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Concepts as Shelter:
Toward a Feminist Theory of Philosophical Concepts

Henrike Kohpeiß

Abstract

Eve Tuck's reflection on a "breakup with Deleuze" and her critical feminist relationship toward Deleuze's philosophical position leads to my exploration of a feminist approach to a theory of concepts. I argue that in order to be applicable and useful for feminist philosophical scholarship, concepts assume a sheltering function for experiences that have lacked adequate forms of representation in the past. Feminist thinkers like Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant support the idea of *concepts as shelter* through their methodological employment of affect as a resource of knowledge. Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks reckon with the structural necessity for sheltering concepts through their respective notions of the *subaltern* and *homemaking.* Finally, Eve Meltzer's study of the relevance of affect for conceptual art underscores the general importance of thinking through the connections between these seemingly opposed categories in order to arrive at a better understanding of what philosophical concepts can do.

Keywords: theory of concepts, affect, feminist philosophy, Deleuze, affect theory, Continental philosophy, Sara Ahmed

1. Introduction

When Eve Tuck, an Unangax̂ scholar of critical race theory and indigenous studies, "breaks up with Deleuze," she has a story to tell. It is a story about misrecognition, institutional power, and the affective dimensions of theory. Her theoretical relationship with Deleuze brought her joy while it lasted, as well as tools to develop her research practice. Nevertheless, the relationship had to end (Tuck 2010a). Deleuze failed to recognize Tuck's desire, because his own concept of desire overlooks subjective relations and personal experience.[1] Tuck however, regards

[1] Tuck is one of the proponents of *desire-based-research*, which opposes the trend of *damage-centered-research* within anthropology (Tuck 2009). Her approach includes trying to understand the desires of a particular community, by which she means wishes and self-determined goals. These desires are supposed to serve as a basis for institutional policies and replace the stigmatizing practice that focuses on lack and loss in order to claim reparations and support from a pitiful position. Tuck has

desire as productive, knowledgeable, and wise. From this standpoint, Tuck addresses the Deleuzoguattarian vocabulary with which she had grown familiar during the course of her graduate studies. Deviating from Deleuze, she wants desire to be understood as "enjoying some/a lot of self-determination, even as its lines of flight 'flee in every direction.'" For Tuck, desire accumulates "wisdom […], self-understanding and world-understanding along the way of a life." It is through desire that accumulated knowledge travels between people and across generations and connects a person to their past and future (Tuck 2010a, 645).

I take Eve Tuck's feminist transformation of the concept of desire as an occasion to sketch a theory of concepts that accounts for what Tuck finds lacking in her reading of Deleuze and his writing partner Guattari. In the following, I will take a closer look at philosophical concepts that clearly have affective content and are relationally embedded in political struggles. The open approach to concepts outlined in Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* serves as a blueprint for how concepts can be understood in their specific use for feminist scholarship. I put the abstract character of Deleuze and Guattari's writing into perspective and suggest a feminist counter position in which concepts serve as shelter for subjects, threatened realities, and political struggles. This article attempts to describe and solidify conceptual movements that are most apparent but by no means exclusive to feminist scholarship. In part 2, I briefly walk through the aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's work on concepts relevant to feminist theorizing. The notion of concepts as shelter itself has precedents in the works of Sara Ahmed, Gayatri Spivak, and Lauren Berlant, among others. In parts 3, 4, and 5, I outline how conceptual practice begins with a particularity for all three thinkers. Concepts *work* because their agents are attached to them. These agents extend their own agency by means of the concepts' stable position in the discursive world. Concepts have near mystical traits when entangled with a subject that embodies their substance. This means that concepts do not reveal their content in a transparent manner. Finally, concepts convey affective power by being attractive, supportive, and relatable.

2. Affects Regarding Concepts

Eve Tuck investigates an issue of philosophical work that is rarely addressed: by portraying her conflict with Deleuze as a breakup, she highlights that desire is part

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conducted empirical research in indigenous communities, primarily on the topic of education (Tuck and Yang 2018; Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2018; Gorlewski and Tuck 2019) and has broadly criticized qualitative research methods (Tuck 2009; Tuck 2010b; Tuck and Yang 2014a, 2014b). Through this research she learned about the ways in which knowledge and wisdom are transported from one generation to the next *through* desire (Tuck 2009).

of conceptual creation in a different sense than assumed by Deleuze and Guattari. Tuck suggests that we should understand desire as affective sensitivity that takes into account lived experience. I want to trace the locus and influence of that affective faculty within philosophical thought. A focus on sensitivity will allow me to show why certain concepts have an appeal that is difficult to explain by means of their propositional content alone. It is important to note the idiosyncratic relationship between affects and concepts: Affects adhering to concepts do not clearly direct thinking toward a specific point. Instead, they show themselves in the form of diffuse aversions, attractions, or sympathies. These affective impulses never serve as the only means to create a philosophical thought. Yet they may provide an occasion to embark on a process of creating—especially when the feeling in question appears repeatedly and has no established equivalent in language.

