

**The company she keeps: a conversation with
Céline Condorelli and Avery F. Gordon, part two**

Many conversations followed the one that forms the basis for Part 1, taking place in California and London over a few months, in person and over email. These were transcribed and put together into one text by Céline and edited and adjusted by Avery.

Céline

In our previous conversation we searched for models of friendships, and found clues in the shadows of the friendships of powerful men, violent nations and dominant institutions. We also traced the exclusive nature of the discourse on friendship to its historical exclusion of women and slaves, who in turn pointed us towards the places in which people who work together towards change cooperate and support each other, and also undertake the titanic tasks of altering the order of things, often through intimate associations and small-scale closeness. Following this discussion of what happened in the shadow of famous men, we arrived at sites in which friendship designates both ‘being close to’ and ‘making common cause’. These ‘other’ friendships do not treat friendship as an objective, but rather as a condition: they are not the strategic means-to-ends tools that are called upon by friendly nations, the friend of the museum, or the friend/enemy dichotomy to achieve other ends than friendship itself.

In this regard it seems fundamental to me to try to address friendship on its own terms and therefore *in* friendship, in the action of befriending. While both the philosophical and political traditions would demand an abstract reflection on the nature of friendship, which in turn requires taking a somewhat external position (*the* friend rather than *my* friend) I would like to argue against it. Again, to refuse the exclusions inherent in the terms as given, as we discussed previously, towards inventing new ones, but also to refuse the idealised position that presumes an objective, neutral place from which to speak.

Now that you and I have found a site for this possibility, I need to ask: what could it mean to want to work in friendship?

Avery

It is interesting that you put the topic in these terms because in many ways much of what friendship in practice means for most people is exactly what their work is not. Many of us have friends at work, or friends from work, but friendship is usually separate from the workplace and the conditions under which the majority of people work, for the obvious reason that for most people work is hard and/or unpleasant. Friendship usually names the set of pleasures, activities, associations and relationships that we have or engage in when we are not working. (And my sense is that friendships often end or become strained, and thus more distant, when they become too much ‘work’—when there’s too much responsibility and not enough fun—or when the affective terrain becomes too fraught and painful.) Also, most people do not choose, in any meaningful sense of the word, with whom they work. More than anything else, I associate friendship with choice: with those elective affinities we make with others, over and above the contexts—some not chosen like the workplace or the family—out of which these elections are made. That said, there are many examples of work collaborations started by friends, or long-standing warm friendships that result from work collaborations.

Céline

You have several friendships that are based on action, in which you work together with others, like your radio show with Elizabeth Robinson¹, or the many political actions you have been part of through the years. You seem to be surrounded by an enormous amount of solidarity. I can relate to this in relation to the Eastside Projects founding collective² and particularly to Gavin Wade, with whom I've been working since 2003. But we call each other collaborators, not friends. We work extremely well together and there's a particular closeness, a specific kind of trust, pleasure and care, but we do not engage in the activities that are commonly associated with being friends—like eating together or hanging out. We just work, that's what we do together, and that's what we do well.

1. *No Alibis* is a weekly public affairs radio program that airs on KCSB 91.9 FM Santa Barbara. Avery has been producing the radio show with Elizabeth since 1997, when it was called *Viewpoints*.

2. Along with Simon and Tom Bloor, Ruth Claxton, James Langdon and Gavin Wade, Céline Condorelli is a co-founder of Eastside Projects, an artist-run space as public gallery in Birmingham.

Avery

What does that mean then about what distinguishes working collaboratively or cooperatively from friendship? The enjoyment, respect, care and responsibility to another person that we associate with friendship are there between you and Gavin, and you've chosen to work together, to make a voluntary fellowship or association. You have a very good and also very friendly working relationship—perhaps it is even a model of working together as a form of friendship. But I still think there's a difference that I don't want to belabour, but also don't want us to forget: for the vast majority of people work is drudgery or merely a requirement for earning money to live, and not a source of pleasure, identity, self development, or social purpose.

