began to feel redundant beside the weight of Wojnarowicz's language. The text itself, with its relentless revelation of dread and tenderness, was capable of carrying the emotional register I sought to explore. I wanted this new remixed project to feel more of a kinship to the original Wojnarowicz piece—something that felt much more rigid, harsh, tonal, and capable of *washing over* the viewer. In other words, I shifted the project away from narrative closure and toward a viewing experience that prioritized affect: less story and resolution, more sensation and resonance. In this way, *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* pivots beyond representation toward atmosphere, offering not a linear account but an emotional space in which queer memory unfolds.

Inspirations

My initial inspirations for *One Day This Kid* stemmed from a few different sources. Besides *Moonlight*, I was heavily inspired by Faraz Shariat's 2020 feature film *No Hard Feelings*, centred around a second-generation Iranian-German queer man working at a refugee shelter. I had never seen an openly-gay Middle Eastern protagonist presented with such refreshing poignancy. The film had a fair share of moments that really pinpointed some aspects



Image 5: Screenshot from *No Hard Feelings* by Faraz Shariat, 2020

of queerness that I found to be astute: for instance, Parvis, navigating his ethnicity when it came to gay hook-up culture with white men (shaving his lower back, or shielding comments that fetishized him as exotic). Or the scene in which Parvis pushes his toothbrush farther and farther into his mouth, presumably to train his gag reflex. There was such a tenderness in the sex scenes

as well, that I wanted to capture in my own short film, both with respect to the camerawork, and their performances. Sex, with respect to gay films, often feels concerned with being hot and steamy, well-lit, with chiselled white men—not unlike the pornography that orbited our formative years. What I appreciated about Shariat’s direction was that it felt a lot more soft and dreamy, perhaps similar to the decades of sex portrayed in heterosexual narratives across genre.

Jeremiah Zagar’s 2018 breakout film *We The Animals* was largely inspirational for how it depicted a character that some might describe as too passive. When I was writing and rewriting the script, I was concerned with the protagonist not making enough decisions. As I’ve been taught, decision-making builds character. In *We The Animals*, Jonah shields a large part of himself around his family, as if holding on to a secret. Zagar implements a soft and whispery first-person voiceover as Jonah, presumably to bring the audience closer to his world. In *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, I borrowed from this approach, choosing to experiment with the Farsi voiceover of a young child, to recite Wojnarowicz’s harsh and gutting text. I imagined this innocent child’s voice would specifically complement the child and teenager versions of Hamed which often resist dialogue, resting on silence and observation to carry the viewer’s gaze. As the first two thirds of Wojnarowicz’s text are concerned with the protagonist being closeted, I wanted to visually stay close to Hamed and his inner world. Moments like Child Hamed at the top of the stairwell listening to his father shout, or the insular sonic world that we take a peek into when Hamed is being taught how to play the Rubab guitar, are meant to linger and build a growing closeness between the audience and the character.

My cinematography inspirations drew from Charlotte Wells’ *Aftersun* (2022), primarily for its visual approach—long, tight, stationary shots that held on a moment or detail that felt

visceral, or baked-into memory. In fact, the overhead shot of Teen Hamed and his friend playing video games, tracing the brushing of their elbows, was a direct influence from *Aftersun*, where Sophie's hand grazes that of another boy during a car racing scene in the arcade.



Image 6: Screenshot from *Aftersun* by Charlotte Wells, 2022



Image 7: Screenshot from *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, 2025

I was drawn to *Afternoon*, too, for its fragmented exploration of the past as a means of building the tapestry that stitched together the relationship between dad and daughter. There's a playful sense of improvisation between her characters within these controlled settings that felt fruitful in building the chemistry between the child and adult actors. I wanted to replicate a similar environment with my film, particularly in the first few car scenes in the film, centred around the six-year-old boy.

As my artistic vision continued to develop in the pursuit of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, my inspirations grew to include visual artists like Omer Fast and Stan Brakhage. Omer Fast's 2007 four-channel (double-sided) video installation "The Casting" which, on one side, projects an original interview with an American Army Sergeant and on the other, a series of visual tableaux vignettes depicting and dramatizing each of the Sergeant's stories.



Image 8: Screenshot from *The Casting* by Omer Fast, 2007

The Sergeant's stories, however, are intercut with sequences depicting the artist casting actors for the reenactments, constantly shifting the audience's gaze between the interview, casting director and filmmaker. There is a fascinating interplay in Fast's work that dramatizes the interview in ways that are both playful and light, and chilling and dark. The Sergeant's story, as constructed and filtered through a fragmented memory, builds a non-fictional playground for which a director and ensemble of actors are encouraged to interpret (*Cleveland Museum of Art*, 2010).



Image 9: Screenshot from *The Casting* by Omer Fast, 2007

This deconstruction of time through the layering of interview, casting and reenactment encouraged me to embrace the seemingly dissonant components of Wojnarowicz's text alongside footage from my autobiographical previous film. The poem as an anthemic queer text serves as a nonfictional blueprint for myself, as a filmmaker, to introduce my own memories as interpreted

by a series of actors. In fact, after the discovery of Fast's work, I am remiss to not have recorded my own 2023 casting sessions for *One Day This Kid*, for reasons as I will discuss later!

As a towering touchstone in experimental cinema, Stan Brakhage's approach to the re-appropriation of his previous work was deeply inspiring for *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*. Brakhage, for instance, re-edited multilayered superimpositions from *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964) into a significantly longer film *The Art of Vision* (1965) which dissected each of the layers of the image and presented them separately, offering a different perceptual experience.



Image 10: Screenshot from *The Art of Vision* by Stan Brakhage, 1965

His dedication to exploring re-presentations of his work served a higher artistic vision that refused to prioritize a singular, final statement but rather a continuous exploration and refinement of ideas. This commitment and openness to re-engaging with one's own visual vocabulary highlights the idea that perception is an ongoing adventure guided by the artist's role to push towards new frontiers of consciousness. Brakhage's keen openness to pulling apart his films in

this way encouraged me to reinterpret and rearrange my own footage, in pursuit of creating a more complementary pace to Wojnarowicz's text.

