Can You Hear Me? Thinking Academic Collective Scenes as Intimate Spaces

Teija Löytönen

Abstract
Inspired by Gilles Deleuze’s texts and writings, this article is an experiment toward thinking about academic “collective scenes” as “intimate spaces.” Baugh explained that for Deleuze experimentation involves encounters with the unknown without preconceptions about what these encounters should be or produce. Similarly, in this article, I begin the experiment without any particular directives or plans besides closely (or intimately) connecting and thinking with academia, and Deleuze; I am interested in investigating what (my) diverse encounters with/in academia prompt (in me) now when thinking and writing (about) academic collectives, disciplines, practices, people and spaces, and more. The aim of the experimentation is not to support or reject any specific forms of established and predefined academic attachments but to explore them, let them loose, to widen thought about what emerges with(in) academia, how we might also connect with(in) academia.

Keywords
Intimacy, Gilles Deleuze, academia, experimentation, poem-ish inquiry

Beginning Now
About 9 years ago at International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry conference in Illinois, USA, philosopher Gilles Deleuze was unexpectedly introduced to me in a workshop called “Between the Two.” By using Deleuzian thought, the workshop facilitators Jonathan Wyatt and Ken Gale provided us participants with the opportunity to work with ideas of what collaborative writing might be and do.

We considered the potentials of collaborative writing by writing, listening, talking, and sharing—a spacious place and vibrating space in the Illini building where we sat in a circle, sharing thoughts about writing, collaboration, and Deleuze; introducing ourselves to others through writing; zigzagging notes in a rhizomatic manner. In each round, we were becoming closer to each other, more attached, more intimate. I have warm memories of the workshop, of all the participants, and Ken and Jonathan, with whom I have had the pleasure of continuing collaborating and writing, sharing thoughts, discussing issues, and more. And Deleuze, of course, who after the first introduction has been an intimate, close, distant, and troubling (and more) companion in my scholarly work and, indeed, life.

In this article, I will continue thinking with him now about academic collective scenes as intimate spaces. The theme of this article, intimacy, was introduced to me, again unexpectedly, by Jonathan as he kindly invited me to be part of this special issue. I am not a scholar of intimacy, nor do I want to be (too) intimate in sharing my experiences, life, or attachments. However, what inspires me is to explore how the focus of my long-term interest in higher education and academic collectives, the research-creation (Manning, 2016; Manning & Massumi, 2014) communities might be approached through the notion of intimacy. I will first offer some snapshots of the ways in which Gilles Deleuze, the philosopher of difference, has been part in my recent scholarly work. Thereafter, I will experiment with the connection of intimacy and academia. I interact with relational processes of attachment in intimate and poetic ways acknowledging my scholarly and sociopolitical and personal contexts but at the same time wondering about normative scholarships and linear academic lives. These experiments include the here-and-now writings in the text that are italicized and justified right, and the last poem-ish thinking-feeling-writing section of the article, which I will introduce in more detail later.

Scholarship With Deleuze
Deleuze’s thinking and writings have been helping/challenging/pushing (and more) me in trying to make sense

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about higher education, discipline-sensitive pedagogy, and
disciplinary differences, and to move beyond fixed pedago-
gies. For several years, I (with others) (Löytönen, 2009,
2015, 2017; see also Koro-Ljungberg & Löytönen, 2016)
have struggled with the unproblematized view on difference,
which is often approached through opposites and conceptu-
alized as discrete and distinct, as separating one from the
other (Davies, 2009). This kind of understanding of differ-
ce easily reinforces “simplified dualism and the assump-
tions of a binary divide that is, in reality, far more nuanced,”
as noted by Macfarlane (2015, p. 114). Deleuzian thought, in
making sense of disciplines and their subtle differentiation,
disrupts and unsettles categories of representation and
allows us to search for fluidity, nuanced diversity, and poten-
tialities, in this case, higher education pedagogies.