That said, could we address the unpredictability of knowing in advance with whom you will or will not have a good working relationship? I've had experiences in which I've been pleasantly surprised and humbled to find a good work partner where I hadn't expected it, or where I'd underestimated the other person, and I've also had painful experiences that have irretrievably broken relationships. I try to find the pattern but often I only see it after the fact.

Céline

You and I are also in a way dealing with the changing nature of work, especially in relation to what has come to be designated as immaterial labour, and would have previously just been called intellectual work. While friendship is regarded as being outside work in the productivist sense, then perhaps working in friendship is a way of claiming space to work outside production? If the premise of working in friendship is valid as a desired condition, in that condition, friendship is as much about producing itself as it is about producing the work: the 'working in friendship' is also a way of doing. What I mean is that regardless of what one is working on—creating artworks, books, etc.—one of the main things being developed is actually the friendship itself, a form of life which cannot be totally capitalised upon and is therefore slightly in excess of work as we know it.

Avery

Again, sorry it's the sociologist speaking, the vast majority of intellectual work or what you're calling immaterial labour—a concept I completely reject by the way since labour is by definition material—occurs in institutional contexts with little autonomy and a good deal of hierarchical command and control. I'm speaking here of everyone from the armies of special effects workers who make friends while they are working 18 hours a day in jobs they can be fired from if they refuse to make work their life, to university professors/teachers like myself with significant degrees

of control at work. In fact, the simultaneous disappearance of the independent intellectual—particularly in the fields I know best, journalism and literature—and the proliferation of a cultural proletariat or precariat, is notable, and means that friendship networks are both more and less important as means of survival. What you mean by friendship isn't, but friendship can and is capitalised upon all the time. I agree with you that working in friendship also produces the friendship—that's a nice way of putting it—and that working in friendship could be a way to work outside of productivist demands. The question for me would be the conditions under which a non-productivist working-in-friendship takes place.

Céline

There is another aspect to this, because we are talking about work that doesn't necessarily supply something. Much cultural labour is work that no one is asking for directly; and its production is always hard to justify within the rhetorics of need or even want. I just don't think culture can (or should) ever really win if forced into the business-led arguments of 'cultural industries', and I really dislike arguing values (conceptual or aesthetic) in relation to value (economic)—something which is especially common and disturbing in higher education. This leads me to think of working in friendship—particularly in culture but not exclusively—as elective in more than one sense of the term: as in people choosing to work together; and in the sense of choosing to add things to the world that have no immediate, instrumental function. Functions might be gained, and that is an important aspect to making things, but they have to be modelled into existence to be capitalised upon in the first place, even if they are just adjustments to existing conditions. And in some ways I think this may have something to do with the refusal of work, with refusing work on the terms in which it is given to us. I would certainly say that my practice is in part born from a refusal to be employed, which results in my working all the time, but also not having a job, if you know what I mean. In the Fordist sense I am a very bad worker... So let's consider friendship and the bad worker within the dominating ethics of labour. Do you think that has changed?

Avery

Yes, I think there has been some change, or at least more recognition of the significance of forms of political organisation, identity and solidarity, such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, that are not based on being a worker or on class in the orthodox Marxist understanding of that term. To some extent, the opposite critique is made today: that not enough attention is paid to class and workers and economic realities, and that politics has been 'reduced' to 'identity politics' or cultural games. I'm less interested in these name-calling turf battles than in the very old question of how to create societies where exploitative soul-deadening appropriative work is replaced with something more meaningful, and where greed-based economies are replaced with shared ones (common/communistic or not). The question of what kind of work constitutes something more meaningful has been widely contested, with art often proposed as a model, much to the chagrin of actual artists. What's been dealt with less is the investment in a work-based or productivist identity, which I think is still very embedded in radical political cultures, in the art world, and in our affective/desiring selves. It's still hard for people to conceive an emergent future without work. I don't mean a future without activity, without things that we do or make, but without this centrality of work to who we are and to our place in the world. In William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890) a man gets

on a boat on the Thames and lands on the other side, in a future world in which Morris' vision of a Socialist society exists. At the heart of the vision is the autonomous cooperative craft worker. Most artists would find this model of work-become-art old fashioned and irrelevant to current conditions, but there's also an element of laziness (in the sense in which Lafargue used that term) in Morris that is almost completely absent among artists today³. You are not the only person working all the time without a job. What does this mean?

