Of Friendship & Form: Dayanita Singh's *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001)

Sayantan Mukhopadhyay

Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed met one fateful day in 1989 while Singh was on assignment to provide images for a newspaper article—a project that never actually materialized. Mona Ahmed was a *hijra* living in Delhi, born into a dominant caste Muslim family who rejected her when she began openly claiming her gender. She later went to live with her guru in a *hijra* household, where she would eventually adopt an abandoned baby girl named Ayesha. Mona always yearned for motherhood and much of the first half of the book details Mona's adoration of Ayesha. Ayesha would be later seized by Mona's *guru*, Chaman, when she came to believe Mona was unfit to look after her. Mona would then find herself doubly cast aside, this time by her own *hijra* community, and became determined to live outside of the bustle of the city, moving to a small plot of land in a Muslim graveyard. She ultimately succumbed to an intense depression with the loss of her daughter, though by the end of the story, she started to receive medical help to begin her healing. Singh followed her studiously with her camera, charting these developments in the last decade of the millennium in one of her most acclaimed projects to date, and her first as a professional photographer following the photo book she executed of famed *tabla* player, Zakir Hussain, as a student in the 1980s.[1] Here, I assert that it is the highly collaborative nature of the project that claims its political stakes. I argue that it is through the affective bond of friendship that Dayanita and Mona are able to create radical allyships and build futures alongside one another.

Singh mentions in her introduction that Mona was highly particular about the selection of images that would be included in the final publication.[2] According to Singh, Mona vetoed scores of options, carefully curating her self-image and also editing her archive, thereby determining the

way she will live on in public memory.[3] Furthermore, as revealed in Mona's letters to Mr. Walter, the editor at Scalo, she evinces a penchant for narrating life on her own terms. These letters provide social, historical, political, and personal context for the reader-viewer, but also serve to establish a platform for Mona's own thoughts to come into focus, creating a mood that is oftentimes in tension with more jubilant images lensed by Singh. The letters and the images thus both claim the importance of Mona's own artistry, creating a meaningful dialectic between aspirational images of herself and her inner turmoil. In her letters, in her poses, and in her act of selection, Mona exerts a form of poetic control and agency over this work, actively troubling Singh's authorial mastery.[4] It is evident in this careful balance of participation in the project that Mona is herself a creator in this process. Mona's desire to assert and perform her own image offers an anti-ethnographic gesture, taking back representation into her own hands while refusing the camera's ethnographic gaze.

The collaborative element, in which both "Myself Mona Ahmed" and "Dayanita Singh" are emblazoned on the cover of the book, speaks to alternative forms of art-making that do not resort to the model of the modern master, the archetypically male voice that creates in a vacuum out of sheer genius, often obfuscating the labor of those instrumental to the means of production.[5] Historically, this has regularly included people such as the models, oftentimes women, used in paintings or the role of the spouse or partner who was present to provide support during the process of creation.[6] Yet Mona's assertions and demands to speak for herself and to have an active role in the production of the object provides a radical template for how art-making might transpire and be understood. It dislodges Singh as a singular voice and places her in a complex network wherein photographer and subject share in the act of creation.[7]

The "myself" that starts the book, belonging neither entirely to Mona nor Singh, then, comes to exist somewhere in between the two. Over the course of one hundred and fifty-eight

pages, Mona will attempt to define a "myself" in an image and Singh will lend her own "myself" to it in an ongoing process of negotiation. The "myself" can thus be read as a dynamic entity, one that changes across the book and through time, trading hands while bearing witness to all the peaks and troughs documented in Mona's life. The "myself" is then also shared outward to the reader-viewer, who gains their own sense of a "myself" in their act of engagement with this visual record. While contending with the reader's own "myself," they are hopefully encouraged to confront any prejudice, phobia, and ignorance they may have arrived with. In this life-affirming enterprise, the reader-viewer looks, learns, and in the best circumstances, changes. A resistance to the static subject, shelf-stable archive, and reader-viewer is everywhere in *Myself Mona Ahmed*, beginning in a title that offers some semblance of fixity before taking it away and redistributing it outward.