And Deleuze (with others) has also helped/challenged/
pushed me (with others) in reimagining scholarship,
research practices, modes of research writing, and academia
as the space for research creations. With my colleagues, we
wanted to explore “how our collaboration through various
embodied/artistic/experimental practices makes a differ-
ence in how we work, think, write, and move in the aca-
demic spaces of research,” and how these various practices
make a difference in “[w]hat and how we come to know,
what we research, how we approach our work and each
other, and others in the academia” (Guttorm et al., 2016, p.
418). We wanted to challenge methodologies and methods
as predefined routes. We desired to find our (own) paths
forward (and backward or sideways) in academia. As we
noted “[o]f clearing the way as you go along . . . and mapp-
ing it . . .” (Guttorm et al., 2016, p. 422). Or maybe we
wanted to bodily explore Deleuzian lines of flights “towards
a destination, which is unknown, not foreseeable, not pre-
existent” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977/2006, p. 94). Deleuze
(with others) indeed encouraged (us) to find a path, singular
paths, several singular paths, in academia. Not to (necessar-
ily) follow the established and expected.

However, Deleuze goes (much) beyond the questions,
concerns, and explorations within academia, toward a
broader notion of life, toward how might one live a life.
He has assured (me) again and again, and through multiple
concept-creations that “we might live differently if we
conceived the world differently” (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 290).
I believe one of the most cited concepts developed by
Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is the rhizome. The concept
removes the “focus from individual actors to dynamic
relations” as described by Pyyhtinen (2016, p. 24). Thus,
“[n]othing exists solely in and by itself, but entities are
what they are only in and through their relations with oth-
ers” (Pyyhtinen, 2016, p. 18). From this perspective,
the world might be understood as constituting of links, con-
nections, associations, assemblages, or of relational and
connective activity, “an originary withness” as Pyyhtinen
(2016, p. 18) suggests.

Nothing exists sole in and by itself but entities are what
they are only in relations.

Everything is differentiating,
becoming (different)
in diverse (discursive, material, human,
more-than-human)
associations, encounters, connections, relations.

No (fixed, stable, permanent) essences but relational
becomings . . .

The moon and the sky,
the moon and the sea,
the moon and the clouds
the moon and the airplane,
the moon and and and . . .
The moon differentiating,
becoming (different),
in diverse associations, encounters, connections,
relations.

And then toward thinking intimacy, or academic collective
scenes as intimate spaces.

**Intimate Spaces**

Laurent Berlant (1998) noted that intimacy “builds worlds;
it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds
of relation” (p. 282). These spaces are produced relation-
ally—in diverse (discursive, material, human, more-than-
human) associations, encounters, and connections.
Intimacy, as noted by Porkka (2018), is most often associ-
ated with the domestic (private-affective) spaces and rela-
tions, and attached to the notions of desire and optimism,
of positivity. Intimacy, then, is thought as a shared emo-
tional closeness, or immediacy between people or even
rapport within institutions or spaces of convention (most
often home). However, intimacy is not and cannot be
tamed only in/to the domestic privacy or conventional
controllable, concrete stable spaces.

The world does not want me to write—it disturbs me,
all the time through each and every sense.

I love the sun but currently I cannot see anything since
the sun shines straight into my eye blurring my vision.

People in the train talk and laugh and I cannot concen-
trate because of the voices and noise(s). I HAVE TO
listen to the construction projects discussed beside me,
and all, and more.

I know I am tired.
I have been working a lot and not been able to rest, relax. Work, work, work.

Does the world want me to stop from working, writing, thinking . . .

But I have been waiting for this, to be able to write in peace in the train, be alone with the laptop, with these words, with the texts and thinking, with you. I so desire this . . .

Sun, movement, trees, light through the forest, blocking my vision, closed eyes . . . intimacy . . .

For Berlant (1998), intimacy is wild. It emerges “from much more mobile processes of attachment” (Berlant, 1998, p. 284).

She continues,

The kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living (if not “a life”), do not always respect the predictable forms: nations and citizens, churches and the faithful, workers at work, writers and readers, memorizers of songs, people who walk dogs or swim at the same time each day, fetishists and their objects, teachers and students, serial lovers, sports lovers, listeners to voices who explain things manageable (on the radio, at conferences, on television screens, on line, in therapy) fans and celebrities—I (or you) could go on. (Berlant, 1998, p. 284)

Following Berlant, intimacy emerges from mobile, moving, evolving processes of attachment, and creates spaces for (other kinds of) relations or maybe relational becomings. Here, I find the Deleuzian notion of event most helpful. For Deleuze, an event emerges when “[s]omething in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 139, emphasis in the original). Thus, events, Deleuze (2004) writes, “are actualized within us, they wait for us and invite us in” (p. 169). These events might be understood as intimacy that emerges when something connects (with us) and forces us to think–feel–write. As such, intimacy is untamed; it is unknowable, uncertain, uncontrollable. It is a connective activity.

