Aziza's Friendship Compendium

1st Edition

(Anotated & Expanded)

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2021
Part I
The Altar of Friendship
Welcome to the Altar of Friendship. This is the altar at which I worship and I invite you to join me in prayer to my deities.

I pray to the...

Deity of the invention of shared utopias
Deity of the reflection of the deepest self
Deity of the validation of experience
Deity of expression and expulsion
Deity of sharing a ride home at 3 AM through DHA Phase 8
Deity of shame - shedding, healing, revealing
Deity of the 4-hour multi-platform dissection of conversations
Deity of the alternative response -- “You should be like:”
Deity of the protection of shared intimacy
Deity of the undesirable burden
Deity of the message “I’m sooooo drunk and have no idea where the cab is taking me can you make sure I don’t die”
Deity of the backup plan
Deity of accompanied doctor’s appointment
Deity of the collective anger
Twin deities of presence, without demand and audience, without question
Deity of accountability
Deity of the interest-free loan w/o payment plan
Deity of reasons to continue
Deity of the garden of rest
I. Deity of the Undesirable Burden

This project is an ode to friendship. It is also a project produced at a distance from my friends, in a state of isolation: a physical distance of 7000 km; an enforced isolation amidst a global pandemic; and also, an internalising of this isolation as a state of being.

This project has been an attempt at shifting the ugly, undesirable burden of surviving under a neoliberal, patriarchal system, rolling the heavy weight of vulnerability, shame, fear and guilt between my shoulders, trying to find a comfortable spot from which to carry on. This project has also been an undesirable burden — an unbearably difficult task of questioning and critiquing this much-needed space of comfort.

In some ways, the process of this project has been integral to the motivations and message of the project itself. The burden of producing a creative work from a space of isolation and exhaustion has been challenging, but at the same time a constant, urging inspiration to create the alternative that I crave.

The final form of my degree project is an illustrated book called Aziza’s Friendship Compendium, 1st Edition. In an ideal world, this work wouldn’t exist, because there would be no need for it. In the current world, I’m glad this work could be created: a celebration and critical examination of friendship, that is fully indebted, in every part of its process, to all the promises of friendship.
II. Deity of Collective Anger

My project originated from anger. Anger at a news cycle that informed me, daily, of new injustices against people already marginalised on the arbitrary basis of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability. Injustices that we work so hard to overcome and eliminate at the root, but that kept mounting; a power imbalance always growing more and more out of balance.

I felt fully entitled to my anger, but I also felt tired of it. I recognise now that this very distance of being in Sweden — those 7000 km away from my friends, away from our shared fight and our collective anger — was part of what made it so exhausting. It feels like living in two places at once, but unable to do anything in either of them. I longed for the catharsis of griping and groaning, organising and creating with my friends.

My project’s thesis statement was conceived from this very longing, from every little nostalgic feeling of moments spent with friends planning and acting (or simply just existing) in defiance against the state, against the patriarchy, against capitalism. In May 2020, while proposing the idea for my thesis project, I wrote

“At the end of my anger there is a rainbow”.

My friends are my rainbow. Being exhausted by my anger, the logical solution was to focus on my hopes. Friendship has always been my key source of hope. Friendship has always promised me resolution and support. Friendship is what comes to mind when I think of collective action, but also when I think of personal defeats and discomforts.

Friendship is a radical tool of resistance.
III. Deity of Validation of Experience

My friend, Sana R. Gondal, wrote, “Anger is the first resistance.” It is the first recognition that something is amiss. That a system is broken, that harm has been caused, that change is needed.

But how to justify anger? Systems of oppression persist by making our anger inaccessible even to ourselves. My anger gets clouded by doubt and guilt. Is my anger deserved? Is it sufficient? Is it productive? Anger is the first resistance, and validation, perhaps, is the second. Seeing your anger reflected in the eyes, emotions, actions of another.

My project began with two simultaneous points of research: reading Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics by Naisargi N. Dave (recommended by my friend Aiman Rizvi), and producing a series of short animations. Dave’s text became a really important starting point for me to ground my general thoughts on friendship. I knew that my experiences in activist spaces had depended greatly on friendship and I knew also that I viewed my friendships as sites of resistance. Queer Activism in India rooted those ideas in Dave’s research.

“The emergent structures of feeling in which new ways of living seem possible, and the radical ethical aspiration of activism to problematize, invent, and creatively practice those new possibilities, are entirely bound up in the security and hope we find in one another. An ethnography about queer activism is necessarily an ethnography about friendship, and its troubles.”

– Naisargi N. Dave, Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics

This concurrently supported my visual research — as I animated short sequences of resistance activated by friendship, I was able to treat my work as an act of collecting, elevating and archiving. My personal history was a shared history and an important history; my narratives were expanding the stunted perceptions of friendship. Friendship
was naturally a space for feminism, even in its mundane or silly or distant moments. Perhaps especially in those moments, because that is our daily struggle for survival and for change.

As Dave said, “My similitude with people based on shared sexual subjectivity, country, languages, and conviction meant that I had little desire, or ability, to compartmentalize my life into research and leisure.”

I sought and found validation, and I set out to liberate others from their anger.

Herd Immunity, 2020 (01:24 min)
Creating a conceptual Altar of Friendship has been a way for me to treat my project as a site that I visit for devotion as well as reflection. When I consider the overall scope of my project, I recognise that creating a distance between me and my project was necessary in order to access the parts of my project that caused discomfort. Before I reached the concept of the Altar, I could recognise my struggle in digging deeper into my project, but was unable and afraid to actually scratch the surface.

My animations had been sweet, simple celebrations of friendship. They provided great moments of connection with my friends in the thick of the pandemic, over a truly isolated summer break. But, by then, I had also recognised that there was much left to explore. I needed to acknowledge, also, the doubts I had over the transformative powers of friendship. I knew friendship to be healing but I wasn’t feeling healed. At the time, I decided that the struggle I was facing now was between abstraction and accessibility.

Animation was new to me, so certain choices in my animations were based on the limitations of my skill. I didn’t have audio dialogue or narration. My first animation, “Herd Immunity”, was based around a written text, but over the next few animations I tried to remove text altogether because I didn’t enjoy following a rhythm set by text, and I also just felt too tired to write and read. I wanted the animations to simply exist as colour, shape, movement; no words. I wanted to see how much I could convey with only moving image and I didn’t want to struggle with voicing characters. Again, the work was happening in isolation, so my first animation didn’t have sound at all, and when I began to incorporate sound it was sfx that I could record on my own at home (upon suggestion of my friend and classmate Margo Ferreira) or could find easily online. When I wanted music, I experimented with making my own clunky tracks on GarageBand.

All of this resulted in short and sweet narratives, based on a gesture or a moment. This made the
Heyyy... How's it going? How was your day?

BAD:S

TERIBLE!!

OMG I knew it!! Me too!!

It's just the stars again, isn't it?
Intimacy, 2020 (00:05 min)
animations an exciting blend of abstract and accessible. The narratives were relatable, and the bigger concepts of friendship that I was basing these animations on were abstracted. Eventually, however, I felt dissatisfied with the degree of abstraction. My idea of liberation from anger through a strong pivot into joy was limiting and losing steam. These “bigger concepts” of friendship didn’t only seem abstracted — they started to feel absent. I wanted to talk about the tough stuff, and I wanted to talk about it directly. I wanted to name the struggle and the enemy. I wanted to dissect the role of friendship as a resistance. I wanted to shift my current balance between abstraction and accessibility.