3. 'Le Droit à la Paresse' (The Right to be Lazy) was an essay that Paul Lafargue, the Cuban-born son in law of Karl Marx, wrote from Saint Pélagie Prison in 1883.

Céline

It is still really difficult to picture what our expanding notions of work can mean, but we can certainly thank socialist feminism for transforming the idea of what counts as labour, in a time when work still corresponded to the waged production of material goods. People around me—peers and friends—are obsessively trying to grasp the specificities of immaterial labour in a society still dominated by the idea of material production, but at least I can now feel and articulate the parallels between the problems of the under-employed and those of the over-worked. The issue that dominates my social context is not in fact people's right to work, but on the contrary, the effort to secure some measure of freedom *from* work, when work seems to monopolise all the time and energy of most of the people I know and care for. I am surrounded by the over-worked, while in my 20s I was surrounded by the under-employed, but both conditions then and now equally dominate our social and political imaginaries. I very much relate to Jean-Marie Vincent's argument that the problem is not 'simply to liberate production, but it is also for humanity to liberate itself from production by no longer treating it as the centre of all social activities and individual action.'⁴

4. Jean-Marie Vincent, 'Libérer la production, mais aussi se libérer de la production', *Critique communiste*, n°136, Winter 1993. Author's translation.

Avery

Yes, to be liberated from production in this sense is what I was trying to say before. Jean Baudrillard already made this point in 1973 in *Le Miroir de la production* (*The Mirror of Production*). And last time, we talked about Jacques Rancière's worker-painters and worker-poets from *La nuit des prolétaires* and their dis-identification with 'work'. The stark choice of these two poles you've identified—underemployed or overworked—registers a larger crisis in the organisation of capitalism today and the stratifications or divisions it continually produces. To refuse the choice is already to begin to work otherwise. The question for me is whether one has the privilege to refuse the choice because your economic means of survival—your money or property—is not dependent on your labour, or whether you refuse the choice because you've got no other economic means of survival, no other options for getting in. It's not always this clear-cut, and both situations can be routes to making refusal a political choice, an experiment in an alternative autonomous way of living, but their conditions and itineraries are not the same. I don't mean to take us away from talking about artists and writers and cultural work, or to trivialise the difficult circumstances in which artists work, but it's important to me to keep the larger context of work close by, so that political strategies and social futures do not exclude the most aggrieved.

5. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

I'm re-reading *Let us now praise famous men*, a remarkable book by James Agee and Walker Evans⁵. James Agee was a writer and Walker Evans a photographer, and the two men accepted an assignment to write a magazine story on southern sharecroppers for *Fortune* magazine. They spent two summer months living together with very poor tenant farmer families in Hale County Alabama,

where Evans took photographs and Agee wrote, often wildly late at night. It was an extremely important experience for them both and they returned with far more than a magazine article chronicling the hardscrabble daily lives of sharecroppers. Agee imagined he would write a trilogy of works, and Evans's Farm Security Administration photographs, which he had been making since 1935, were the subject of a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1938 –the first exhibition MoMA held devoted to a single photographer. It's a very unusual work even still: an ethnography that's simultaneously extraordinarily detailed, poetic, critical, subjective, self-reflexive and passionately committed to presenting poor people in all their complex personhood. There's been nothing like it ever written since. Walker Evans' description of Agee's writing practice gives insight into the struggles that produced Agee's way of seeing, which seemed to require thousands and thousands of words to express. Evans, by contrast, hoped that he could tell the story without ever having to use any words at all. This book is endlessly fascinating to me as a model for artist/writer collaborations and as a model for sociological writing. I wish I could write something like it, with all its excesses and faults.