Intimacy seen in this spreading way does generate an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it. (Berlant, 1998, p. 285)

And so, even the positive (normative) desires often attached to intimacy are not always that positive, stable, or clear, but contradictory. They are both, and pulling and pushing, toward and away and sideways, wanting and not. “Polar energies” of intimacy, of our lives—yes, again Berlant (1998, p. 285).

Impossible, sun in my eye, again.

Cannot help . . . wanting, desiring to write, to connect with thinking-feeling, movement-moving.

Desiring but the sun pushes me away, makes this impossible. Anger and relief.

Finally, giving up and connecting with the sun light . . . warm . . . red . . . yellow . . . powerful . . . tired . . .

Intimacy

as a kind of connective activity,

an activity, that creates a world, a life,

in continuously emerging relations

with others.

Intimacy,

an aesthetic of attachment,

the beauty (and not) of relational becomings.

Intimacy,

the contradictory desires and

the “minor intimacies”

(Berlant, 1998, p. 285)

that do not have a canon.

And then she (Berlant, 1998, p. 285) asks:

“What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place?”

Academic Collective Scenes as Intimate Spaces

Inspired by Deleuze’s texts and writings, this article is an experiment toward thinking about academic “collective scenes” as “intimate spaces” (Berlant, 1998, p. 288). Baugh (2010) explained that for Deleuze experimentation involves encounters with the unknown without preconceptions about what these encounters should be or produce. Similarly, in this article, I begin the experiment without any particular directives or plans besides closely (or intimately) connecting (and thinking) with academia, and Deleuze; I am interested in investigating what (my) diverse encounters with/in academia prompt (in me) now when thinking and writing (about) academic collectives, disciplines, practices, people and spaces, and more. The aim of the experimentation is not to support or reject any specific forms of established and predefined academic attachments but to explore them, let them loose, to widen thought about what emerges with(in) academia, how we might also connect with(in) academia.
Gilles Deleuze and his intimate collaboration with Felix Guattari inspired this thinking–writing experiment but so also did Finnish dance-artist Jorma Uotinen and his dance performances, most importantly a piece called LA DIVA. It was first performed in 1993 at the Finnish National Ballet. It is a solo performance in which he himself always and only performs the Diva; no one else, ever. It belongs into Uotinen’s dance trilogy, which comments upon manhood from different perspectives. Whenever the Diva is performed, it is the same but different, after all these 26 years. Repeating yet constantly altering, in different time-spaces, with different audiences, and more. The same but different—the Diva differentiating in line with Deleuzian thought, becoming different in itself in each singular performance. The same goes with this writing experiment; it repeats yet it constantly alters, reminding us of small variations in our repetitive work, in our academic lives (see also Guttor et al., 2016).

Adele’s, the English singer-songwriter Laurie Blue Adkins’ song and single called “Hello” hit me as a powerful image of intimacy, or as diverse aspects of intimacy—attachments, desires, closeness, distance, longing, vulnerability. “Hello” inspired me toward a “poem-ish” (Lahman et al., 2019; see also Richardson, 2018) approach to experiment with academic scenes as intimate spaces in a way of not describing or representing intimacy but enacting it, living it. Here I (also) follow Patti Lather (2001) and her notion on writing experiments “where the text becomes a site for the failures of representation, and textual experiments are not so much about solving the crisis of representation as about troubling the very claims to represent” (p. 201).

The experiment that follows might work or it might not work. It might express or not. Working or expressing, however, is not the point here: experimenting is, with how we might (also) think–feel–write about academic scenes as intimate spaces and how these spaces might affect us within academia and our academic attachments.

Can you hear me?

Hello,
can you hear me?
I’m in Finland, remembering our first encounter.
I’ve not forgotten how it felt
when you were first introduced to me.
Since then, you have been a close (and more) companion in my scholarship
and indeed, in life.

Hello, it’s me.
I was wondering if after all these years you’d like to meet.
To go over (and around and through) everything.
I could come closer.
But I ain’t sure if I could bear that kind of closeness, intimacy.

There’s such a difference between us.
And a million miles / times / spaces.
Such a difference.
And a million texts.

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And a million miles / times / spaces.
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And a million texts.