My first baby step into that direction was a zine exploring the relationship between space and value, and how value is determined in a neoliberal, patriarchal society and how friendship is able to shift this imposed balance. This zine was purely created for process; it was never finished into a
at your workplace

Marginalisation is directly reflected in the space you inhabit.

Friendship offers you that space.

Marginalised people are neither to be seen nor heard.

Friendship

It says, Here's this space for you.

is an institution that gives.

to be held
“product”. As such, it doesn’t even really have a name, or a cover. I just called it “space zine”. The process of this zine involved testing out a few things: how to make a complex idea simple, accessible and enjoyable; how to use the relationship between text and image to play with the aforementioned balance between accessibility and abstraction; and how to talk about struggle without losing my precious spaces of comfort.

The making of the zine was quick and simple, and the writing and drawing felt equally important. At some points, the drawing felt even more important. I had begun a fairytale-inspired animation over the summer and never finished it, so I decided to continue that visual exploration in the zine. I felt especially distraught by autumn over knowing I had to make things difficult for myself but not wanting to, so the Enid Blyton-esque fairyland scenes and characters were another attempt at seeking comfort. I wanted to draw big fluffy costumes and objects and animals, and let those lead the text.

I always forget about the zine, but it was definitely a very important step toward the creation of my compendium. It might be fair to call it a direct predecessor, especially in terms of the Lake, unfinished animation.
play between “heavy” text and “lighter” images. Feedback that I received for it also became integral in defining how I moved ahead with the subject. Hanna Stenman, my tutor and also the guest for this particular feedback, questioned the original (rushed) ending of the zine, which stated that friendship gives us the space to be ourselves. Hanna critiqued the predominant narrative of “being yourself”; she asked me to consider what that even means, especially in a neoliberal society, and why it needs to be considered a product of friendship.

This was an important moment for me to reconsider the role of “productive” change in friendship as resistance. It led to a greater restructuring of my core argument because I had finally found a comfortable starting point for me to dig into how neoliberal and patriarchal ideas infiltrate friendship and our practice of it.

Friendship is resistance, and one of its greatest resistances is in its moments of rest.
V. Deity of Shame

An enduring part of my process throughout these two years has been “great concept — now for the execution.”

The tension and disconnect between knowing and doing has meant that the process has never been linear. This disconnect has also contributed to existing feelings of shame, and shame has been a major roadblock in my process. My Compendium addresses shame to a great degree, but before I could address it I had to name it.

The Altar of Friendship was created before my December presentation. It featured 12 deities — approx. 4” tall figurines sculpted out of air-dry clay — that named and represented different aspects of friendship for me. The Altar was a return to the debate of abstraction vs accessibility; it was an experiment in how much I could say and show without saying and showing much explicitly. Until this point I had structured the process of my project as a play on the 5 stages of grief: Sorrow, Hope, Mania, Doubt and Peace, with Peace seeming further and further away as I lingered in the state of Doubt. Now, the Altar and its deities provided a new structure that combined the complex, intellectual ideas of friendship with the simple lived experiences of it. The idea to clearly combine the two originated from a conversation with my friend and classmate Hannah Arnesen, where we discussed how my animations already combined the pain and joy of friendship in one narrative and how Hannah found that to be representative of her friendships, where a single conversation can move effortlessly and quickly between the complex and the simple.

The Altar of Friendship bridged the final gap over the tumultuous, dangerous terrain that I had to cross to investigate the failings and the fragility of friendship. After months of saying “I know friendship can be difficult”, I was finally ready to explore how and why. Or so I thought!
The Altar of Friendship, oracle cards, 2020
VI. Deity of Reflection of the Deepest Self

During my December presentation, a first-year Master’s student, Veronika Larsson, brought up the question of loneliness. She asked if after working so much with the idea of friendship I had considered reflecting a bit on loneliness as well. My immediate response to the suggestion was to dismiss it. My project was about friendship, and I felt like there’s always a tendency for people to try to expand your project for you whenever you’re in the process of narrowing it down. I was already struggling with Friendship; Loneliness felt like a separate beast.

But the next day I was already Facebook messaging Veronika an apology — something had been cracked open by her question. I still wasn’t sure about bringing loneliness into my project, but I recognised an existing overlap. In my message I wrote “I think [my response] was a live example of what I said in the presentation, of how I find myself pulling away from talking about difficult things and so my gut reaction was to say oh I can’t incorporate loneliness into my project even though I have already identified it as a foundation of my work (in how I talk about individualism).”

Now, the more distance I get from my project, the more I am able to recognise how important the role of loneliness is in an investigation of friendship. In my Compendium, I used relational dialectics to place loneliness at the heart of friendship and vice versa. During my final exam, I was able to recognise in the moment of presenting that of course my interest in friendship as a tool of resistance is triggered by a deep fear of loneliness and what that would mean for my survival in such an oppressive system. And now, writing this, I have been able to notice that from the very beginning my project was recognising loneliness before I was. My animations, all celebrations of friendship, represent in visuals and in narrative instances of isolation, distance, being apart and attempting connection.

Loneliness in its forms of isolation, alienation, neoliberalism-prescribed individualism, became central to my exploration of the much-anticipated failings of friendship. I was finally able to summon friendship from its great heights into the imperfect world that we inhabit, and recognise its struggles, a reflection of our own struggles. Finally acknowledging loneliness, I was now able to create the narrative arc over which I could structure my full argument for friendship.
Lemonade, 2020 (00:24 min)
Part 2
Aziza’s Friendship Compendium
Aziza’s Friendship Compendium

by Aziza Ahmad

a love letter to my friends,
a death threat to the powers that be

"created with the support of

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First Edition. Published 2021
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What is friendship?

It's hard to define...

Depends on how you hold it, how it catches the light.

This isn't friendship.

Neither is this.
Maybe this is friendship.

A definitive relationship with no defined form.
Etymologically, the root of friendship is "freedom" and "to love".
Friendship is dynamic, charged.

It is unbound, and resistant to boundaries.

It is more than love – it is the action of loving.

Friendship exists untethered, always in the act of becoming, a bond outside the bounds of capital, religion, family, law.
Friendship exists in contrast to all other relationships in our lives. All our relationships structure themselves around a singular, central point: families hold the patriarch as their central point (Fig. 1); marriage holds reproduction, the concept of a family, the proliferation of patriarchal family values as its central point (Fig. 2); institutions – economic or religious – hold their capitalistic, paternalistic values, and the leaders who enforce those values (and who profit from them) as their central point (Fig. 3 & 4).

Fig. 1

born to a father

Fig. 2

given to a husband

Fig. 3

slave to a corporation

Fig. 4

servant of thy lord

The manifestation of this central point is different for every relationship, a different name, a different image, but it is always a point of surveillance and control.

In every instance, the hold of these centers is reinforced by laws, policies, societal demands and pressures. Law, governance, a society enforcing the patriarchy and capitalism. Friendship, on the contrary, is free not only in name but also in form.
So, what structure does friendship hold? That is dependent on each individual instance of a friendship, but generally, friendships build around 3 foundational pillars. They are voluntary, they are dynamic, and they are intimate.

Voluntary

The freedom of a friendship is evident in the fact that you are never born with a friend or assigned a friend – you always choose your own friends. And, as such, you can also choose – mutually or individually – to stop being friends. There is no contract binding a friendship, no biological link, no authorities that regulate it.