Throughout the book, Mona consistently reiterates her devotion to Dayanita and the steadfastness of their friendship. In her first letter, she states, "From childhood I have never received such true love from anyone but her."[8] This relationship has provided Mona with a sense of comfort and at times even hope. And so, while one side of Mona's life charts her loss, it is also constantly framed by the support and love of a friend. In a more recuperative reading of the text, therefore, the bond between Dayanita and Mona is foregrounded: it is the accrual of trust, the nurturing of affection, and the promise of dependability that the book ultimately recounts. In a photograph from 1998, Singh turns the camera on herself, the length of her outstretched arm visible as the lens faces upwards towards two faces in an analog selfie. Mona's sullen face rests on Singh's shoulder, a withering glance cast across her countenance, but evidently at ease in present company. Singh tilts her head to the side so that their foreheads rest against each other. This reflexive act, intimate and caring, results in the only image in the book where Singh and Mona are seen together, whereas Singh's presence is only ever implied as the person behind the

camera in all other images. The inclusion of this photograph lays claim to the strength of their bond and signals Singh's investment in both the project and in Mona herself. The final book is not only an art object, but also evidence of this process of enmeshment. *Myself Mona Ahmed* is, at its core, a story of this friendship itself and the time through which it passes and grows.

In Powers' description of the politics of recognition that takes place in *Myself Mona Ahmed*, she states how it is the mutual alterity embodied by Mona and Singh that drew them together across such a wide social gulf.[9] In a letter, Mona states, "It was destined that we should become friends. I am sure she never dreamt that a eunuch could become her best friend, and I am sure people ask her what she sees in me, but she has never bothered what people say. From childhood I have never received such true love from anyone."[10] In this statement, Mona identifies the defiance of expectation that establishes why such an entanglement is so unexpected. She also notes how the love between the two transcends and exceeds the love that one might expect from biological kin and romantic partners. She goes on to say, "Now it feels like she is my own blood."[11]

Friendship is a type of solidarity that is particularly powerful in the face of imperial capitalism and far-right postcolonial nationalisms. It flies in the face of heteronormative modes of affiliation that prioritize and value reproductive union: the heterosexual couple formation and the parent-child unit that promise property ownership, consolidation of capital, and progeny.[12] Many romantic bonds support the machinations of the economic markets in this way. And through this churning machine, society can continue its neat ordering, guaranteeing the future of the nation and the operations of the state through its regulations of culture and the law. In such a system, the notion of biological family supersedes all other relationships, because those are likely to be the most enduring; blood being thicker than water, as the adage goes.[13] Friendships,

on the other hand, hold no such promise. Friendships exist simply because: a fortuitous alignment of feelings and circumstance. In sum, they are fickle and operate outside this constant generative drive.

As in the case of Dayanita and Mona, friendships offer radical conjunctions that might not otherwise be available in relationships created through ties developed in romance, business, or biological kinship. Dayanita, a member of Delhi's cosmopolitan elite, and Mona, a Muslim *hijra*, are brought together through the force of friendship in a way relationships sanctioned and supported by the state might not typically allow—particularly within the complex social structures of India where religion, class, caste, and gender hyper-regulate the kind of relationships that are possible, or even feasible, given the spatial politics of urban environments.[14] *Myself Mona Ahmed* is therefore, in part, the story of a critical solidarity that embodies the secular democratic ideals of the Nehruvian national vision, but that project was never realized by the nation-state and has been firmly displaced in the twenty-first century by the rise of a fascist Hindu nationalism seeking to eradicate such cross-cultural ties altogether.[15] It is therefore a relationship that defies expectation and normative logic.

The possibilities offered by an asymmetric friendship such as Mona and Singh's resonates with José Esteban Muñoz's account of a queer politics of incommensurability, which centers on the relationship between the gay black writer, Gary Fisher, and the leading theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick. When Fisher died of complications from AIDS in 1994 at age thirty-two, he was entirely unpublished. One of his mentors, Sedgwick, whom Fisher had met while studying at Berkeley, subsequently undertook the task of editing and disseminating his work, published in 1996 with Duke University Press.[16] In his essay on Fisher and Sedgwick, who was also Muñoz's own advisor while at graduate school at Duke University, Muñoz discusses the attendant politics of a white female academic championing the work of a queer person of color.

While Singh and Mona are divided along the lines of class, gender, and religion, Fisher and Sedgwick are separated by class, gender, and race: in both their geopolitical contexts, they represent incommensurable pairs.

Muñoz asks the reader to consider Sedgwick's involvement in Fisher's erotic fiction as a way to escape the individual sovereign subject in favor of "a larger sense of the commons."[17] He suggests that these two incommensurable actors exceed a sense of equivalence, thereby denying the authorial, the masterful, and the singular. The paradigm he envisions re-situates our notion of praxis as something that is shared, existing between individuals rather than belonging to any one person: it is a way of being with or alongside others, rather than being positioned against them.[18] For Muñoz, a collaboration such as the one between Sedgwick and Fisher results in a *queerness as a sense of the incalculable* and simultaneously an *incalculable sense of queerness*, generated in the chasmic distance that exists between the two authors.[19] Muñoz does not argue that these socioeconomic, racial, and sexual gaps are somehow miraculously bridged through these instances of partnership, but rather that this partnership offers new ways of sharing and sharing *out* work while upholding this alterity.[20] Just as Sedgwick cares for, attends to, and distributes Fischer's work, we can see Singh doing something comparable with Mona's images and words.