Concepts as shelter provide such an equivalent. A lack of language might also arise when an experience is characterized by negativity. When an experience is disorienting, painful, and unspeakable at first, a concept can provide temporary accommodation for it and make space for a linguistic unfolding in the future. The idea of a shelter highlights the disruptive intentions of conceptual creation. A concept offers the possibility of making something that has not been thought about extensively before into an object of elaborate thought. In so doing, concepts tread a path toward the intellectually unexplored. The motivation for this conceptual exploration stems from a lack experienced by the thinking subject. Concepts are invented in order to fill a linguistic gap that opens between the subject and the world. This is how concepts provide space for more than one experience. Concepts are never individual matters but are established by making sense to more minds than just one.

Situated, embodied conceptual practice urges one to make particular experiences count by endowing them with a lively abstraction that can defend their existence in the discursive struggle. This practice is about insisting on the particular, holding fast to what others tend to discard or gloss over prematurely. bell hooks's idea of homemaking allows me to understand this dimension of situatedness and to develop a materialist layer to the notion of concepts as shelter. In part 4, I consider trauma as a conceptual example by looking at the case of Christine Blasey Ford's explicit use of the term in her testimony against Brett Kavanaugh in 2018. Her doing so, I argue, turned the concept of trauma into a shelter for herself. Finally, I conclude with a "note on real shelter" to situate my work in a materialist manner.

Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, feminist thinkers like Ahmed, Spivak, and Berlant have made their conceptual inspiration explicit. These feminist thinkers have not disguised their motives for critiquing established concepts or for devising new ones. My understanding of concepts as shelter builds on the notion that conceptual work—that is, the creation of a concept—always includes a subjective motive and relates to

specific circumstances, even if its gesture is a universal one. Consider, for example, emancipatory claims such as the demand for reproductive rights, which are most meaningful in relation to the speaker's experience of having a childbearing body. Positionality and motive are indispensable ingredients of a concept and a crucial condition for it to gain traction in discourse. This does not mean that these concepts change the linguistic world they refer to.[2] Rather, such concepts express the negative implications of that world. They point toward oppression and unseen suffering. I engage with philosophical positions that contribute to this methodological discourse by practicing conceptual work that takes into consideration affects and feelings. Moving through these positions allows me to assemble elements toward a theory of concepts that extends Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion in *What Is Philosophy?,* while also criticizing its disregard for concrete experiences. I position concepts as shelters that protect experiences from being erased. Concepts can be pictured as mobile homes that help subjects to move through the world and orient themselves in it, while insisting on the validity of their experiences.

3. Deleuze and Guattari's Theory of Concepts

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994), philosophy is the creation of concepts. For the purpose of this article, I will briefly elaborate what their theory of concepts has to offer for feminist theorizing, and I will leave aside a broader discussion of the different qualities their conceptual account speaks to (Bell 2009; Patton 2003; Schmidgen 2015; Schönher 2020; Stengers 2005) as well as a general discussion of the feminist value of their work (Braidotti 2002; Buchanan and Colebrook 2022; Grosz 1994; Olkowski 1999; Stark 2017).

Deleuze and Guattari present a very open notion of concepts in their last collaboration *What Is Philosophy?* In the framework of Spinozist immanence-thinking, they refer to concepts as "multiplicities," consisting of different components. Concepts are articulations, differentiated from chaos, and they can be seen as a result of "cutting and cross-cutting" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 16) reality into chunks of meaning. Deleuze and Guattari avoid limiting the idea of a concept and instead emphasize, first, the plurality of significance a concept contains and, second, the movement of expansion and change as an integral part of concepts. This openness of conceptual creation is a valuable quality for feminist theoretical work because this work often requires articulating topics and issues that are not part of canonized discourse yet. Hannah Stark (2017, 2) locates the importance of conceptual work for

[2] Such has been proposed in debates around conceptual engineering: "If conceptual engineering succeeds in a particular case, it will change how people think, talk, and act on the (non-conceptual and non-linguistic) world." (Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett 2020, 12)

feminism in the fact that "concepts offer us new ways to address the world." She argues that Deleuze and Guattari's work is particularly helpful if we consider emancipatory theory as a creative endeavor to affirm and develop "a speculative register in which to imagine new ways to think, to create and to live" (ibid.). Deleuze and Guattari support the idea that concepts do not only depend on historical depth and rigorous definition but are inspired by and consist of different components, some of which are related to experiences (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 17). And although I will come to criticize their idea of experience as too abstract, I do think that the malleability of their conceptual model is a promising vantage point from which to think about concepts from a feminist perspective.