I felt strongly that Wojnarowicz's words would unveil in the film both through the innocent voice of a child, as well as with intertitles. Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of watching Theo Panagopoulos' poetic short film *The Flowers Stand Silently, Witnessing*—a project that repurposes archival 16mm scans of vibrant flower-filled lands in Palestine (as filmed by Scottish missionaries) alongside prose-like intertitles that touch on his heritage, as well as his historical ties to his ancestors and the country in light of the current horrific genocide ravaging Gaza and the West Bank. Panagopoulos said “The titles had to be extremely sensitive in a way I



Image 11: Screenshot from *The Flowers Stand Silently, Witnessing* by Theo Panagopoulos, 2025

would place them because I noticed in places if I said something, it would completely change the way you would look at the next image” (Smith).

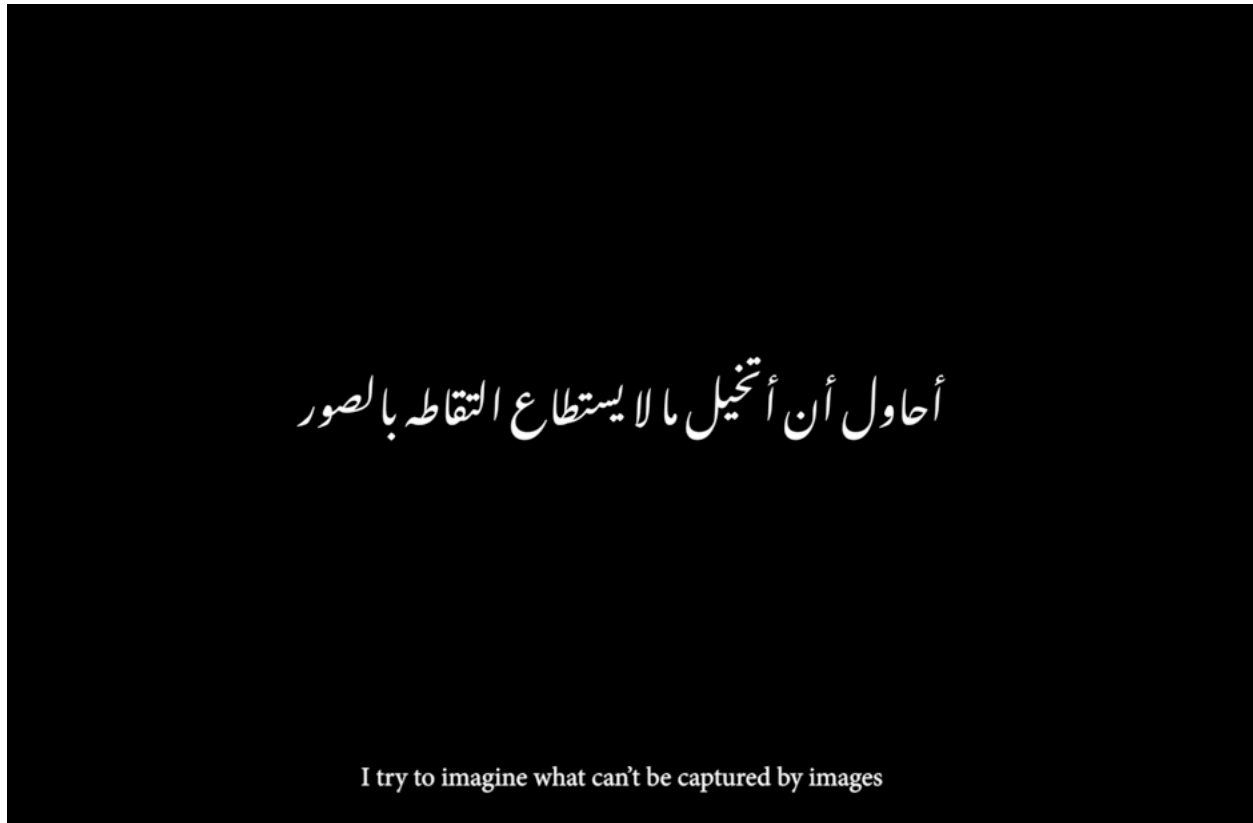


Image 12: Screenshot from *The Flowers Stand Silently, Witnessing* by Theo Panagopoulos, 2025

In *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, the formative scenes of Hamed’s coming-of-age unfold in tandem with Wojnarowicz’s text, each vignette teasing the growing proximity to his otherness until he is fully realized as an openly queer man. The text, while seemingly innocuous in its first few lines, becomes increasingly grim as the audience begins to clue into the possible reasons that existence will be “unbearable” for this kid. That mounting dread seeps into Hamed’s world: the tension of ritual at the mosque, the subtle exclusions of the family gathering, the stirrings of desire while playing video games with a friend—these moments embody the slow accrual of shame and longing that mark queer adolescence.

A useful parallel emerges in Shariat's previously mentioned *No Hard Feelings* (2020), where the protagonist's sister Banafshe reflects: "Since we came here, I feel like I always experience everything twice—once as the person I could have been, and once as the person I am today." Similarly, my pursuit of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* became an opportunity to process the grief of a past self—trapped, voiceless, and often alone—through the empathetic lens of who I am today, openly queer. My project thus serves as both a reckoning and a release: a gesture of care extended backward in time—to the boy I once was—and outward toward others navigating similar silences. In returning to these fragments with gentleness rather than despair, I hope to suggest that pain and hopelessness can be reimagined and capable of unfolding into tenderness, connection, and becoming.

Casting

Casting for *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* unfolded across several pivotal stages, each underscoring the ethical and practical complexities of representing queer diasporic experience on screen. Most recently, I sought a young Farsi-speaking child to recite Wojnarowicz's text for the voiceover, experimenting with reads in Farsi, Dari, and English. This decision positioned the film within an intertextual dialogue in itself: the child's breathy, unknowing delivery lent the narration a nursery-rhyme quality, amplifying the haunting dissonance between innocence of voice and violence of text.