Dynamic

As no structure for friendships exists, you therefore build your own structure. Every friendship depends on a mutual exchange between friends, deciding boundaries and then being a friend within those boundaries. In the absence of formality and ceremony, we create our own rituals in our friendships and then perform those rituals as a committed practice of the friendship.
Intimate

A relationship's transition to friendship is dependent on a shared intimacy. To enter a friendship is to risk a chance to reveal yourself, trust the possibility that you will be seen, embrace the feeling of having been seen, and then do the same for your friend.

All friendships thrive on intimacy but intimacy is a contested topic. In the little research and reflection on friendship that exists (compared to all other interpersonal relationships), intimacy is always questioned. Aristotle wrote of “the friendship of virtue” vs “the friendship of utility” and the measure of what makes a friendship one or the other is intimacy, and the “authenticity” of it. A friendship of utility is one lacking “real” intimacy, and is said to exist more as a transactional relationship.

Note: According to Reis & Shaver (1988), the 3 steps of intimacy are self-disclosure (revealing aspects of “inner” self), receiving a response to the self-disclosure, and perception of having been responded to. It is also a process that unfolds over time.
But is intimacy not a transaction itself? If I share, and desire for what I shared to be accepted, and expect for something to be shared in return? And is there no utility in intimacy, that which makes me feel understood and loved and empowered? And, conversely, is a friendship of utility even qualified to be called a friendship when it lacks intimacy?

I find fault in this measurement of friendship. It is a decidedly capitalist view of a relationship that defies capitalism. If a relationship is to be quantified, if its utility is to be measured, friendship is the last to lend itself to such scrutiny. Employer-employee relationships, to begin with, most obviously depend on the transaction of labour and capital. But marriages (Fig. 5) and kinship (Fig. 6) also depend on a transaction of intimacy – along with transactions of power, security, finances and opportunities, some of these transactions being quite tangible, such as generational wealth, or a desirable foreign passport.

Fig. 5. The archaic transactions of marriage and property still exist – today, they manifest in property-ownership laws and tax benefits.

Fig. 6. Parent to Child Resource Transferral

tbh, if I could have gone to an Ivy League school with legacy status through my parents who also footed the bill and then set me up in their own successful business, I wouldn’t have to be here writing this book.

But, also, because of the generational wealth, opportunities and social capital my parents did have, I am here able to write this book.
Of course, if my argument now is that all relationships are transactional, how does friendship’s structure enable it to defy capitalism?

Friendship still requires a constant exchange, of any combination of trust, intimacy, company, accountability, validation, entertainment--

But the difference with friendship is that its transactions are not tied to a hierarchy. There’s no defined social expectation or law for how these needs must be arranged in a friendship--
in our friendships, we build and rebuild, arrange and rearrange our own hierarchy of needs, one that is in constant development and only responds to the people involved in the friendship.
Friendship is a wonderful example of workers controlling the means of production.
This flexibility of friendship also makes it much more difficult to hold captive in the definitions of "friendship of virtue" or "friendship of utility".

We can, at once, have some friendships that depend deeply on trust, and others that hold entertainment – the occasions to simply share a laugh, feel rejuvenated through joy – as their greatest value.

Even a friendship that at a particular point placed validation at the top of its hierarchy, may over time...
or through circumstances...

come to replace validation with accountability.

Our lives are truly enriched when we have an assortment of friendships, each with their own set of needs, arranged within their own hierarchy, each friendship important to us individually.
That last part bears repeating, because society's emphasis is always on truer, fewer friends.

But in our lived experience, it isn't better or worse to have more friendly acquaintances than deep, prolonged friendships.

Our choice in friendships depends greatly on our circumstances and on the kind of support we already have in our lives.

Science and culture have so far deemed friendship a less important role than other relationships because only dominant segments of society are the ones being studied.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The default is set at cishet middle-class members of nuclear families.</th>
<th>These are people who already have great support built into their lives because the world, our systems, our organisations are designed primarily for them</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>But for marginalised people living in a system that isn’t made for them, friendship has a far greater role:</td>
<td>It is a natural source of support. An alternative nourishment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A healing response.

A restoration of selfhood.

A protection of our vulnerable selves from erosion.
I should admit that I’m borrowing language from environmental writings.

And I want to propose that – if you truly want to imagine the form of friendship – friendship is a lush scattering of weeds.

But weeds are simply a natural response to land that has been disturbed.

We’re taught weeds are a problem, because we decided that they’re a problem. Because they cost us money. Because it’s faster to use the land until its unusable and move on, than to nourish the land that nourishes us.

I know I’ve just snuck in an unsolicited rebranding of Weeds™, but
Friendship does for society, what weeds do for the land. The hard work. The overlooked work.

Friendship steps in where our social ecosystems threaten to collapse.
Let's loop back real quick

huff

to the idea of friendship
as a verb;

HUFF:

as the act of loving –

puff

Friendship in motion.
Friendship in its inherent form is a direct network, where you and your friends are mutually building, strategising, redesigning your relationship—both consciously and subconsciously, unregulated and answerable only to yourselves.

But a conscious consideration of friendship not only breaks open exciting, alternative ways for us to interact with each other, but also with ourselves, and the world. Friendship functions as a filter through which we are constantly redefining ourselves in relation to all that surrounds us.

Friendship is a continuous act of pulling away from the abyss of isolation that neoliberalism and the patriarchy have placed us in.

Both neoliberalism and the patriarchy work in tandem to not only isolate us from others\(^1\), but to convince us that’s the best way to be. After all, capitalism depends greatly on the concept of scarcity, and a capitalist society very successfully instills in us the fear of scarcity. There isn’t enough – of anything. And if we want our share, we must work for it. And someone who doesn’t work for it, doesn’t deserve it, because then there won’t be enough for us, and our family, and only family matters, because families define us with our specific gendered roles, and, and--

what room is there

amongst such fear

for friendship?

Why *should* we be dependent on others? Isn’t it good to be self-sufficient? And, regardless, how can we even begin to trust anyone—care for anyone outside of our immediate kin, when the stakes are so high, literally life or death?

The stakes don’t *have* to be life or death. The mere existence of friendship is a proponent of this because friendship is not designed from scarcity; it is a relationship of abundance.
We’ve always had friendship and, because of its limitless form, it is also the most simple, easily available form of companionship. Our friends can be someone we’ve known intimately as long as we’ve been alive, and also someone we’ve had lunch with twice at a new job. Friendships can develop quite quickly – the space between an “acquaintance” and a “friend” can be filled in a single instance of helping each other out in a simple task or realising you both pull from the same pool of meme references.

So, friendship is expansive and unpredictable and uncontrollable. And if there’s anything any system of oppression despises, it’s something that power cannot easily and precisely be exerted upon.

This is exactly what makes friendship, at once, a natural point of connection as well as resistance.
This connection and resistance is displayed well in the analogy of friendship as a mirror, an analogy affirmed by several unattributed Pinterest quotes. Our friends are our mirrors – they reflect us (connection!). But, in the process of reflecting us, they reveal – by virtue of the fact that they will never be identical to us – something we are unaware of, or unable to accept, and something that Pinterest quotes might classify as the truth (resistance!).
There’s also more than one kind of mirroring.

In psychology, mirroring is connected to specific neurons in our brains – called the mirror neurons – which are activated:
1. when we perform an action, and
2. when we recognise someone performing an action we are familiar with.

In neurotypical people, mirroring helps us connect with others and their mental processes when we notice how their thoughts and emotions turn into actions the same way ours do. These are the neurons firing in our brain when we see Beyoncé eating chips and think, “celebrities! They’re just like us :)”, and also when we see our friend tearing up while talking about their tough day and we know it’s time to break out the tissue paper.