I will further qualify the two core qualities of Deleuze and Guattari's account of concepts mentioned above: multiplicity and expansion. Concepts are reactions to "the event" or an attempt to manifest the event in language. Regardless of the complicated position the notion of the event has in Deleuze's philosophy, it is important to remark that concepts articulate an often intransparent accumulation of aspects, which, in their multiplicity, constitute a problem. The concept's function is to grasp that problem (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 16). For the problem to be adequately grasped, the concept has to adjust in relation to its surroundings and in relation to infinity (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 19). Concepts are in a movement of striving, because thought is a dynamic activity: "the concept is an act of thought, it is thought operating at infinite (although greater or lesser) speed" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 21). In this complex characterization of concepts provided by Deleuze and Guattari, the relevant points for my purpose are that concepts operate in a dynamic, ever-evolving field of meaning and that they are driven by a movement that goes beyond them. It is Eve Tuck's intention to clarify the force behind the speed of conceptual consolidation in order to avoid a purely abstract play of significance. And although "desire" is not a central term in *What is Philosophy*?, Tuck (2010a, 635) seeks to "interrogate, expand, and extend" Deleuze's concept of desire in such a way that shows desire to be an affective aspect of thought production itself. Tuck employs a concept of desire grounded in concrete lived experience to understand how conceptual meaning is being generated. One of feminism's most profound claims states that the organization of meaning is connected to and dependent on such experience and that it is therefore never innocent or apolitical. This must be considered for a feminist theory of concepts.

4. Sara Ahmed's Sweaty Concepts

Sara Ahmed's understanding of "sweaty concepts" is indebted to Audre Lorde (Ahmed 2017, 12). Lorde's work provides an archive of experience of sexism and racism and simultaneously describes the failure of public discourse to acknowledge these (Lorde 1988, 2008, 2009). Ahmed (2017, 12) describes sweaty concepts as a

"lifeline" thrown out to her on reading Lorde's work and recognizes her own, notoriously underrepresented experience in it. The moment in which Ahmed catches the line initiates her connection to a mind that, although not burdened with exactly the same type of suffering, nevertheless finds itself in a similar position that is excluded from the hegemonic discourse about feelings and worldviews. According to Ahmed, the sweaty concept in question can *save* the person that discovers it from the isolating and harmful effects of that exclusion. All concepts are sweaty insofar as they stem from the viewpoint of someone who has no sense of feeling at home in the world. She particularly points out that contrary to a common cliché in philosophy, concepts are not created in solitude but as reactions to lived and often social situations (Ahmed 2017, 13). This means that concepts are being established through the social and one's recognition of shared locations in it; therefore, they are always already intersubjective. Ahmed positions concepts as descriptive rather than normative entities. She suggests that the process of concept creation might be banal in its operation and still broad in its effects. Description serves as a theoretical tool in this regard, and it is not only to be understood as the counterpart to the normative. Ahmed problematizes the philosophical distinction of descriptive versus normative. When our theorizing includes terms that do little more than describe a situation, we highlight the fact that this situation has not yet been considered in the very way we propose and thus cannot be adequately grasped by established theoretical vocabulary. In such a case, a description itself amounts to an objection of normative weight. Sweaty concepts bring reality into view by describing its (inter-)subjective and social specificity. Doing so lends these concepts new facets, while establishing them in the theoretical realm.

Ahmed's proposition resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of concepts being instruments "speak[ing] the event" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 21) but opposes it in the same instance.[3] Unlike Deleuze and Guattari's rather formal notion of the event, which aims to capture the temporal dimension of truth, Ahmed advocates for a more direct relationship between experience and theory. This means that in her view, the event must be understood as subject-related in order to be spoken. According to Ahmed, the force of description lies in its capacity to offer a different *orientation* toward the world rather than a new world to work toward. She notes that "concepts are in the worlds we are in" (Ahmed 2017, 13).[4] In that

[3] "The concept speaks the event, not the essence or the thing—pure Event, a hecceity, an entity" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 21). "Events are what catch you out and catch you up" (Ahmed 2010, 85).