The earlier casting of live-action performers for *One Day This Kid* proved a lot more fraught. Despite working with two casting directors—one experienced in professional talent, the other in street casting—we faced a severe shortage of applicants for child and teen roles. Many Middle Eastern and South Asian parents declined outright, citing discomfort with their children appearing in what would ultimately be earmarked a “queer film,” some as far as reminding me they are “against gays.” This resistance revealed the sociocultural constraints that shape queer filmmaking in diasporic contexts: while the film sought to affirm underrepresented experiences, its very premise deterred participation from the communities it hoped to center.

In response, I expanded my outreach to immigrant neighbourhoods across the Lower Mainland, from community centers, to halal butcher shops and mosques, distributing flyers for a “Middle Eastern coming-of-age film.” The limited responses eventually led me to Instagram, where I connected with Mahan Mohammadinasab, a Farsi-speaking teenager whose first-time performance carried both enthusiasm and vulnerability. Serendipity played a role as well: through a reconnection with an Afghan family from my childhood, I met Elyas, the six-year-old

who ultimately embodied young Hamed, along with his sister and mother who also appeared in the film. These casting encounters underscored how relatedness, trust, and cultural familiarity can substitute for conventional industry pipelines in diasporic filmmaking.



Image 13: Screenshot from a casting email, 2023

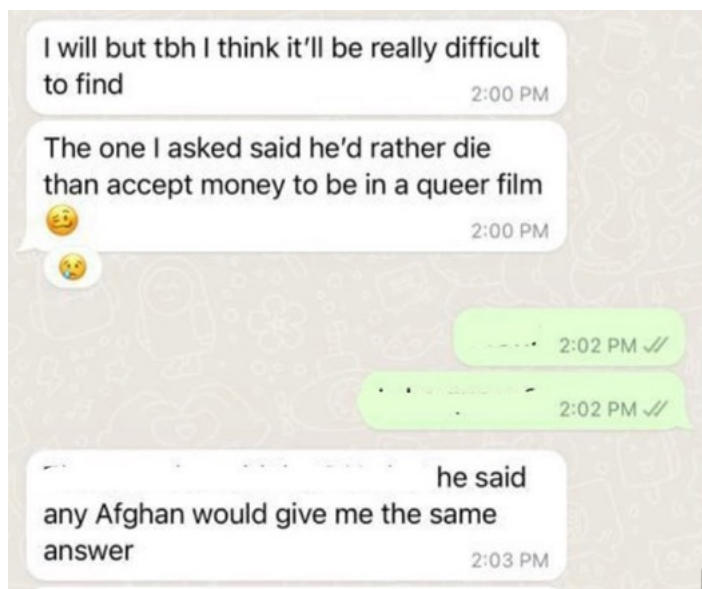


Image 14: Screenshot from a WhatsApp convo with a Humanitarian Refugee Worker, 2023

As the casting demands of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* grew, translation further complicated the process. Since my grasp of Farsi is conversational, I enlisted native speakers to refine the text and to ensure cultural nuance was respected. As I inched past translation and closer to casting someone for the voiceover, I worked with an Oakland-based woman whose humanitarian work reflected strong relationships with Afghan refugees. She had offered me samples of several boys' voices, and I shared a strong affinity to the one presented in the film; there was a natural airy whisper quality to his voice that felt very young and childlike, as if there was no true understanding to the words he was citing—having an aforementioned primitive cadence that bore resemblance to a nursery rhyme or children's poem.

I should note that I shared some hesitation when seeking out a young Afghan or Iranian boy to recite such a tragic text, especially one that notes rape, guns, decapitation and suicide—especially in reference to these children being vulnerable, newly-arrived refugees. While there have been many celebrated films that showcase child actors in close proximity to adult themes like sex work (*The Florida Project*, 2017), suggested sexual abuse (*Mysterious Skin*, 2004) or sexuality and gender identity (*Tomboy*, 2011), I still wanted to be mindful and navigated the sensitivity of these topics (and the task at hand), closely with the woman who was helping recruit the talent. As for the artistic decision to keep the voice of a child, I continued to remind myself that *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, similar to Fast's *The Casting*, would owe a lot of its layered emotional impact to the dissonance between the child's voice, Wojnarowicz's text and the recreated images that (ultimately) reflected my own personal coming-of-age. Yet rather than sensationalizing this dissonance, I sought to foreground its affective potential: the child's

tentative cadence emphasized the vulnerability of queer becoming, while reminding viewers of the fragility of giving voice to marginalized identities.

Ultimately, the casting process itself became a site of artistic inquiry and exploration. It highlighted the challenges of queer representation within immigrant communities, the ethical obligations of working with children, and the layered meanings produced when voice, language, and text are recontextualized. Thus, *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* contributes to broader conversations about how queer diasporic cinema must continually negotiate between artistic vision, cultural responsibility, and the politics of participation.

Rehearsals

Before addressing the significance of rehearsal, it is important to note that the audition period for this film was longer than any other project I had worked on. I went through four rounds of interviews, auditions, callbacks, and follow-ups before finalizing the central roles—Child Hamed, Teen Hamed, Adult Hamed, and Karim, the father. I needed to ensure that each performer (and in the case of minors, their guardians) understood both the demands of the role and the overall intention of the project. The audition material was tailored for each character—extending beyond the script—to include short, situational scenes in the “world” of the film that incorporated carefully-timed emotional shifts, requiring actors to make active choices. To add, whenever I was able to for in-person auditions, I concluded each audition with a deliberate locked-eye contact exercise, where I was able to assess their level of concentration, commitment, and vulnerability—qualities I considered essential for this project.