Mirroring is, therefore, a perfect introduction to the functions of friendship, holding an integral role in their development and execution.

**Validation**

Validation is perhaps the simplest function of friendship. It comes quite easily, as – if you remember – one of the foundational processes of friendship is that of intimacy: to reveal, to be perceived, and to be responded to, the response itself being a form of validation. *What you revealed has been acknowledged.* Mirroring might even be the shorthand of intimacy. Through our mirrored actions we are constantly, subconsciously perceiving and responding to each other.
Whether conscious or subconscious, validation is an extremely important function of friendship. Preeminent friendship scholar William Rawlins believes that it is one of our fundamental human desires, “to be known and perceived, to have our humanity reflected back at us.”² And in some ways, validation is the very first resistance.

Viewing our friend as our mirror requires trust and understanding, just like a real mirror requires you to believe that what it’s showing is the truth, that it is accurate. When our friend reflects to us our truth, our sense of worth is affirmed in the eyes of another whom we deem worthy as well – worthy enough to acknowledge this reflection.

And the mirroring that brings us closer to the people we call our friends, also creates distance between us and others who are not our reflection. When we receive validation, we distance ourselves from that which invalidates.

The validation that friendship can provide –

for being funny, for being kind, for being tired...

... can create a dangerous, important, incredible distance from the invalidation of a system that sees us in limiting, terribly contained ways; in roles that we did not choose, in spaces we cannot fully occupy.
Identity

Validation, especially as a repeated process over time, plays a very important role in forming and feeding our identity.

We’re all born with a template of our identity; we are gendered at birth, and socialised accordingly, valued along the way primarily on our productivity as a labourer, as a devotee to certain belief systems, as a human meant to reproduce.

All of these can certainly be welcome parts of our identity. But it’s the template itself that’s restrictive – and it’s meant to be!

Friendship provides a space outside of the template.
This is why as adolescents and teenagers, as we gain the experiences that define the directions we want to take and the life we want to live, it's common to value friendship extremely highly. Our teenage years and early 20s are also the times when we have the greatest number of friendships, because we have the greatest opportunity for them, most likely being in a school or college with hundreds of people the same age as us, and the time and lack of "adult responsibilities" to develop and maintain these friendships.
Friendship also follows a period of time where our identity was attached only to our family. And our proximity to our parents (or any primary caregiver – a grandparent or older sibling) during stressful situations when we’re younger can, according to attachment theory, be quite definitive. Children that do not have a secure attachment to a primary caregiver during their early years develop an insecure attachment style – which means that when it comes to relationships they generally either have a negative view of themselves, or others, or both.3

The attention that you receive as a child can vary greatly depending on the mental, emotional, or physical preoccupations of your caregiver. When I think of myself and my friends, it’s not uncommon to have grown up with parents who weren’t fully able to provide an adequate level of care and attention, not because they were necessarily “bad parents”, but mostly because they worked demanding hours, struggled with their mental health, were preoccupied by the stresses of putting food on the table or surviving in an abusive household, or were never conditioned to give attention and affection themselves.

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Research shows, then, that young people with an insecure attachment style find friends to be an incredibly important source of support and stability. That is, after all, the foremost function of friendship: to be present where all else is absent, to provide from its abundance where there is a lack. And so friendship becomes the playground for our identity.

"I don't know who I'd be if it wasn't for my friends."
Me, neither!

All my life, my friends have been my mirror in whose reflection I dress up and play pretend until I've found what I like –

my existence, my choices, my agency affirmed along the way.
And I have been that mirror for them. In friendship, we have the opportunity, the possibility, to keep expanding well past the confines of our given templates, outside of the productive demands of family, work, society at large.

And what greater resistance is there than to BE, and to be larger than your allotted space in this patriarchal, neoliberal hierarchy? And experience this joy of being collectively.
Our identities don’t just define us, they’re also our point of connection to community, to others who also subscribe to our experiences and ideas and values. This is in complete contradiction to liberal individualism that, ironically, designs and enforces restrictive individual templates upon us.

That’s the catch. In capitalist culture, great emphasis is placed on “being yourself” and “being true to who you are”. Individualism is prized as the greatest freedom. “Identity” isn’t considered to be in communal possession, but in individual possession – you are the master of your destiny.

But where are we given the freedom to actually explore our individual self, outside of the crushing norms that we must conform to, to survive? Can we really be ourselves, for example, if it makes us less employable in a system that is already looking for ways to exploit us? Be yourself, we’re told; only if you can afford to, is the caveat. Identity, thus, becomes a burden placed upon us, a role we must fulfill to the best of our abilities, lifting responsibility off of the social, cultural, governmental infrastructure around us that hasn’t been designed to support our needs at all.

And so the real freedom is friendship. It is community, it is collectivism, it is the group in which we feel wanted, loved and safe. There is no actual freedom in being alone and exhausted by the weight of who you must be. The freedom is in being with the people you choose to be with and who choose you too, always exploring the potential of who you can be and maybe never picking one single thing to be at all.
Accountability

The sacred freedom of friendship that allows us to be/to become/to belong outside of the restrictions of productivity is very naturally dependent on accountability.

Accountability is a big buzzword right now. Over the past few years, whistleblowing within different institutions has revealed rampant abuse of power and exploitation, and highlighted how certain types of people have been allowed to operate and advance in these spaces through causing direct and indirect harm to others, and without any accountability for it for a long while.

It is obvious that this is not an individual problem; it is a structural problem.
Power structures operate through deflecting laterally, or delegating and dumping the burden of accountability further down the hierarchy (Fig. 7); the people in power are always able to exempt themselves of responsibility. This is crucial to the reproduction of oppression: to place the onus of it on those being oppressed.

**Perpetrator**
A Corporation™

Crime
Causing harm to vulnerable groups for personal profit

Accountability
Stop harmful practices
Compensate victims
Make structural changes

Deflection
Blaming a government that explicitly supports the corporation and its practices

Delegation
Blaming a few “bad employees” who have been trained in the corporations harmful practices

Dumping
Blame the victims

*Fig. 7 A generic power structure’s anti-accountability chain of events*

Friendship, conversely, is unable to function without evenly-distributed accountability.
Its dynamic nature means that being a friend requires us to be responsible for collectively negotiating the demands and values of our friendships.

After all, the structure of our friendships is upheld by us, not any external body, so if we aren’t constantly involved in evaluating and structuring the mutual exchange that our friendship is dependent on, it will fail to function.

We might grow distant, or decide that this relationship does not fulfill the needs that we have allocated to it. So, as we constantly redesign and rearrange the boundaries defining our friendship, we are in the process of holding each other accountable for respecting those boundaries.
The seamless integration of accountability in the functioning of friendship makes friendship an excellent lens by which to view the idea of accountability itself.
Another buzzword, “cancel culture”, makes people afraid of accountability, but accountability doesn’t actually have to be difficult and damning. We live in a system that depends on punitive measures to function. That’s how a hierarchy is established and upheld.

And that’s what makes the idea of being responsible for our actions seem like we’re being forced into walking a thin line between reward and punishment.