[4] "By using the idea of sweaty concepts, I am also trying to show how descriptive work is conceptual work. A concept is worldly, but it is also a reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing. More specifically, a

statement, the concept's novelty lies in what a body that is "not at home in the world" (13) can—by mere description—add to the discourse. In particular, racialized and feminized bodies that experience alienation in the public sphere can serve as a starting point for finding language that does not ignore or harmonize that experience but that instead points toward the situation that sustains that experience, and thus toward an analysis of the mechanisms that produce it (Ahmed 2010, 41).

For example, Ahmed (2010, ch. 1) is interested in happiness as a social ideal whose content is often better described by *un*happiness when brought in touch with certain subjects. This highlights how reorientation is both the aim and the result of conceptual work. Giving legitimacy to a deviating experience of a certain event not only opens up a different perspective, and thereby a broader framework, but *creates* a different world. Ahmed (2020, ch. 1) uses the example of the wedding day, which is expected to evoke a happy experience. Questioning this affective expectation means opening up a world to explore beyond this specific idea of happiness. Considering its potentially forceful aspects changes the event's unfolding. Through a description of what happens, the concept unleashes what could be described as a "counter-actualization" as Deleuze (2004, 150) calls it.[5] When we draw the event close to our-selves and engage in the relations we can create with it, we change its meaning and open up a position from which to grasp that event differently. Sweaty concepts provide counter-actualizations on the conceptual level. They establish a different and irreconcilable understanding of a given situation. The not-at-home body generates the concept by introducing a way of being into language that extends beyond available vocabulary. Yet this leads to the question, what can a concept do for a body?

In answer to this question, I want to suggest that concepts can serve as a discursive substitute for a home in the world. To make my case, I follow Sara Ahmed as well as Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern. I argue that this notion of home is apparent in Ahmed's analysis of novels in which female characters provide escapes for women who struggle with their assigned social role. Concepts hold a similar

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sweaty concept is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world. By this I mean description as angle or point of view: a description of how it feels not to be at home in the world, or a description of the world from the point of view of not being at home in it." (Ahmed 2017, 13)

[5] In *Logic of Sense,* Deleuze uses "counter-actualization" to describe the struggle that can be unleashed by the unconditional affirmation of the event: "Thus, the actor delimits the original, disengages from it an abstract line, and keeps from the event only its contour and its splendor, becoming thereby the actor of one's own events—a *counter-actualization*" (Deleuze 2004, 150). Deleuze describes counter-actualization as a way of appropriating what happens to us by action. I will come back to that further below.

surplus potential. They mark a space in theoretical thought where troubled subject positions can find shelter and a starting point for shifting the world according to how they inhabit it. Ahmed's account of descriptive conceptual practice opposes that idea by insisting on the possibilities that lie in telling-as-it-is. Departing from Ahmed, I suggest that telling it as it is can be quite a hard task. Concepts allow one to make a claim about the world, even though they might not be fully accurate in a detached descriptive or theoretical sense. Their doing so provides some space in which all the underlying conditions of their initial claim can now be uttered. This is why a concept can shelter a body that has not found a place to settle in the discursive field. But the concept is more than just a shield in the battle. It also changes the battle itself. This means that concepts do more than fix certain discursive positions that might otherwise be overlooked. They intervene into the production of meaning as such and claim authority in the battle over how to interpret reality. Furthermore, the speculative part of a concept anticipates the gap between language and reality.[6]

5. Reactive Concepts: Allowing Withdrawal and Making Space to Appear[7]

In Gayatri Spivak's (1988) text *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, the "subaltern" fulfills the function of a conceptual parenthesis whose content refuses proper definition. It works like a conceptual placeholder. Spivak seeks to determine a subject position that is excluded from discourse by the corresponding subject being oppressed in different ways. She borrows the term "subaltern" from Antonio Gramsci (1971) but shifts its meaning by interrogating who is meant by that term. For Spivak,

[6] Theodor Adorno (2006, 26) circumscribed this constitutive gap of conceptual production with the term "nonidentical." He argued that what slips through language falls into this gap, and that historical suffering is preserved there (Adorno 2006). Suffering can therefore never establish an exact relation to language but is rather concealed by it. In *Negative Dialectics,* the concept's task is to linger as close as possible to the site of historical suffering and suffering's urgency to be articulated—without ever revealing the totality of its content (Adorno 2006, 149): "A historicity abstracted from historic existence glosses over the painful antithesis of nature and history; an antithesis which equally defies ontologization. There too the new ontology is crypto-idealistic, once more requiring identity of the nonidentical, removing by supposition of the concept, of historicity as history's carrier rather than as history, whatever would resist the concept" (Adorno 2006, 359).