Once the roles were cast, I organized chemistry tests, particularly for Teen Hamed and his best friend, to find performers who could sustain mutual responsiveness and attentiveness. Protecting rehearsal time was a priority: I was grateful for surrounding myself with a team of collaborators who understood and respected my extended time with actors. I scheduled ten blocks—each two to three hours—working with actors in varying groupings, especially given that most were first-time performers. With Elyas, the six-year-old cast as Child Hamed, I emphasized building trust gradually—meeting his family for walks and ice cream, or going to the playground where I would introduce him to my producer and cinematographer, or later rehearsing in production studios through games that integrated movement, play, and line readings. After some recognizable struggles to channel his focus, I enlisted a child acting coach,

whose strategies of “parallel pretend” offered a way to scaffold the script’s demands through play-based exercises. These processes underscored that rehearsal, particularly with children, was less about performance polish than about cultivating comfort, trust, and a willingness to explore.



Image 15: Screenshots from rehearsal videos, 2023

The voiceover portion for *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* posed different challenges. Because the performer was a young Iranian refugee living in Oakland, my direct access for rehearsal was limited. Working through an intermediary, I offered minimal, clear instructions, encouraging him to “throw away” the line: to recite them as fact rather than perform them with a more readily-playable emotion. The intention was to let Wojnarowicz’s text carry its own weight, allowing the child’s voice—unadorned and fragile—to produce a stark, haunting dissonance without affective embellishment.

Ultimately, these rehearsals were less about repetition than about listening; listening to the child’s rhythms, to the hesitations of first-time actors, and to the quiet whisper of a borrowed voice. In that listening, the ground was laid for what would follow: the fragile leap from preparation into the raw unpredictability of shooting (and editing), along the participation of these young children.

Shooting

The footage sourced and remixed in *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* came with challenges that ultimately shaped the form and ethos of the work. Choosing to shoot on 35mm celluloid film, across more than twenty locations (in six days), was not simply a logistical gamble but an aesthetic and methodological decision. The orchestration of everything was successfully helmed by my producer Joaquin Cardoner. We relied predominantly on crew members that we had worked with in the past; our cinematographer Farhad Ghaderi, our first assistant director David Findlay, our production manager Aline Meyerhoffer. This “make movies with your friends” mentality proved to be integral, primarily for keeping morale high during the intense pace at which the film was shot.

Shooting on film was a choice that Farhad and I wrestled with many times, as we continued to stack the costs with other production demands. Film’s tactile qualities—its warmth, its ability to harken back so gracefully to those 1990s/early 2000s hues, its capacity to soften first-time performers, and its discipline-inducing scarcity—encouraged a more intentional and economical approach to visual storytelling. Rather than amassing excess coverage, Farhad and I developed a restrained shot list that ultimately allowed *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* to preserve a pace with the (eventual) intertitles that was not overly sparse or dense, but created appropriate markers to split up the vignettes. In doing so, the film participates in broader conversations around how the design of the shot list informs narrative rhythm and audience effect. I was incredibly thankful for the latitude that 35mm film gave us in the colour grade as well, giving us a dynamic range through which to fine-tune the colour palette of the film to capture the nostalgic tones of each decade. In hindsight, it’s easy to claim that shooting digital

could have worked just as well—perhaps we could have allocated more funds to the colour grade or sound mix or given ourselves more opportunities to improvise with the actors.

Shooting the first act was undoubtedly the most difficult portion of the project. Working with children and first-time actors presented further opportunities to reflect on process. As mentioned, the children had never acted before, and managing the temperaments of performers that young was something that tested my adaptability. During the scene where Karim is teaching Child Hamed to pump gas, there was an accident where the nozzle's handle pinched Elyas' finger leading to him crying and retreating from set. This, paired with our very limited time allocation to this particular gas pump at the gas station—which remained open for business—induced a lot of pressure for myself and the crew. Scenes like these that tested concentration or emotional resilience underscored the ethical responsibility of directors to adapt methods, safeguard wellbeing, and foreground trust over expediency. Strategies that included more regularly structured breaks, extended rehearsal time and freedom to improvise, exemplify how production practices must evolve when working at the intersection of autobiographical subject matter and vulnerable performers.

The vignettes presented in *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* had their fair share of scenes with dozens of extras, which marked my first time scaling up to such visually dense frames. Luckily for these overpopulated days, we recruited an additional assistant director to aid the first assistant director in positioning and blocking the background performers to create populated environments. This was something very exciting and absolutely crucial to the film feeling more lived-in and real—something I will implement on all projects moving forward! Interestingly enough, these experiences underscore a central paradox in experimental and

autobiographical work: that the pursuit of intimacy and subjectivity often requires highly elaborate logistical infrastructures. Unsurprisingly, the most time-consuming scenes included anything that required the camera to be rigged to moving vehicles.



Image 16: Photo of the camera rig during the driving scene, 2023

The amount of equipment, time and labour needed to strap the camera to the cars for all driving scenes sharpened my abilities to schedule on future projects. I also learned a lot about myself on these days, as the pressure tested my ability to manage my expectations, stay focused, and exercise patience. To my pleasant surprise, I dialled into this resilience that kept me nimble, sensitive and adaptable to our collapsing schedule, challenging lighting conditions, and temperaments of the children. My ability to be fully present and alert—refraining from lingering on conditions or circumstances that *could have been*—was something I am proud of to this day.

I was adamant on the inclusion of a sex scene that felt as honest and real as circumstances

permitted. Too often, I have viewed strong, narrative films with omitted gay sex scenes that feel as though they won't risk the comfort level of a predominantly heterosexual audience. Thus, this project marked my first collaboration with a certified Intimacy Coordinator. This experience situates the film within current industry shifts toward codified practices of consent and safety in representing sexuality on screen. I found the process to be incredibly helpful, particularly for the actors who appreciated the opportunity to open dialogue and collaborative forces needed to make the set feel comfortable, organized and safe. I came into the rehearsal day equipped with visual references that allowed everyone to be aligned with the task at hand, doing my best to emulate what the environment would look and feel like during production—myself, the intimacy coordinator, cinematographer, and focus puller all in a closed-door room, running through the scenes. Rather than constraining artistic freedom, these protocols cultivated a collaborative environment that enhanced performances and clarified creative intent. Such structures highlight how modern filmmaking in particular can model alternative production cultures—ones that prioritize comfort, transparency, and ethical rigour alongside formal experimentation.