Céline

It is interesting that they structured the book with a first part consisting just of the photographs and a second part just text: they didn't try to weave both together. So in a sense there isn't a dialogue in the work and both did what they do: taking photographs or writing. But they did the book together, which could only have happened because, as well as living with the families, they made that journey together, which must have changed both their lives. They were lucky it worked out! As somebody who is involved in working in culture and often with a lot of other people, I would say that one needs to want to spend time together with someone in order to work with them, or else life turns into a nightmare. One of the most important things I've learnt through all these years of doing exhibitions is that it is more critical to choose to work with people I actually want to spend time with, than to choose to work with people just because they are interesting or talented or intelligent. These are not exclusive qualities, of course, but there is a question of hierarchy of choice that is crucial. Which is why thinking of 'the company one keeps'⁶ is quite important to me and has impacted my life. There are people who I think are absolutely brilliant that I never want to work with again.

Avery

This is a very perceptive description of the way Agee and Evans worked together: the dialogue isn't in the work, the work is the result of a working and living together that was also separate. Autonomy and cooperation. I'm very sympathetic to what you say about the company one keeps. Throughout the history of culture, there are many intellectual friendships that centre on doing intellectual work together. You've written about Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy and their doing 'this thinking business together', which didn't mean that they wrote together. It meant that they were each thinkers and they did their thinking for each other, even though they didn't think alike. They were real friends to each other—they called on one another for help when it was needed, they spent holidays together, they confided private feelings and experiences etc.—but the heart of their intimacy and their friendship was this thinking together that was their work. I suspect many writers and artists have such friends and that in many circumstances the choice of friend(s) will seem odd from the outside because, as you say, desire and personality

6. The cultivated person is "one who knows how to choose his company, among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past". Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance' in *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in political thought* (UK: Faber and Faber, 1961) 226.

and something incalculable, or even irrational, is at work in making and keeping friends, especially ones with whom you are also working.

Céline

There is a very particular intimacy that you describe here, and also a difference between doing the work together and doing it *for* and *with* each other. There is also in friendship an element of taking sides, of making common cause, a sense of solidarity, or being loyal—not just to people, but to the causes they embrace. This certainly applies to our encounter; as listening to the talk on imprisonment which you gave in Cairo⁷, and before that reading *Ghostly Matters*⁸, opened up a whole world of issues that I would not necessarily have encountered and that have become dear to me. Not only did we start talking and thinking together in that way, but subsequently when I met and started working with Marco Scotini I knew that I had to arrange for you both to meet, because you were already in a certain sense allies in the world. I don't know if you will or will not work together, but that political friendship is already there... Could you tell me something about getting close to issues, the intimacy and responsibility that comes with that? Can you relate to what I call 'befriending issues'?

7. 'Social Death and Doing Time', a presentation by Avery Gordon at Contemporary Image Collective (CIC) in conjunction with the seminar 'The Laboratory of Return/Regimes of Extraterritoriality' organised by Pericentre Projects and the Goethe Institute, Cairo, Egypt, January 2010.

9. *Disobedience Archive* is a curatorial project by Marco Scotini, which in its last two iterations was housed in a specially commissioned installation by Céline Condorelli: *The Parliament* (Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden June–August 2012, and Castello di Rivoli, Turin, April–September 2013). The archive explores the links between contemporary art practices, film, and political action. www.disobediencearchive.com

10. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983)

8. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008).

Avery

(Smiling) I would certainly love to do something with Marco and the *Disobedience Archive*⁹ and I feel like the ground has been prepared in such a friendly way, and not only by you. The friendship/work/political networks that entangle me with Marco are very precious to me and it is true that on the rare occasions when we encounter each other, it is like a meeting of two experienced diplomats representing a larger alliance left at home!

I think 'befriending issues' is a very nice term or concept for addressing the proximity or distance we have to the material on which we're working. I see it also as a question of standpoint: how do we make common cause with the subjects we're studying, and at the same time make common cause with the people who are subjected to various depredations and aggravations? I've been thinking about this problem for a long time, because I've been concerned with what Cedric J. Robinson shorthands 'the nastiness', and how to write about it without doing violence again of a different sort.¹⁰ My book on haunting emerged from this problematic and from looking for a language or a vocabulary that could grasp what happens when force and meaning collide. At the time, there was already a very active critique of the assumption embedded in positivistic forms of thought that distance was necessary to produce accurate and valuable knowledge. The rejection of detachment and the conceit of a so-called objective knowledge were central to feminist thought and Black studies whose critiques seriously challenged the epistemological rules governing scholarly knowledge.