[7] The term "reactive concept" is also used by David Braddon-Mitchell (2020, 80) for a similar purpose in the CE-context. For him, a reactive concept is one that is built as a direct response to desire: "They [reactive representations] are partially representational states which are reactive inasmuch as they bypass interaction with distinct desires to directly motivate behaviour."

the subaltern aptly describes the female lower classes of the Indian population, who have no voice in public discourse and, at the time of her writing, were not properly included by postcolonial theorizing. Through a demonstration of failed attempts at making the subaltern subject seen, Spivak creates a concept characterized by the *withdrawal* of its content. In so doing, she helps to articulate a systematic problem of abstraction: the impossibility of adequate representation.

Spivak enters a process of deconstruction to analyze the relations of representation used in a conversation between Deleuze and Michel Foucault (1977). Referring to Deleuze's claim that "there is no more representation; there is nothing but action," she points to such a statement's failure at offering shelter (Spivak 1988, 275; quoting Foucault 1977, 206–07, translation modified by Spivak). Deleuze's conflation of two different meanings of representation produces a blind spot within his theory. On the one hand, "representation can be understood as 'speaking for'" (275). This is the sense of representation used in politics. On the other hand there is "representation as 're-presentation,' as used in art or philosophy" (275). The problem Spivak identifies in that conflation is that Deleuze declares *all* representation to have ended. This claim follows the general dissolution of the subject in poststructuralist thought of the twentieth century. By positioning theory on the same ontological level as all action, Deleuze makes the subject position of the one who theorizes seem irrelevant. Spivak problematizes this theoretical move by pointing out that this conflation means to accept that "the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately)"; on the other hand, the conflation also *privileges* the subject by centering the idea that everything the subject does, whether thinking, speaking, or acting, should be understood as action (Spivak 1988, 275).

This form of subject-privileging results from the claim that subjectivity as representative consciousness has been overcome and, therefore, no longer needs to be regarded. Spivak shows how the conflation of theory and action is designed to disguise the subject who *makes* the equation. But instead of dissolving subjectivity for good, this refusal of representation creates a seemingly universal position for the speaker. The question of how to speak about oppressed groups remains a difficult one, and Deleuze's suggestion that it does not matter should be considered as a shortcoming relevant to his and Guattari's theory of concepts. In the process of dissolving a consciousness that accepts responsibility for its representational function, something else gets lost: namely, the possibility for a representation to be inadequate. Spivak reveals how the claim of "theory as action" works as a means to shield theoretical thought from legitimate criticism. If you deny that an objects exists, it also cannot be criticized. When theory is declared action, the position of the intellectual is held to be a "transparent multiplicity" (see Spivak 1988, 275; this is my term for a combination of her concepts) through which the voice of the oppressed

can be mediated. Refusing representation leads to misrecognition in this case.[8] And it might lead to a misrecognition of the connection between meaningful conceptual creation and concrete subjective and social experience.

Spivak's critique of Foucault and Deleuze is most relevant for my purpose in her problematization of representation. Spivak sees inadequacy as a constitutive part of theorizing. Yet she nevertheless holds on to the representational function of concepts. While she agrees with poststructuralism's general criticism of representation, she does not seek to overcome it as a whole. Instead, she calls upon philosophers to reckon with the trouble that representation entails.

Spivak's point supports Eve Tuck's project of reintroducing a subject position into the concept of desire. They both render a subject position, which is not present in *What is Philosophy?*, necessary in order to allocate accountability for why a concept is being crafted and what it *does.* Spivak's concept of the subaltern deals with these problems in an interesting way. She does not seek to prove Deleuze and Foucault wrong by clearly applying the concept to a specific group of individuals who stand to gain representational substance by its creation. Instead, the concept of the subaltern remains a placeholder for what it is not. Spivak builds this concept from an accumulation of its possible failures. This is how it becomes a shelter.

The concept's political function is to shelter both subjects and their struggles from appearing as theoretical figures in Western thought. A concept that refuses proper definition exposes the possibility that there is more to say about a subject position than its theoretical figuration allows us to see. This invisible surplus entails a class interest while also measuring the silences produced. When "the consciousness of the subaltern" is the object of study, "the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important" (Spivak 1988, 287). Spivak asks how "insurgency," social upheaval, can be transmitted through text when its receiver is not predetermined (Spivak 1988, 287). What she describes as the transformation of insurgency into a "text for knowledge" can be considered as conceptual work leading to the creation of a philosophical concept, even when it is done by a historian. The process of preparing a social deviation to become theoretical content entails a translation of experience

[8] "*Because* 'the person who speaks and acts… is always a multiplicity,' no 'theorizing intellectual… [or] party or… union' can represent 'those who act and struggle' (FD, 206). Are those who act and *struggle* mute, as opposed to those who act and *speak* (FD, 206)? […] The critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formations and systems of political economy can now be effaced, as can the active theoretical practice of the 'transformation of consciousness.' The banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent" (Spivak 1988, 275; quoting Foucault 2017, translation modified by Spivak; bracketed ellipsis mine).

into theory. Extending the question of translation into the context of concept formation draws attention to the concept's internal space. How can a concept host insurgency without predetermining any political consequences, either for itself or for the upheaval? How does a concept responsibly grasp social upheaval—which is the signifier of experience in this case—and contain it at a more abstract level, without erasing its uncomfortable parts?