While I am extremely proud and grateful for the resources that went into creating the visuals of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, it's often an inevitable shame there is never enough time—time to play, experiment, and discover, on set; Time that was consumed by the demanding needs of the production: shooting on film, with dozens of crew members, first-time performers, background performers, in natural environments where natural light was changing at a quick pace, or extra time was needed for complex set-ups in cars, in water, or culturally sensitive spaces (i.e. the mosque). What emerged from these challenges was a deeper recognition that filmmaking is not only about capturing images, but about negotiating time, bodies, and

environments in pursuit of both ethics and aesthetics. In reflecting on these negotiations, I also recognize their resonance with queer and diasporic life itself: both demand adaptability, resilience, and the ability to make meaning within constraint. Just as *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* remixes fragments of memory to construct new possibilities, so too does the production process, mirroring the improvisational strategies required of those who grow up between cultures, languages, and identities.

Post-Production

As far as the editing phase goes, there are multiple significant milestones as they pertain to the footage; the period that involved editing the film, and subsequently the time and space taken away from the film before choosing to re-contextualize the work to create *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*. Shooting on 35mm film yields an enforced pause, since the exposed reels must be mailed to a processing lab—in our case, Kodak New York—before being returned as digital scans. This imposed interval, while primarily logistical, functions as a structuring device in the artistic process, mandating distance between production and review. This sort of pause creates a heightened awareness of time, anticipation, and risk—an affective economy that has long distinguished celluloid practice from digital immediacy. During this time, I often oscillate, emotionally, through a rotation of liberation, fear, remorse, dread and excitement.

When the processed footage returned, my cinematographer and I confronted the extensive raw material with both anticipation and apprehension. Like many editors, the initial encounter with unshaped footage can be disorienting; its sheer excess resists immediate coherence and, rather, demands patience, repeated handling, and gradual refinement. I've likened this process to working with a malleable substance like dough, requiring kneading, resting, and reworking until form begins to emerge and rise. This is less about instant revelation than about cultivating a tolerance for uncertainty and a recognition that meaning arises through accumulation and revision. My practice of editing then operates not only as a technical process but as testament of endurance—one that reflects broader artistic questions about temporality, deferral, and the slow construction of narrative.

Editing, Part One

After transcoding and syncing six hours of footage, I began to build out an assembly that resembled the initial script for *One Day This Kid*. The parts of the edit that felt most frustrating, were mirrored by the challenges first posed on set. I recall feeling that continuity and performance, specifically with the children, were massive struggles. Getting the kids to start and stop the scenes as they were written felt very challenging. For example, my attempt to depict Child Hamed's inability to swim was undermined by limited footage and a distracted young performer, while dialogue written for the children in the backseat car scene felt stilted and resisted emotional authenticity. These shortcomings underscored the limits of relying on scripted beats when working with non-professional children, and the necessity of rethinking performance through editing rather than capture alone.

I had recorded my own voice recording of Wojnarowicz's text as a scratch track, at this stage, to use as a guiding narration for the film. Once layered over the footage, however, the text produced an overwhelming density leaving me to question whether the film could (and perhaps should) stand without the scaffolding of voiceover. Admittedly, I started to spiral into thinking my film, primarily inspired by Wojnarowicz's text, felt like it was abandoning the seed I had nurtured over the last few years. At the same time, allowing the vignettes to unfold sequentially emphasized the power of image and gesture to construct character in ways that felt more organic than the text *originally* suggested. I recall feeling very influenced by Walter Benjamin's quote "It is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it," (*Jeu de Paume*, 2016). Nevertheless, this version of the film, like the initial script, started and ended with water—starting with Child Hamed at the pool, abandoned by his father, and bookended with the

lake scene where Adult Hamed observes, in the distance, a father coming to the aid of his son. This rough cut rounded out at just over twenty-three minutes; each scene felt substantial with a beginning, middle and end, with the aim of it feeling full, detailed and fleshed-out. I had three different aspect ratios, 1.85:1 for the first act, 2:1 for the second act, and 1.78:1 for the final act, all designed to subtly reinforce the protagonist's movement from confinement to expansion, even if their perceptibility to viewers remained uncertain.

For the first time in my experience as a director and editor, I had sent *One Day This Kid* as a rough cut out to nearly thirty-five people—some filmmakers, distant contacts, visual artists and a few non-industry friends. I reached out to each person armed with a Google Review link—asking what age group they are in, what gender they were, what genres they usually like to watch, etc. I asked open-ended questions like “what is your general feeling about the film? (with a “choose all that apply” that included options such as Beautiful, Nuanced, Made me smile, Too long, Too slow, Disjointed, Confusing, A bit melodramatic, etc.). More written questions included “did any element of the film feel particularly repetitive?” Or “were there any performances that were not working for you?” This method generated feedback that was—visually, with a chart—comparable, contrastable, and actionable, revealing broad patterns alongside individual divergences. Such an approach demonstrates how editorial decision-making can be informed not only by instinct or private reflection, but also by organized audience research that situates the work within wider interpretive communities. In this sense, the editing process here became a testing ground for how queer autobiographical cinema might balance subjectivity with collective reception, and how feedback can itself become an integral component in how form slowly accumulates.

Editing, Part Two

The feedback I received on *One Day This Kid* was encouraging but deeply divided. Scenes that resonated strongly with some viewers were rejected by others; Performances praised by one respondent were dismissed by another. Narrative points that felt self-evident to me—such as the growing distance between Hamed and his father—were read as unresolved or unclear to others. This experience revealed and underlined the critical lesson that proximity to lived experience does not guarantee clarity in cinematic storytelling. In other words, what is emotionally obvious to the filmmaker may remain ambiguous—or even invisible—to an audience. This sheer range of opinions left me disheartened. I resisted confronting perceived “plot holes” and retreated from the project for several months.