An End in the Middle

Based on this experimentation, what I am suggesting is that academia creates (private) intimate and affective spaces, which are framed by (public) normative trajectories of and for our collective academic lives. For example, every scholar encounters the diverse categorizations or taxonomies within academia (pure, applied, hard, soft, assistant, associate, full, independent, funded, non-funded, reference, index, visibility, impact, etc.), which make their lives both personal and public (and maybe instrumental). It may be that in these kinds of trajectories, only one plot counts as academic. What I am suggesting is that we might (re)imagine academic collective scenes as intimate spaces to create potentialities toward diverse (discursive, material, human, more-than-human) academic lives, diverse encounters for thinking, disturbing, challenging, or creating academia (differently). Rather than re-presenting academic collective scenes through established concepts and categories, this kind of thinking, or thinking-feeling, might produce academic collectives toward something not-yet-known or the unknown: the speculative figuring of academia’s incipient future (see also Manning & Massumi, 2014). It is the creation of academia through intimately inhabiting a problem rather than analyzing or knowing it (see also Rogoff, 2006).

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To go over (and around and through) everything.
I could come closer.
But I ain’t sure if I could bear that kind of closeness, intimacy.

There’s such a difference between us.
And a million miles / times / spaces.
Such a difference.
And a million texts.

Hello, from the other side.
I must have tried to call at least a thousand times.
To talk about everything I’ve done, explored, encountered.
With/in academia, and research work, and life.
But when I call, you never seem to be there.

Hello, from the outside.
I’ve tried.
To find a way through the twisty labyrinths with/in academia.
To continue disrupting and unsettling categories, taxonomies
of representation, to continue searching for fluidity, nuanced diversity, and potentialities in pedagogy, research, life and the world. But there’s no answer.

Hello, how are you? It’s so typical of me to try to lean on you again and again, I’m sorry. I hope that you can rest. And hope you understand how much you have inspired me with your thinking, writings, experiments, humour, play and more.

It’s no secret that I am in the margins in academia, academic collectives and practices. Or in the middle. Or indeed nowhere—to no designated place.

Being and becoming a scholar, teacher and . . . and beyond taken-for-granted classifications, categorisations, relations, processes. At times, in the margins, feeling young and free, wild and happy. Other times, quite vulnerable, lonely. Only.

So, hello from the (other) side (other side).

I must have called a thousand times / thousand times. To tell you how desire draws (me) toward relations, explorations, experimentations toward connections, toward you. Tuck (2010) also turning toward you puts it nicely that desire “. . . is not a hole, not a gap, not a lacking, but an exponentially growing assemblage” (p. 639).

She tells how the interest in desire for you (Gilles) and Guattari, or Felix (happiness) was in how it loosely accounts for unexpected and unanticipated turns in humanity and history.

Unexpected and unanticipated turns in humanity and history.
Unexpected and unanticipated turns in academia, academic connections and relations, lives. Past, present, future humanity and history. Past, present, future life with/in academia.

“How is it that everything does not go as planned? As predicted? How is it that human beings act in ways that do not match their intentions? Even betray themselves? Desire, multiplicitous, complicated, paradoxical, is a way to begin to explain’” (Tuck, 2010, p. 639).

Desiring the unexpectedness and unanticipatedness, and not. Not desiring but facing, and not. Academic collective scenes as intimate spaces. Inviting and distancing. So many contradictory desires with/in academic intimate spaces. Competing.

But when I call there’s no answer.

I must have tried to call at least a thousand times. (from a thousand plateaus) To talk about everything I’ve done, explored, encountered with/in academia, and research work, and life.

Hello from the outside (outside). At least I can say that I’ve tried (I’ve tried). I’ve tried.

To find a way through the twisty non-linear labyrinths
with/in academia (macademia).
To continue disrupting and unsettling categories,
taxonomies,
(of representation),
to continue searching for fluidity, nuanced diversity,
and potentialities
with/in academia,
in pedagogy, research,
life and the world.
Again and again.
Again and again.
Again and again.

Hello from the other side (other side).
I must have called a thousand times (thousand times).
To tell you what I’ve tried.
But when I call you never seem to be there.

Hello from the outside (outside)
At least I can say that I’ve tried (I’ve tried).
I’ve tried.
To find a way through the twisty labyrinths
with/in academia
To continue disrupting and unsettling categories,
taxonomies,
To continue searching for fluidity, nuanced diversity,
and potentialities
with/in academia,
life and the world.
But when I call there’s no answer.
Hello,
can you hear me?
Anymore.
Anymore.

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