The subaltern is a reactive concept. It does not so much position itself as new but rather as a corrective to what has gone wrong and who has been misrepresented in the past. While Spivak offers a positive definition of the concept ("the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'"), she by no means conveys the full theoretical and practical impact of the concept's unfolding (Spivak 1988, 284). Naming the subaltern without revealing that category's exact content can be read as a theoretical defense strategy and, hence, as a withdrawal.[9] The subaltern is solely being defined by a social position of misrecognition experienced by many Indian women, and it is important for the concept's political purpose that the negativity of not being seen as something different than that is not being reconciled. This humble way of introducing a theoretical point will most certainly not create a power position. Yet withdrawing visibly will also prevent the community in question from being misrecognized over and over again. Spivak uses the concept of the subaltern as a hideout for those who are problematically considered "at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other" (Spivak 1988, 284). In doing so, she presents an alternative knowledge-formation to Western philosophy. Her essay addresses the danger of theoretical work overshooting its mark. The subaltern avoids and corrects this tendency and, in so doing, opens a different set of questions about conceptual work: How can we foresee, imply, and deal responsibly with the political implications of theorizing? How can we think about subject positions that we cannot know?

6. Theory as Homemaking: Concepts as Shelter

When conceptual work refers to an object only determined by the conditions that constitute it, like in the case of the subaltern, the concept appears in its relational embeddedness.[10] Conceptual work which articulates experiences helps to make space

[9] For the importance of defensiveness to Black feminism, see Nash (2019).

[10] Such an approach can be read as pushing against common approaches to conceptual engineering (Cappelen 2018; Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett 2020). I argue that concepts are not merely functional, since we do not always use concepts in predetermined ways. In CE, the main task is seen as "assessing and improving our representational devices" (Cappelen 2018, 3), such as concepts, whereas my

in language where before there was none.[11] Concepts function as sheltering entities for overlooked and hard-to-name experiences and the subjects who have them. Experience in a world that does not make enough effort to host all bodies, but only some, necessarily produces suffering and discomfort that cannot be met by established terms. Suffering from structural violence often means suffering without being able to explain why and without a prospect for cure. This also means enduring a lot of confusion because of the feeling of contingency evoked by social inequality. For example, before public discourse shifted attention toward the role of women in public spaces, being overruled in discussions and constantly having to fight for opportunities to speak evoked that feeling for women. A sheltering concept—*patriarchy*, in this case—situates itself amid the confusing conditions by which a subject feels surrounded and holds space for that subject to conceive of its situation. A concept also opens up space to take a rest from confusion.

Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism" provides shelter for the double bind of experience. Its conceptual gist lies in its acknowledgement that experiences are shaped by ideology and in a criticism of that problematic shaping. Berlant describes how subjects get *used* to suffering and lose the ability to end it because they are attached to its ideological implications. Berlant's (2011, 28) example is the notion of the American dream: People across classes believe in the possibility of social advancement despite all evidence that speaks against that expectation. The suffering engendered by structural oppression, in the forms of poverty, sickness, and racism, is mitigated by belief in an ideal that, if achieved, would make all these troubles disappear. The belief is sustained despite its distance from lived reality and its questionable rationality in the long run. This belief reduces the feeling of contingency that often accompanies states of suffering, and thus it serves as an "orientation" in Sara Ahmed's (2010) sense. What is being sheltered here is a subject position that—unable to find a solution to this dilemma elsewhere—finds a position in the middle of it.

Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is thus an analytical tool for understanding a complex ideological event. It seeks not only to unveil the ideological construction of the American dream but also to recognize the lived optimism that this dream can produce. Berlant's concept renounces a clear moral positioning or a strict Marxist criticism. Instead, it aims to describe how meaning is produced, which is to say how a subject orients itself in the world. Understanding the concept as shelter emphasizes

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formulation is rather concerned with the creation, expansion, and idiosyncratic quality of concepts.