Returning *after* this deliberately enforced distance, however, proved transformative. I approached the material with less attachment to showcasing production value and more willingness to “kill my darlings,” as they say. Scenes that once seemed indispensable—such as Hamed struggling to swim, or cultural signifiers like the *haft-seen*⁴—were omitted in favour of maintaining tight emotional proximity to the protagonist. My editing proclivities shifted towards entering scenes as *late* as possible and exiting as *early* as possible, allowing meaning to live in the cut points themselves. This approach invited viewers to lean in, constructing the narrative through inference rather than exposition.

As I continued editing as well, I decided the aspect ratio changes were not particularly noticeable or adding much to the overall narrative. In a surprising turn of events, I began to resent the 1.78:1 aspect ratio overall, and embraced the 2.39:1 (native) aspect ratio of our 35mm

⁴ a traditional Afghan/Iranian table setting central to the celebration of Nowruz (Persian new year)

2-perf footage. Shockingly, the footage was able to punch out to this wider aspect ratio without sacrificing too much of the mise-en-scène. I felt this choice emphasized a cinematic expansiveness while eliminating distracting inconsistencies across acts. Through visual effects, framing intrusions were removed, allowing the wider ratio to function both as a practical solution and an aesthetic recalibration.

Between my fine cut and my final picture lock, I recruited the help of my friend and classmate, Helen Lee, who came in with bold and confident feedback. Helen introduced the idea that short films should end on an emotional climax, if not an immediate *dénouement* *after* the emotional climax. She also encouraged me to start the film with a more inviting image—the scene of Hamed in the backseat of the car being playful with his sister. I agreed with both of her points, to start and end the film in the car; There remains a heartbreaking quality to starting the film with him as a child in his sister’s lap (and subsequently learning how to pump gas), while then ending the film with Hamed, fully-realized, driving his own car and reflecting on his growingly distant relationship to his family. These two images positioned in dialogue created a haunting economy of form, encapsulating the trajectory of familial intimacy and estrangement without need for explicit exposition.

In the creation of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* (now two years after *One Day This Kid*), my attachment to the footage has decreased significantly, inviting more room for experimentation and play with new forms and discoveries. Revisiting the footage with greater independence and less pressure to satisfy institutional or festival expectations, I explored new juxtapositions of image, intertitles, and voiceover. My first edits of the installation with voiceover used an adult man’s voice, in English, alongside white sans-serif text superimposed on

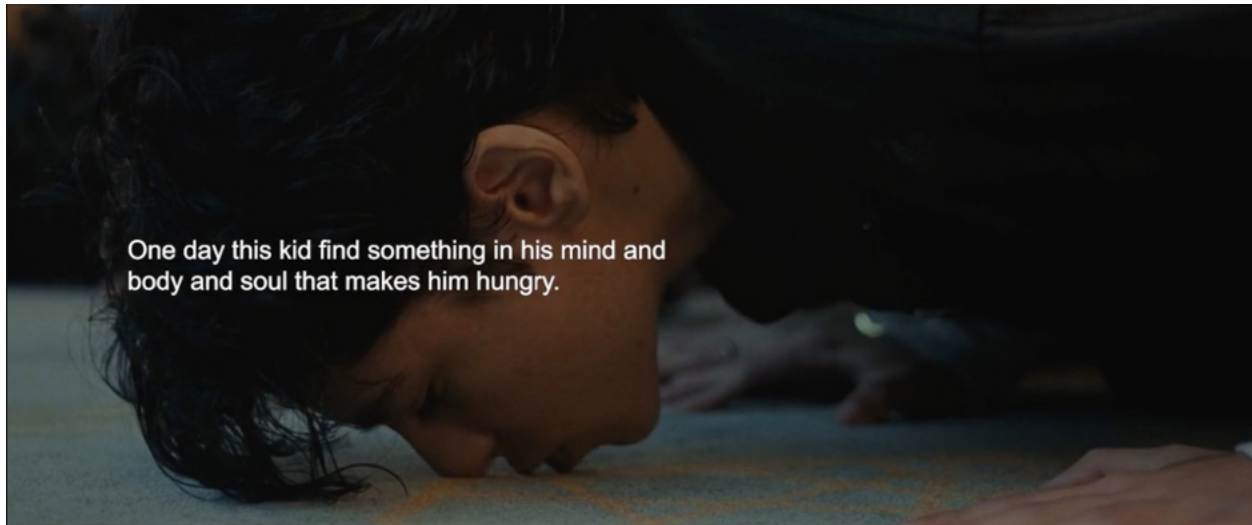


Image 17: Screenshot from rough cut of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, 2025

the image. My Supervisor John and Graduate Program Director Mike pointed out that both layers, the adult’s voice in English, and the text in English, were more or less doing the same thing. Helen echoed this sentiment as well, adamant on presenting the voiceover through a non-English language, and preferably that of a child. At this point, presenting Wojnarowicz’s text through a child’s voice in Farsi, against English subtitles, created a dissonant layering that invited questions of perspective, temporality, and supernatural presence—was the child’s voice that of Hamed, the protagonist? If the text is being spoken with an omniscient future-tense, does the child fully understand what will happen to “the kid” in question? Is the child meant to represent a ghost, a haunting shadow, or a past life? Similarly, linking text and image through associative (rather than literal) pairings—such as overlaying references to “priests and rabbis” across mosque imagery—allowed the material in *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* to resonate less as illustration and more as intertextual dialogue.

What began as a process of disappointment and retreat ultimately became an exploration of editorial methodology: how absence can function as presence, how subtraction can heighten

intimacy, and how language and image can operate in counterpoint rather than unison. My process of re-presenting footage from the short film in *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* felt like an intimate and introspective process limited to conversations I'd have with my committee, Helen, and myself. I chose to steer clear of nearly all of the collaborators that were involved in the making of *One Day This Kid* as I was conscious of exercising my agency and independence in pursuit of work I deemed more liberating in its experimentation. To my ultimate surprise, Helen expressed that she preferred *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* more than my initial film, even encouraging me to submit it for consideration for programming and curatorial exhibition. This was a delightful thing to hear, especially given my process of making this thesis project to exercise freedom from any expectations from production companies, Google forms, or ulterior motives to collect more festival laurels. In this sense, the editing of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* contributes not only to my own artistic development but to wider conversations in (queer) filmmaking about narrative economy, intertextual layering, and the productive possibilities of failure, distance, and return.