Once the critique was made, the question emerged starkly: what should we do now? What does it mean to make common cause with political repression or widespread disappearance—subjects I was researching and writing about? For example, I started taking women fiction writers from the Southern Cone¹¹ seriously as theorists and methodologists because they were forced to invent a language that could represent, literally conjure, political disappearance: a frightening and also surreal situation in which people would be there one minute and gone the next, having been kidnapped/captured by state-sponsored death squads, taken away to secret prisons where they were tortured and often killed, all the while the state de-

11. Editor's note: The Southern Cone is a geographic region composed of the southernmost areas of South America, typically understood to comprise Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

12. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study of Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

nying that anything had happened. Michael Taussig called the state of knowledge in a society of terror ‘epistemic murk’¹². These women, Luisa Valenzuela especially, understood that the political system itself was irrational—hysterical—and was producing a haunted society full of spectres. How do you get close to that which is very dangerous and will kill you? The writers developed a mode of expression—poetic, surreal, coded—that enabled them to broach the truth of disappearance without (they hoped) being disappeared themselves. This mode of expression was not only anti-positivistic, it was also quite unlike political critique, and their political credentials were often questioned. Yet, I think it was more accurate and more truthful than either of those two forms of discourse. All this I explain best in *Ghostly Matters*, where my language is more precise. But just to say, being willing to get close to how power works is not an easy thing to do—it is very hard—and so scholars and thinkers have invented formulas to make it easier, and to make it easier to communicate publicly, and distanced critique is one of them. It has its purposes. We should remember also that getting too close is not always good either: one has to be able to get close and also get away; otherwise you lose perspective of another sort.

I think that befriending an issue, or making common cause, requires a certain standpoint that is, in the deepest sense, sympathetic. My guiding principle for this kind of friendship I take from the anarchist Church Morse who writes: ‘it is the task of the radical critic to illuminate what is repressed and excluded by the basic mechanisms of a given social order. It is the task of the politically engaged radical critic to side with the excluded and the oppressed: to develop insights gained in confrontation with injustice, to nourish cultures of resistance and to help define the means with which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of human potentialities.’¹³ There are limits to working by this instruction, and sometimes I succeed and sometimes I don’t, but that’s my guiding principle.

13. Chuck Morse, ‘Capitalism, Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview with Cedric Robinson’, *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 3:1 (Spring, 1999).

Céline

It was very clear in your work *The Workhouse*¹⁴, in which the voices of people who had hardly been registered by a system that was effectively set up in order to shut them up, a system of isolation and repression, were actually able to speak through your work. Suddenly those absent voices became present in the immediate and very sensual realisation that those women could be talking to us.

14. *The Workhouse: Room 2* made with Ines Schaber was installed at dOCUMENTA (13) 2012. See also Avery F. Gordon, *Notes for the Breitenau Room of The Workhouse – a Project by Ines Schaber and Avery Gordon*. No. 41 in the series ‘100 Notes—100 Thoughts’ (Kassel: dOCUMENTA(13) and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).

Avery

Maybe in a way it’s necessary to imagine being friends with, for example, the women confined in the workhouse. But only if you remember that you’re not in fact their friends, except in the most abstract sense; more abstraction is the last thing that a prisoner needs. For example, when I teach about imprisonment in my undergraduate classes, I ask the students what it would mean to treat the prisoner as a beloved, as a friend, or as a relative you love and care for, because unless students already have a personal contact with a prisoner, it’s not real to them. They can’t conceive of it if it hasn’t or isn’t happening to them or their families. (Sadly, every year more students do have imprisonment as part of their family experience). It is in part a provocation that pushes them to look at the dehumanisation of criminalisation: how it makes a person into a nonperson, and this asks them to return the stranger to the status of a person. They need friendship or love or family—something they know as personal—to affect that transformation. But, unless the prisoner is your actual real friend, it’s important to recognise that in this context friend-

ship is a conceit, a construct, which can also obscure the fundamental difference between being free and being caged, and the differences in authority and social status entailed.

Céline

And to understand the responsibility that comes with that position, so that to make common cause—just like any form of friendship—is not a choice that could be or should be made lightly.