[11] Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 21) call this "speak[ing] the event." "Hosting the event" generally refers to their ontological idea of events as origins for meaning production (Deleuze 2004, 2008).

how patterns of orientation are structured by idiosyncratic ways of managing lived experience, more so than by rationality and control. Conceptual takes on sociality stress these kinds of strategies, images, and action patterns. Cruel optimism combines a sympathetic with a critical element in order to offer an adequate perspective. The optimism one can feel about the American dream is as real as the cruelty that only unveils itself when one dares to take a critical look at things. This tension is not a contradiction to be solved but a mess that constitutes experience. In Berlant's terms, survival is at least as important as a realistic account of the reality one inhabits. If the existence of an ideological construct is relevant for the subject's survival, theoreticians have to deal with its problematic implications in creative ways that do more than merely suspend the construct as a whole.

Cruel optimism allows for the simultaneous articulation of individually experienced and structurally relevant layers of meaning. Concepts like this one stem from the paradoxical quality of experience itself—when suffering happens simultaneously with striving and optimism is cruel—and contain a critical perspective without foregoing the material usefulness of a particular ideology at a given moment. These concepts are shelters because they manage to grapple with contradictions. Cruel optimism makes the reader realize that a contradiction is never adequately dealt with just by naming it. Instead, because it is specific, the contradictory relation plays out in different shapes and with different consequences. Cruel optimism does not become a productive term simply because optimism is disqualified as cruel, but because of the space it provides to learn about forms of life that endure this tension. There is no way for this contradiction to be resolved toward one or the other direction. A sheltering concept allows us to recognize endurance and can make the tension feel less brutal. Cruel optimism is a marker that points toward an ongoing struggle. It recognizes that struggle without resolving or ending it. Instead, it supports the efforts invested into a life constrained by inequality, and it looks at the kinds of suffering those constraints entail.

The creation of a concept often means putting parentheses around the material and ideological relation in order to render it recognizable. The concept partitions a specifically problematic piece of lived experience and brings it into view. It stabilizes a problem by naming it and might assure those burdened with it that the problem will not be neglected.

For sheltering words to become proper concepts, they have to be relatable, and relation is best built by gestures of generosity. The concepts I have been discussing become the best versions of themselves when the receiver allows them a certain credit, without judging too harshly. One of the virtues implicitly proposed by Deleuze and Guattari is to replace judgement with affirmation, and to read with the most charitable attitude. This is how energy is invested in the continuation of a thread

of thought, and this is how a concept can become a theoretical accommodation for the thinker. Concepts can remain shelters if readers contribute to their equipment and interior. To remain vital, concepts must continuously be furnished with references, examples, and related concepts. Deleuze and Guattari warn us not to treat a concept like an old skeleton that must be rescued from natural decay and instead encourage us "to play it again on a new stage" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 83). Concepts are living spinal columns (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 36) in need of vital resources, and they must be fed with current articulations of lived experience in order to be up to date and to defend the objects they protect in appropriate ways. Through this dynamic form, concepts become a home for meaning and subjectivity.

Drawing on bell hooks, I want to propose the term "theoretical homemaking" to emphasize the political potential of concept creation.[12] As mentioned above, I understand concepts in terms of their multiple functionalities. They not only host specific political agendas and ideologies but also allow subjects to negotiate their position in the world. Concepts work as mobile homes—they need not be renewed when the subject or the world is changing.[13] But they make space for that change to be grasped within the concept's processual dimension. This malleability is being described by Deleuze and Guattari in terms of adjustments a concept has to undergo as a result of the "infinite speed" of thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 36). Concepts are the most abstract articulation of problems (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 28), and they can be improved or shifted according to how these problems appear in the world. Concepts, like homes, live and give life to thought. The notion of home is meant to emphasize the affective aspects of discursive undertakings, which regularly slip from view in the context of methodological questions.

In what follows, I discuss the extent to which theory production is accommodating for subjects. It does not contradict or challenge existing theories of concepts to think specifically about accommodation. Rather, this view extends them toward the points of contact that make them matter. This endeavor of connection-making

[12] *Home* is an important and often emancipatory term within the Black intellectual tradition even beyond bell hooks's writing (Lorde 2009, 119; Hill Collins 2014) and also resonates in white feminism in debates around reproductive labor and the commons (Federici 2012).