Editing, Part Three

Somewhere Between Not Knowing unfolds as a looping structure that rotates between Hamed's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, with particular attention to the transitions across timelines. The cut from childhood to adolescence—moving from a moment of parental scolding to Hamed's fixation on a stranger's forearms in the mosque's *wudhu*⁵ room—illustrates continuity in affective experience. This repeated beat (particularly after “one day this kid will feel something stir in his heart and throat and mouth”) suggests that Hamed, as a teenager, is not entirely far from where he was as a child: perhaps his curiosity has morphed into a more nameable desire at this stage, where shame is starting to develop. Specific echoes in dialogue (“Hamed, come out” from childhood, to “Hamed, come” in adolescence) reinforce a pattern of obedience and subservience across acts, foregrounding the character's limited agency, moving through different life stages as an unknowing and/or closeted queer person.

The transition into adulthood presents a more dramatic temporal rupture with much more information (and time) presented in the cut. We move from the disorientation of teenage Hamed, unsettled after a fraught encounter with his best friend, to the declaration “or one day this kid will talk,” paired with images of Adult Hamed in a gay club—drinking, dancing, and taking up (queer) space. This edit signals the labour of self-interrogation required to arrive at such visibility, particularly since the film ultimately leaves unresolved whether this confidence coexists with reconciliation or rupture in relation to family. Subsequent glimpses reveal enduring bonds with his sister, strain with his mother, and estrangement from his father, offering a portrait of adulthood shaped by both survival and loss.

⁵ a space designated to the Islamic ritual of washing (ablutions) before prayer

The final movement of the film ties these arcs together. Cross-cutting between Adult Hamed driving and childhood Hamed in the backseat establishes a recursive structure in which the past remains present. To me, there is a precision to these few cuts that elicit an emotional, nostalgic and ruminative response in Adult Hamed driving that prompts his boyfriend to offer the touch of his hand on the back of Hamed's neck in support, comfort and solidarity as a fellow queer brown man. This culmination of moments, accompanied by the haunting and tender musical stylings of Fred Again... & Brian Eno's track "Enough" is then punctuated by Wojnarowicz's powerful reveal "all this will begin to happen in one or two years when he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy." This interweaving of intimacy, memory, and foreclosed possibility crystallizes the emotional climax of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* before it loops back to childhood, underlined by the exhibition of installation.

Throughout the installation, recurring motifs—the Dari spoken by a cab driver, the prayer in the mosque and park, the Spice Girls shirt, gestures of care like the comfort of his sister's lap or his father's grip on the gas nozzle—function as echoes that bind stages of life together. These motifs serve as a means of building out the stages of life that recall and rely on one another: the visual of the vehicle's gear shift ties the third and first act together, bringing us closer to the father and highlighting a thesis from the film—that living authentically comes at a cost. These repetitions construct a temporal tapestry in which queer desire and diasporic identity are inseparable from histories of family, faith, and migration. By punctuating such echoes, the film challenges linear coming-out narratives in favour of a structure where past, present, and future remain constantly fluid and in dialogue.

In reflecting on this process, I sought not to romanticize “outness” as an uncomplicated resolution, but to illuminate the costs and continuities of living queer and Afghan-Canadian. *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* offers a cinematic meditation on how closeted existence leaves lasting ripples—at once lamenting what is foreclosed and honouring what persists. In doing so, the film contributes to a growing body of queer diasporic cinema that situates personal memory within collective histories, proposing that authenticity is less a destination than an ongoing negotiation across time, language, and belonging.

Personal Reflections

Reflecting on the research, development, production, post-production, and exhibition of *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, I feel a deep sense of hope, relief, and pride. Securing and shaping this footage tested me at every stage but in doing so, I proved my capacity to lead a production of this scale. I worked with children and first-time actors, coordinated scenes with dozens of background performers, navigated the complexities of 35mm film, collaborated with an intimacy coordinator, and spent years in post-production allowing the material to transform. I integrated decontextualization as a methodology, reappropriating both my own work and the text of David Wojnarowicz, situating my practice within a lineage of queer experimental artists.

On a more personal register, the project has felt like another *kind* of coming out—a metamorphosis of self through art. I am relieved that it exists in short form, where the stakes felt lower and the story's intensity was concentrated rather than diluted, as a feature film. The work offered me a therapeutic regression into formative moments of my life, enabling me to confront the layered dynamics of my own family, our past, our history, and diaspora at large. To add, initial responses from viewers—especially queer men of colour—affirmed the film's strength as both nuanced and relatable, paving the way for an intimacy that resonates beyond autobiography, echoing Wojnarowicz's own call for queer lives to be witnessed and remembered.

The future of queer cinema may be unpredictable, yet what feels certain is that it will continue to reflect and challenge the social conditions from which it emerges. I've observed that my own filmmaking repeatedly returns to family as both subject and lens. When I screened early edits for my mother and sister, both wept—a sight that was both rewarding and painful to witness. Their tears revealed how the work functioned not only as a piece of art but as a shared

act of reckoning—an encounter with memory that words alone could not provide. In this reflection, I think there is a tender profundity here that may recall my closeted adolescence—presumably spent looking for anything *but* the words to say (or scream) what I was never able to.