Friendship reveals a non-punitive concept of accountability because we’re engaged in this form of ownership (of our choices and actions) all the time. Because of the undefined, unregulated format of friendship, when a friend pushes the jointly established boundaries of friendship, perhaps in a direction that we’re not ready for or interested in, we’re able to actively practice gentle ways of negotiating this push.
Since we choose our friends, and view ourselves through the mirror of our friends, we are able to hold each other accountable with a kindness and respect that isn’t the norm. This could be attributed to fears of losing our friend if we push too hard. Or, it could be a moment of us negotiating our identity and how our friend’s unagreeable actions change the reflection of ourselves that they present to us. And this regular practice of accountability works both ways: how we hold each other accountable, but also how we deal with being held accountable. As our friendships develop, we are able to subconsciously make space within the relationship for disagreements through greater understanding of each other. This space for disagreements is necessary and normal, because if we didn’t have such a space to acknowledge where our identities and experiences diverge, then the process of mutual exchange and intimacy in our friendship would actually be quite stressful.
Friendship is not tied to capitalist rules of scarcity or any productivity-based timeline, so this space for disagreement can also extend to become a space for us to process being held accountable:

to negotiate our feelings around our actions, to feel shame or guilt if necessary, and to not experience consequences or any form of course-correction under pressure and in isolation.

As we restructure the dynamic boundaries of our friendship in response to disagreeable actions, we are bound to support each other. By form, friendship is fully immersive for all parties involved. We cannot delegate the housekeeping of our friendships to anyone else.

Friendship’s promise of accountability is therefore not a threat to our individual selves. Through its collective nature, it is in fact a generous offering of growth, through mutual guidance and support.
Sharing

Generosity is deeply ingrained in friendship's form but it also provides an important function.

We base our friendships in shared intimacy, but this constant mutual exchange also becomes a practice in sharing as an act of reproducing abundance.
Sharing is anti-scarcity in practice. What we share does not diminish for us, but multiplies, because we are able to work past our individual limitations.

Sharing reduces the weight of the burdens we carry not only by spreading it out amongst friends who take part of it willingly, but also by giving us extra collective tools to work past the burden, in the form of shared skills, knowledge, physical resources.
This, then, creates further room for us to explore and innovate together — and also, room to rest. Our shared universe keeps expanding, not from hoarding for our individual gain but sharing for collective liberation. Our friendships become alternative realms for seeking and creating more in a society that always offers us less.

Friendship generates space for a collective experience beyond basic survival

This especially holds true for those of us whose very existence is diminished by society. Those of us who are pushed to the margins; out of sight, out of mind.
For us, sharing becomes a radical attempt at visibility, access, and, perhaps if we’re lucky, acceptance.

Friendship is our shared language – it is how we name our experiences.
Friendship is our shared memory — it is how we situate our experiences.

Friendship is our shared voice — it is how we amplify our existence.
My life feels like 50% sensory experience and 50% processing the experience with my friends — people who truly understand my position in those experiences. And this ability of my friends to reflect my understanding of myself and my surroundings back to me is especially important when there’s a lack of prominent narratives that can provide the same. The memories we collectively store, the meaning we collectively make, and the stories that come out of it all step in as sacred, personal truths in the face of the many betrayals of this world (and of myself, as a subject of this world).

It is also when we process and present ourselves collectively that we’re able to break away from the neoliberal, patriarchal ideas of a singular genius and the pressure that puts on us to exist and excel in isolation. We are able to recognise that nothing gets created in a vacuum; for every solitary male genius there is a community that has been left behind uncredited, with the ability to have created so much more if they had also been recognised.

When we share our spaces, our thoughts, our skills, our vulnerabilities, we also learn to share the rewards and recognition, even for the moments where nothing is produced, even for the activities that are meant to restore us, even for the caretaking that we neglect, the supportive (instead of productive) duties that we devalue.

Sharing is, therefore, friendship’s self-regulating, self-generating apparatus for equality and prosperity. It adjusts for equality, while simultaneously generating new possibilities.
Invention

All of friendship’s functions are inherently resistant to the oppressive workings of capitalism and the patriarchy. They operate as oppositional forces to our social hierarchies, governments, and institutions that are constantly working to divide, devalue, dehumanise and conquer the many, for the benefit of the very, very few. But friendship goes well beyond resistance. Friendship’s greatest power, in fact, lies in its most radical function. That of invention.

When we validate each other, build our identities together, hold each other accountable and share — openly, freely, joyfully — we are practicing friendship as resistance to a system we already exist in, one that invalidates, restricts, shames and excludes.
But in all our practice of friendship, there also exists a seed of invention that is constantly being watered by our shared imagination. Friendship is, in fact, our shared dream, and our efforts to make that dream a reality. Within our friendships, we invent a new reality – a reality that is not defined by resistance to oppression, but that eliminates the oppressive systems altogether and replaces them with our collective projection of new possibilities.
Friendship is the process of building this reality. Bit by bit, we try to create spaces with our friends where our hopes for our lives can be tested, evaluated, enjoyed. This practice, these spaces, in their absolute rejection of neoliberal, patriarchal limitations, is friendship as activism.

Here, I employ a particular definition of activism⁴, that breaks it down into a three-step process.

1. **Critique**: when we identify an issue in our current means of existence
2. **Invention**: when we develop a solution for this issue
3. **Creative Practice**: when we begin to actively incorporate this solution into our lives

Let me clarify: I don’t mean to say it’s just a matter of, like, positive thinking. But even in the direst of situations, there’s something that happens in the space of friendship, a reflection of the critique through the lens of this relationship that, perhaps not moulds, but at least dents the problem into a new shape.

Yeah, we’re suffering, truly suffering, from an endless barrage of violence. Some mornings, it only takes a total of three scrolls on Twitter to decide life really isn’t worth living. The news cycle does 1000 pts of psychic damage to me on the daily.

But omg imagine if our bodies weren’t constantly policed and gendered...

and what if my character design was based on personal motivations and not fear?

Haha jk........ unless?

This is where creative practice steps in. Friendship is a daydream and friendship is a work in progress. Friendship exists in several realms, and it is also the porous in-between of all these realms. So, at some points, our imagined reality starts to naturally seep into our lived reality. We begin to make active changes in how we live to emulate how we want to live.
Our friends, in this process, are our support, our courage, our blueprint, our roadmap. Perhaps we simply adopt a new language that helps define our potential new world. Perhaps we adopt new rituals.

But whatever our choices, we’re making the collective effort of creating something different that doesn’t only push back against the norms (or maybe doesn’t push back at all) but also puts into process a new norm. One that’s customised to our specifications.

Friendship is, perhaps, life’s most accessible modification tool.
All this isn’t to suggest that friendship is easy – it’s not! And I say this from experience, as someone who has committed a year to obsessing over friendship as a concept, only to grapple majorly with friendship as a process.

Why is that? Well, it’s because I’ve been $depressed$.
After all, the mind is an inherently lonely place.

And when my voice is strained, unhappy, uninspired, the echo chamber of my brain simply amplifies each sordid feeling so much so that I find myself near catatonic in bed, leaving messages on read and cancelling plans that I initiated.

In this state, I know that the voices of my friends would be a welcome addition...
Capitalism values us based on our productivity and therefore perpetuates feelings of shame for being a less able worker. It also defines relationships as work (Fig. 8), hence I am ashamed of the labour I can’t perform of being a “good” friend.

The patriarchy uses shame to silence and subjugate, so that we do not seek help outside the bounds of family and can keep up the facade of cishet family supremacy while confined within it.

But I’m not allowing any of those voices near me because of shame.

And I can find a way of blaming capitalism and the patriarchy for this, too!

"Hey! I’m so glad you reached out. I’m actually at capacity / helping someone else who’s in crisis / dealing with some personal stuff right now, and I don’t think I can hold appropriate space for you. Could we connect [later date or time] instead / Do you have someone else you could reach out to?"