Friendship offers a new model for interrogating both process and product in *Myself Mona Ahmed.*[21] Friendship was the kin-making bond that allowed the project to come to life, borne of two people who became increasingly knotted in each other's lives. The friendship is, as such, one of the materials and conditions of production, while also serving as an understated subject in the work as Singh's camera follows Mona. Through friendship, Mona and Singh extended their relationship beyond artist and subject to become collaborators and creators. The photographs are visual traces of the lingering gaze and the intimacy that a friendship can allow. And it is in the queerness of this friendship, the affect that it generates, that the book develops and claims radical

stakes, and creates unexpected diagonal attachments that are highly meaningful. In this sense, the relationship between Mona and Singh is an instance of what Jasbir Puar has termed "queer conviviality," in which the encounters between different assemblages does not create a universal politics, but rather offer ways for alterity to suggest new means to understand one's own position in the world.[22]

Sayantan Mukhopadhyay is the Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine, where he recently curated *As We Are*, an exhibition featuring fourteen emerging artists with strong ties to Maine. Prior to the PMA, he served as Lecturer in the department of Art History at UCLA and as Research Assistant in the Scholars' Program at the Getty Research Institute. Mukhopadhyay arrived in Maine by way of Los Angeles, Shanghai, New Delhi, New York, Montreal, and Kuwait. He holds an MA and PhD in Art History from UCLA and a BA in Comparative Literature and Art History from Williams College.

[1] Dayanita Singh, *Zakir Hussain: A Photo Essay* (Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1986).
[2] Sophia Powers, "Intimate Durations: Reimagining Contemporary Indian Photography," PhD Dissertation: UCLA, 2018, 98.
[3] Mona Ahmed and Dayanita Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scalo, 2001), 16.
[4] This line of thinking is heavily indebted to Marxist and feminist interventions in art history that have argued for analyses of the modes of art's production. See: Griselda Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction" in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity, and the Histories of Art* (Oxon: Routledge, 1988), 1–24.
[5] For further discussion of the artist's model in European modernism, see: Griselda Pollock, "A Tale of Three Women: Seeing in the Dark, Seeing Double, At Least, with Manet" in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories.* (Oxon: Routledge, 1999). 247–316.
[6] For further discussion of the vital role of the artist's model and questions of difference (particularly in regards to race and diaspora in European modernism), see Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
[7] The "modern master" as a singular artist is a phenomenon that arose in South Asia under British colonial occupation, when formalized art education in the university system began producing an elite class of artists as distinct from artisans. Prior to this development, artists in South Asia routinely worked anonymously in an atelier system. For more on this, see: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
[8] Singh, 11.
[9] Powers, 96–7.
[10] Singh, 6–7.
[11] Ibid., 7.
[12] Niharika Banerjea, et al, eds, *Friendship as Social Justice Activism: Critical Solidarities in a Global Perspective* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2018). For more on reproductive futurism, see: Lee Edelman, opt. cit.
[13] Jack Halberstam "Forgetting Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations" in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Queer Studies*, George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, eds. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2007), 317. See also: Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
[14] Singh herself notes this in the introduction to the book: "In this class-ridden society of ours, there would be no meeting point for Mona and me, were it not for photography." Singh, 20. Cities in India are often redlined in ways that make for porous encounters between different social groups rare, with many from underprivileged and marginalized backgrounds living in informal settlements that members of the dominant caste and class would not regularly enter.
[15] For more on the ongoing debates between nationalism and queer and transgender identity in India, see: Sayan Bhattacharya, "The Transgender Nation and its Margins: The Many Lives of Law" *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 20, 2019. <DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj. 4930>
[16] Gary Fisher, *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*, Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
[17] For one scholar, this denial of mastery involves the unthinking of imperial logic that champions individual authorship and ownership over collective thought and action. See: Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[18] José Esteban Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fischer with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick" in *Reading Sedgwick,* Lauren Berlant, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 162.
[19] Muñoz, 153.
[20] Rebecca Brown suggests that we could see Walter Brown, the editor, and the reader as further participants in this networked approach to the photo-book. opt, cit.
[21] For more on the creative potential of partnership, see: Joshua Shenk, *The Powers of Two*: *Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).
[22] Jasbir K. Puar, "Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility and Capacity." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 19:2, 169.