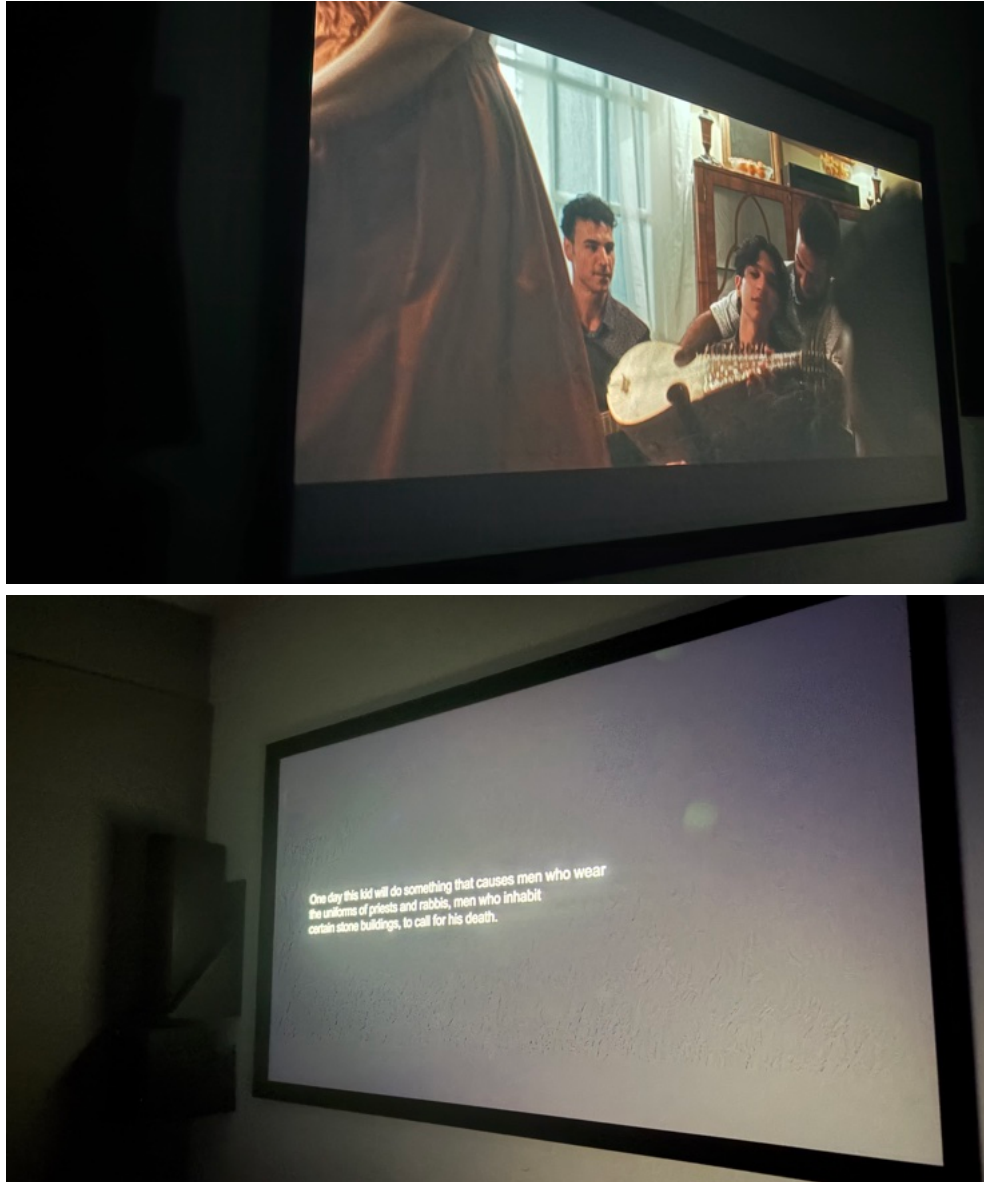


Image 18: Photos from the installation, *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, presented in CFT 104, at York University, 2025

My installation, *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, thus demonstrates how cinema can extend beyond representation to become a relational practice: a means of reaching across time, across

silence, and across pain. In laying bare these fragments of my life, I hope the work contributes to a wider conversation in queer and diasporic filmmaking about how art can both mourn and honour, rupture and repair, and above all, insist on the enduring presence of voices that once felt voiceless.

Conclusion

When setting out to create this work, I posed the question: how does this universal text, derived from Wojnarowicz's lived experiences from the early 1990s, reshape this queer Afghan coming-of-age story and the visual storytelling of my film at large? With inspirational work from Omer Fast, Stan Brakhage, and a number of narrative filmmakers, I was able to lean into the layered meanings that would unfold as a result of combining voiceover, first-person prose, and the reenactments of my own childhood. Wojnarowicz's text, therefore, paired with the young child's Farsi-speaking voice, offered a solid emotional blueprint that added new colours and shades to the story of a young first-generation immigrant man growing up in a world that never made room for him, seeking a self he's never been shown to become. The text presented alongside the scenes is such a stark reminder of the realities "this kid" will one day encounter, weighing an otherwise common portrayal of youth and coming-of-age with such doom and inevitable tragedy. The poem re-contextualizes the footage in a way that is sharper, heavier and more punctuated. For me, the exploration and integration of Wojnarowicz's words creates an overall narrative that feels considerably less personal than my previous *One Day This Kid*—and by extension, perhaps more of a universal experience. The poetry feels as if the viewer is seen, in some ways, and *held* through this collective trauma it describes—as if encouraging the viewer to reimagine their own memories between the carefully placed inter-titles.

Ultimately, *Somewhere Between Not Knowing* extends its reach far beyond a film or installation; it is a testament for how art can remain unfinished, porous and alive, serving as a generative site of discovery rather than a sign of (in)completion. By layering Wojnarowicz's text with imaginings of my personal archives, this project illustrates how the autobiographical can

move beyond confession and towards collective resonance. A colleague of mine, having seen *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, astutely described the film as “one long sentence, broken up by time.” How profound, I thought, to frame the work not as a closed text, but an ongoing utterance—unfinished, revisited, and recited differently every time. To me, this echoes the fluid rhythms of queer life itself: fragmented, often interrupted, forced into pauses, yet still catapulting forward with persistence and grace. I hope that this work may contribute to ongoing conversations about queer artists, particularly those from diasporic and radicalized backgrounds, reclaiming the fragments, not as a period, but as a continuation—an insistence that our stories are never final, and always unfolding.



Image 19: Final shots from *Somewhere Between Not Knowing*, 2025

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