Fig. 8. An example of friendship as labour, attached screenshot of text templates for friends, from viral tweet by @fyeahmfabello, November 18, 2019.
Technically, the spectre of loneliness never really lingers far from friendship. Relational dialectics, the study of interpersonal communication within relationships, is concerned with contradictions and multiple perspectives and the dynamic act of balancing emotions in any relationship. It’s a yin and yang philosophy of dualism and how the most extreme version of any value will still contain a seed of its opposite.

Friendship, therefore, contains in it the seed of loneliness, and the two are able to coexist. After all, we enter friendships as individuals with the agency to negotiate the ever-changing, complex boundaries and structures of our friendships.

However, it’s different when the system is rigged for our isolation. Neoliberalism neutralises the threat of friendship foremostly by devaluing it. The idea sold to us time and time again through all the different patriarchal and capitalist institutions in our lives and the popular culture that they produce is that friendship is optional; it is not a need.
Our lives are organised along a timeline of productivity, where we move from family to family, study to work, with friends as the add-ons we pick up and leave, depending on the demands of our other priorities. It’s not unusual to hear people in their late 20s and early 30s begin to complain about how difficult it is to make new friends, or maintain friendships.

*expected milestones of life:* school, work, marriage, children

This is not a failing of friendship itself, and it’s not a coincidence. This is by design.

Friendships are meant to be charming childhood pastimes.

Adulthood – when we have finished formal education, left our birth families, gotten married and started having children – is defined by independence in the form of individualism, which requires us to prioritise our work and our families above friendships that provide no productive benefit.
The devaluation of friendship is paired with the daily pressures of our individualistic lifestyles.

Friendship is the valve that releases these inhumane pressures of survival that are pushed upon us by institutions that neglect their responsibilities to us.

But at the same time, friendship itself is under a lot of pressure!

I know of the abundance of friendship, but how do I access it when I and all my friends are held back by an enforced scarcity of our time, money, space, energy? It's not easy to re-evaluate and re-prioritise our lives and instate friendship with greater value, when structural inequalities don't give us the opportunity to take a break from surviving and make an attempt at living, or possibly even thriving.
Of course, all of this makes friendship harder, but it doesn’t stop us from wanting friends, particularly if we belong to a marginalised identity. Then, connection also becomes a necessity for our survival. Women in working class neighbourhoods, for example, band together to share domestic and child care duties. Queer and trans people find alternative families amongst their friends in the face of rejection by the cishet family institution. People isolated from the majority on behalf of their race, class, religious/political beliefs constantly seek connection because the more that we’re estranged from the norm, the more we desire to discover our own norm.

These friendships, over time, can develop into collective action, because as marginalised people become more visible through forming connections with each other, they also face more threats, and must collectively combat those threats. This is where neoliberalism changes tactics. Instead of just explicitly devaluing friendship, these days neoliberalism assigns a very specific kind of value to friendship as well.
Co-option is a particularly sinister tool, because it doesn’t just outrightly reject a threat – it tries to deconstruct and rearrange the threat to feed its own agenda instead. This is why neoliberalism is, for example, especially interested in “female friendships” now. It’s an appropriation of feminist collectivism for individualistic propaganda.

Female friendships, while generally marketed as unstable, dishonest and competition-driven, are now also being repackaged as necessary “investments”. This form of “sisterhood” markets friendship as a need, but still a temporary one, for individualistic gains and perpetuation of capitalist and patriarchal ideas\(^1\). Female friendship is romanticised – *we all need our girlfriends!* – at the same time instilling ideas of what an ideal image of femininity is, rejecting any possibilities of queerness or trans/non-binary gender expression, coding our friendship “investments” with values based on race, age and class, and using friendship as a method of surveillance and peer control (*Fig. 9-11*). If you can think of any chick flick/rom-com with a makeover scene, you know exactly what I’m talking about.

\(^1\) Alison Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*, Palgrave, 2013
This neoliberal appropriation of friendship to perpetuate our own oppression through what is meant to be our means of liberation is a dark reminder that friendship, while being in form and function a freeing, anti-oppressive force, must still be practiced by us within an oppressive system.

And that is what I grapple the most with. That even when I know better, I’m often unable to do better, because to access the form of friendship that is true to me I must still filter through years and years of neoliberal ideology embedded in me, which is also refreshed, remarked, reinforced at a speed and volume that I’m not fully able to combat.
I suppose the hardest pill to swallow is the idea that perhaps, at times, the greatest friendship of all is that between the patriarchy and capitalism. It’s painful to recognise that for all the power that friendship has, a lot of our experience of friendship is still affected by these ubiquitous oppressive systems.

How do I keep cheering on my friends in their victories when I’m afraid that it means that they’re also outgrowing me, that I will be left behind in the social hierarchy?

How do I share how I feel without also feeling like it makes me a burden?

How do I allow myself to be perceived, how do I identify so closely with my friends, when that familiarity begins to breed contempt, because I can’t stop viewing myself— and then my friends, my reflections— through the critical eye of the patriarchy?
Sometimes I do contemplate defeat. On days—weeks—months—when all of us are exhausted by the everyday violence we must endure, and none of us have the capacity to reach out to each other, to hold space for each other’s pain, to not feel alone, the frictions within friendship—something that promised me so much—I feel especially grating.

Sometimes it feels like I have no room for friendship.

Sometimes it feels like friendship is too special, too sacred,

and it has no room for me.
It's the lowest of the lows that is a perfect reminder that friendship is more than a promise; it is a practice. Friendship: to love. The action of loving. Friendship is in constant creation, and its failings are part of the process.

And just as friendship contains within it the seed of loneliness, so does friendship exist in the depths of loneliness. Even in the moments that I am alone, I am alone together, with my friends.

The world we share doesn't stop existing simply because we are apart. Instead, it expands to make room for us to sit in our solitude, until we're ready to reconnect.
In a world where I am tired of being resilient, friendship is resilient for me. Friendship is not resistant to critique and it is not crumbled by it – it thrives on it. That is how friendship becomes a space to recognise injustice and undo the knots it has on our own behaviours, all while finding solace in each other.

Friendship is our ultimate fantasy, always in the process of being made into reality. It is intimacy as optimism. In friendship, we never stop dreaming, seeking, demanding, believing, collectively, for ourselves and each other. The romance of friendship is not a fragile flower, but the dense network of roots deep beneath the soil, enchanted and entangled.
If friendship is a shared dream, then what a work of alchemy it is.
to transform the pain of our deepest desires, our greatest longings into thrilling possibilities.
If friendship is a shared language, then what a moment of reverence it is.
If friendship is a shared anger,

then not a moment too soon for us to recognise this,
to harness it, to breathe life into it, to be liberated by it.
And if the question at the end of all this is, “Would you follow your friends off of a cliff?” my answer is...

“maybe”

and my counter-question is, “Where else is there to go, once we’ve been backed onto the edge of this cliff?”

And what if I change the question? Would I follow my friends into a better world? A world that belongs to us? That respects us? That doesn’t reject us, violate us, or – best case scenario – simply endure us... but celebrates us?

Then my answer is---
YES! Me and my friends, we’re gonna jump!

And we’ll survive it, because we’re each other’s safety nets.

And we’ll thrive because the bottom of the cliff is where the party’s at.
Get in loser, we're jumping off a cliff!
Sources

My friends (surprise!!!) are my #1 source. A lot of what they read, hear and experience, gets passed onto me in casual conversation, intense text group chats, and through their own incredible art. All sources beyond that are listed below:


Besharam Baaghi Tehreek, *Radical Feminist Gupshup*, Instagram Live series, 2021


Eva Hagberg, “The Pandemic has Remade Friendships”, The Atlantic, 2020

Georgina Kenyan, “How weeds help fight climate change”, BBC.com, 2019


Nudrat Kamal, “Teaching Literature on Female Friendship in the #MeToo Era”, Dawn, 2019


Sadie Graham, “How Our Cultural Obsession with Platonic ‘Girlfriends’ Sidelines Queer Women”, Vice, 2018


This is a textbook and this is a manifesto. This is an argument for friendship.

Friendship as a basic need.
Friendship as a necessary joy.
Friendship as a radical thought.
Friendship as a moment of rest.
Friendship as a demand.
Friendship as an answer.
Friendship as a political tool.
Friendship as a prayer.
Friendship and all its efforts, and friendship in all its effortlessness.

This is a dissection of friendship; this is a resurrection of friendship.

This is my compendium, and this is my agenda.
Annotations on

I. Narrative & Structure
II. Aesthetic & Production
III. Outcome
I. Narrative & Structure

Narrative Arc

*Aziza’s Friendship Compendium, 1st Edition,* is divided into four parts: Form, Function, Friction and Fantasy. Form addresses “what is friendship?” Function addresses “how does friendship work? What does it do?” Friction investigates what stops friendship from functioning at its optimal level. Fantasy imagines the possibilities available to us when friendship resists and overcomes the forces of friction.

These four parts also represent the common narrative arc of exposition (Form), action (Function), climax (Friction), and resolution (Fantasy). The book naturally fell into this narrative structure as I knew that while I wanted to acknowledge the difficulties that friendships face, I didn’t want that to deter from my argument that friendship is a force of resistance. So, upon presenting Friction, it was important to follow up with Fantasy, because the failings of friendship aren’t conceptual failings but executional failings, having to operate in a system rigidly defined by neoliberalism and the patriarchy as already outlined by Form and Function.

Text & Image

The book is non-fiction in text, and fictional in imagery. I wanted to present my argument with authority, co-opting the tone and tropes of academia and science to elevate the idea of friendship. This tone was also necessary for me to write an argument that is mine, but not necessarily limited to being about me. Alongside, I wanted to openly reflect on the tone and tropes and their role in representing “objectivity” and “the truth”. The imagery that accompanies the text helps in doing this, being a playful, layered interpretation of it. This play of text and image achieves the goal of balancing abstraction with accessibility. The illustrations work on multiple levels to represent the text as a fictional narrative of a series of actions between friends, as well as adding layers of meaning and emotion that blur and reshape the dry and deliberate text. Accompanying the visual narrative of these characters are diagrams that
Diagrams from Aziza’s Friendship Compendium, 1st Edition (2021)
are also, for the most part, fictional. The choice to include these diagrams was, again, to create tension with the text and allow for more fun, more accessible interpretations.

**Visual Narrative**

The visual narrative resides mostly in the playground. There is the central character — me — who guides you through the book, and a wide cast of friends who join to illustrate different concepts through different acts of play, such as mirroring represented by a game of catch. The choice to place the narrative in a playground and acts of play was, similar to the fairytale illustrations of the space zine, a decision primarily based in seeking comfort. I wanted the chance to enjoy myself through drawing, while I suffered in the process of writing. On a secondary level, I also chose play to represent my concepts of friendship as it has the potential to be quite universally understood. Throughout the book, I chose forms of play that most people have experienced or are aware of and strayed away from complex/regional games. I also enjoyed what my tutor Moa Matthis said about my choice of the playground — that it’s a space of great joy but also great pain — and play, which is trans-linguistic. Play is also reminiscent of/deeply linked to childhood, which Moa identified as “the first exposure to collective living”, and I appreciate that insight as well. The playground and different forms of play definitely gave me a wide range of emotional and situational possibilities to add depth to my text with.

**Playing with the Structure**

There are, of course, a few moments of slight deviation in the narrative, where we exit the world of the playground or any forms of play. One such moment is when, at the end of the Form section, I liken friendship to weeds. I’m actually very unclear on where that moment originated from; in the recesses of my memory is an image of weeds bursting through the concrete of a playground, and I think I used that loose link to justify this slightly bizarre tangent. But Rudy Loewe, my opponent in my final examination, had an interesting reading of this section, suggesting that the weeds represent how friendship and freedom and resistance are in our nature. I think that strengthens the link between the conceptual use of weeds and play as play is also extremely integral to our nature.
Continuing on the topic of deviations in structure, the text and illustration follow a distinct pattern in the book until the Friction section. Then, the text switches from being somewhat distant from me, as the writer, to becoming quite personal, and the illustrations switch from representing several different characters engaged in several different actions, to just me, alone and at a slower pace. For me, considering the time and effort it took to get to this point in my process, the Friction stage is perhaps the most important, so I desired for it to be distinct. Of course, these choices also naturally matched the content of the section. At the climax of the narrative of this book, it felt necessary to bring in more emotion, to truly reveal myself as the author of this compendium.

The planning and organising of the previous sections was able to give me the opportunity to, in the final section of Fantasy, take everything that came before and playfully mix and match it to present a somewhat open-ended resolution. Here I was able to refer to previous ideas and project them into the future. Fantasy is the shortest section, which I was initially unsure about, but I think the pacing, again, follows the narrative arc structure quite well, while leaving room for the reader (and me!) to continue dreaming.

**Writing Process**

For those interested in the actual hands-on process of creating this book: it involved 6 simultaneous Google docs, the most important ones being:

1. The *write-as-it-comes-to-me* document where I threw in all thoughts unstructured, and the structure document where I brought in the raw, jumbled up content and cut-and-paste it into a new order
2. The *extra idea-dump* where I relocated all ideas that I could not fit into the current scope of the book.

It also involved several pages in my notebook of me asking myself the same questions over and over again: what is the form? What is the function? How is the function different from the form? What do I want to say in Function that I do not repeat again in Friction? How often do I repeat certain concepts for clarity? How many counter-arguments do I want to include?

At some points, I did find myself getting trapped in a loop of debating myself, always trying to find and bring to the forefront every possible loophole in my arguments. This felt like an important method of investigation, but it also became self-defeating, trapping my argument in a circle instead of letting it move forward. Here, Hanna Stenman provided a very important restructuring of my process: to stop feeling like I need to debate myself to make my point by thinking of Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård and his Min Kamp series of books — six books detailing his (potentially humdrum) life. I haven’t read the books, but thinking about them gave me the confidence that if Knausgård can write six novels with a controversial title about just himself, without feeling the need to defend it, then I can certainly write my book on friendship without getting caught up in the imagined responses of people that this book isn’t even addressed to.
II. Aesthetics & Production

As an “illustrated textbook”, the tension between image and text was an important part of creating this work. My illustration style is always inclined towards cuteness, and I’m personally quite partial to cuteness as a vehicle for difficult conversations or serious information. But I didn’t want the cuteness to be overwhelming to the point of detracting from my very political argument. I chose to offset the cute illustration style, then, with Times New Roman as the typeface for my text.

I wanted a typeface that was a serif, and had a clearly authoritarian context without being extremely noticeable. Times New Roman seemed like an obvious choice. It is the default of academia, and I felt that the combination of this typeface with my illustration style would elevate both text and image, while still being a slightly cheeky choice. Times New Roman reads some seriousness into an otherwise helplessly cute aesthetic and, at the same time, is extremely self-aware of its role in providing this gravitas.

Professor Johanna Lewengard was extremely helpful in offering an alternative to Times New Roman — Ibarra Real Nova. It felt very similar to Times New Roman, while having a few quirks in, for example, the counter of the lowercase ‘a’, that made it even more self-aware and cheeky than Times New Roman. When placed side by side, I felt more inclined towards Ibarra Real Nova. However, when I placed the font within the book itself, next to the illustrations, it suddenly felt too conscious of a choice, too distracting, like it demanded an added level of attention to itself for its form. My Compendium is also My Agenda, and I felt that the wiser choice was a typeface more seamlessly associated with authority, a little more imperceptible as it communicated its radical content.

In terms of the illustrations, I’m interested in how occasionally people will reference childhood when talking about my book, but I personally did not draw the characters as children. Something I want to investigate further is if people have a tendency to perceive the characters as children, or if it’s the setting of a playground that sparks memories
of childhood and creates that association. Or if it’s both. For me, it was a conscious choice to not really place the characters in a certain age or gender, because I wanted all the characters to be as open as possible for people to read themselves into, while still being distinct and heterogenous. I wanted my friends in the book to represent the full gamut of my friends in real life.

The space where I took the most liberties with my illustrations was actually the space defined by the most strict limitations. I chose to illustrate my book in a single colour — black — partly because of my main inspiration for this project of xeroxed textbooks and partly because I didn’t really even have the time to consider full-colour illustrations. The Friendship Compendium was produced in the time span of March to May, much of that time spent laying in bed, so the limitation helped in faster, smoother decision-making and drawing. I also, within the single-colour limitation, got to experiment more with textures, overlays, noise and opacity. This helped keep the process of drawing tight, but with room for enjoyment and exploration. It also led to some definitive aesthetic choices, such as the use of a marbling texture throughout the book, a beautiful representation of collectivity.

My aesthetic and production choices were tightly interlinked. I wanted the book to not just be accessible in content but also physically accessible. The A4 single-colour spiral-bound book is a reference to my high school World History and Literature classes, where the teachers would regularly hand us hot, freshly-xeroxed textbooks and collections of their own notes, multiple books covering different angles of a particular revolution or poet. While I originally began my book in an A5 size, I was encouraged by my professor Sara Teleman to go bigger, and settled on A4. I chose a default size instead of a custom size for similar reasons as my typeface choice. The A4 size gave more room to the text and illustrations and allowed for a bigger font size — also a “default” 12 pts.

Keeping certain things simple and “pared down”, I felt strongly about other aesthetic and production choices that would uplift the “standards” I had chosen to play with. Therefore, I chose to riso-print my single-colour book in blue, on coloured 120 gm paper in the shades of light green, violet, chamois, yellow, rose pink, light pink, blue and orange. The choice of coloured paper works especially well with riso-printing as the translucency of the ink creates
new tones of blue, green and purple when placed on different shades of paper.

I also definitely wanted to spiral bind and definitely wanted to use coloured binding coils. Those were hard to find, until a serendipitous moment where immediately after a tutoring session with Hanna Stenman in which I complained about how I didn’t expect these coils to be so hard to come by, I opened Instagram and the first story on my feed was of my friend Kinnat Soley holding neon green binding coils that she had just tracked down and bought. The coils can be bought from a mind-blowing selection of colours from www.mkm.es (not sponsored). I picked neon orange, green and lilac for my coils, giving me more options for mixing and matching.

When producing the books, I decided to mix the different coloured papers and have each book have 4 different colours for the 4 different sections. Pairing those with the bright plastic binding coils created, with no deliberate effort on my part, a series of completely unique books, all having their own mix of colours. It also sorted a final design problem of whether or not to have a Table of Contents to introduce the four-section structure of the book.

I remember telling Johanna Lewengard in April that my design choices were strongly defined by “making things easy for myself”, and I’m glad I chose to do that. I was writing and drawing and printing and binding this book till the very last moments, and it was a blessing to have picked methods that I could independently produce the book with, not tied to a business’s schedule. It also felt like one final assertion of agency; this book truly feels like my book when I am able to be part of every single process in the making of it.
III. Outcome

At my final examination, in response to Rudy Loewe’s reading of my work, I said “I just want to be understood” and I’m glad to say that in most of the responses I’ve received for my book, I have felt understood. More importantly, I feel like others, too, in their reading of the Compendium have felt seen and understood. A general response has been that the book has made people reflect on their friendships, which I feel is an incredible success, because it means that the readers are translating the concepts and theories into their own lives. It means that the concepts and theories are accessible enough to relate to.

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“Rudy noticed “a distinction between friendships that nurture us and allow us to grow and friendships that replicate the other societal dynamics governing our lives. Not everyone has access to friendships in which they are nurtured, so how do we get there?”

“If all your relationships are built on survival, how do you find friendships that lead to mutual thriving?”

“What happens when we are not able to mirror the people who are supposedly our friends [in regards to sexuality, gender, disability, neurodivergency]?” Also, especially when you’re the only one in a group of friends who is unable to mirror them.

Rudy also shared concerns regarding “over-romanticising friendship”. They said that when I speak of friendship as a relationship of abundance, “it’s a beautiful reality, but not everybody’s reality.” I recognise in this statement the response
I had had to Veronika Larsson’s question on loneliness that I have mentioned before — my impulsive response had been triggered from reading the question as an expectation of me to answer how those who do not have friends were meant to relate to this book. And I felt guilt, because I know when I argue for friendship as resistance and empowerment, I’m somewhat ignoring those who are so isolated, so marginalised that this “most accessible form of activism” is not accessible to them. I recognise that this is my current roadblock, but I’m unsure if this is the direction I want to take this project forward. At the moment, I find it intimidating and... impossible.

But perhaps when I am able to take a break from producing comfort for myself, when I am placed in a situation that is already, naturally comfortable, perhaps when I am reunited with my friends, I will be able to tread carefully into this new discomfort. Something that I think could help with this is attempting to create work collectively. Throughout my degree project I kept coming up with ideas for collaborating with friends, but the ideas never materialised. Mostly due to anxiety around my project always feeling fragile to me, I chose to work in isolation. I discussed friendship with my friends, shared my thoughts surrounding it, but rarely showed unfinished work outside of feedback sessions at Konstfack. I understand the ways that this opacity around the process, this fear of sharing, could actually be holding me back in my process. Moving forward I hope to be able to emulate my ideas (and ideals) of friendship in the way I work.

For me, the process of this degree project has been illuminating beyond the topic of friendship, as well. I have come to better understand the concept of “trusting the process”, and I have also noticed the trust I have in my hand and its working that seem to take place engaged with and independent of my mind.

With a practice that previously revolved a lot around print publications, I’m also glad to have had a moment of purely digital creation in the form of animations. Although, as I said during my examination, “I always say I won’t make a book, and then I make a book,” it’s been invaluable to see how methods outside of text-and-image book making can contribute significantly to a process and a project as well.

Most importantly, this process has ignited the spark of making for myself and for the people I love in me. My friends have always been my greatest inspirations. This project has become a starting point for me to make this form of work sustainable for myself. As I’ve mentioned several times now in this document, this project was at once a burden and a space of comfort for me. It was something I felt I couldn’t do, and a lot of the time didn’t want to do. But when I did it, it gave me support I couldn’t access from myself in any other way. It wouldn’t be untrue to say that this project has been my friend. And as I consider all the possibilities that friendship continues to generate for me, I hope I can continue being a friend to my work as well.