[13] With reference to Fanon and Audre Lorde, Lewis E. Gordon (2016, 13) mentions the homemaking function of thought: "Fanon thus responds to the dialectics of recognition not by asking to be seen but by seeking to go beyond the dialectic itself. Focusing on dismantling the master's home will still leave the problem of being homeless, but focusing on building another home could achieve the important task of rendering the master's home irrelevant without which his mastery loses its force. We could read this as a case for an important role for thought."

becomes apparent in three regards, all of which touch upon the notion of experience. First, when we articulate a certain perspective through a concept, we can open the uniqueness of that perspective to the participation and inscription of others and create intersubjectivity. bell hooks's idea of "homeplace" (2015) and the corresponding notion of "homemaking" (2009, 165) exemplify that opening: Homemaking is by no means a singular practice, but its naming allows for a different view on what might have seemed self-evident, banal, or even unimportant before. Accordingly, concepts allow for experiences to be understood as collective instead of singular ones. Second, concepts can bear and put forward political demands that have been posed in different historical situations to gain greater traction. This point is specifically relevant for feminist theorizing, as Sara Ahmed's work on sweaty concepts has shown. A case in point is the push to call domestic activities "reproductive labor" and to insist on their relevance for Marx's critique of political economy (Federici 2004, 2012). Establishing "reproductive labor" on a conceptual level fosters the global struggle for women's rights while encouraging a sheltered discourse around the various demands claimed by different groups of women. Here, concepts function as tools for political struggles. Third, creating a concept is a way of articulating a kind of negativity that is unacknowledged suffering, which has no presence in political discourse or emotional life because it cannot be used as a resource for either of them. This negativity is difficult to share in its specificity and is not being eliminated by being named. In effect, conceptual work contains negative experience in its own right—that is, the experience of suffering. The term "trauma" does more in this respect than point to a specific form of psychological injury. Trauma also circulates around the void of the unspeakable that *is* psychological injury. In so doing, the concept prevents that injury from being erased.

To address individual(ized) experience that is both singular and subjective, yet structurally shared, we must begin outside of the theoretical sphere. bell hooks's concept of homemaking does not primarily gain its substance through thought but rather emerges from practice. It arises in observing a structure in life that has not been appreciated or even noticed for very long as an object worthy of consideration. Homemaking merely describes the protective function of a home to offer a relatively safe space for Black families during and after enslavement. In her theoretical work, bell hooks emphasizes the humanizing function of that space, which resists the dehumanizing forces of racist society.[14] When the consequence of oppression is

[14] "Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" (hooks 2015, 42).

control and isolation, homemaking becomes an activity of resistance that endows life when death is foreseeable. Bearing witness to her mother's repetitive insistence on a home and the importance of laughter, hooks creates the concept of homemaking as a theoretical equivalent to her lived experience. Thus her concept offers one answer to the question of Black survival in racist societies in a way that is not limited to the singularity of one practice (hooks 2015, 42). Homemaking gains conceptual substance because it accommodates not only hooks's memory and experience but also the lived and shared history of enslavement that is life under constant threat. Homemaking transforms her mother Rosa Bells's practice to an abstract form that accumulates knowledge about survival and, thereby, constitutes a theory of survival. Its bedrock lies in the continuity of its use, and this is why the concept has stability. Homemaking demonstrates how concepts need lived experience, refer to shared subject-positions, and exist as abstractions. The process of crafting concepts can work both ways: from abstraction to application or from lived experience to theory.

Finally, "trauma" is a good example of how a concept bears potential for containing and preserving the negative. Since Sigmund Freud, the use of the word trauma has far exceeded the medical and psychological realm. In the humanities as well as in its everyday use, trauma refers to occurrences on very different scales (Bond and Craps 2020). Its broad use has been criticized by those who stress its medical origin (Leys 2000). The term "trauma" is placed within language when the event in question cannot be further described. When I describe an experience as traumatic, I typically refer to a matter I struggle to deal with, to put in the right order, to fully comprehend. Thus, when trauma is used as a medical term, it shelters the various uncertainties unleashed by an overwhelming event and makes space for the negotiation of a possible reaction. The generic appeal of the term may be due to this double directedness: trauma is at once a diagnostic term, as well as a word for psychological pain of unidentified origin that has found its way into common sense and speech (Leys 2000). Its lack of medical specificity opens possibilities for unscientific yet helpful appropriation, so that the term trauma can be used to lend urgency to the repetition of an uncontrollable emotional state. It thus allows individuals to make their suffering heard without being forced to explain it. But using the term in discourse requires precision in order to be as appropriate as possible in relation to an experience that is difficult or even impossible to describe. The concept's task in that regard is to hold the tension between the unspeakable and the necessity to speak (Herman 1992, 1). The conceptual offer of "trauma" is to keep the void open for more language to be added and for the intelligibility of suffering to be successively increased.

A very concrete application of that concept could be observed in the US Senate in 2018, during the Senate Judiciary Committee's confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court. Christine Blasey Ford testified

against him with allegations of sexual assault. As she described how Kavanaugh had assaulted her, she struggled visibly to handle the recollections, grappling with her trauma before the eyes of the world. She was aware that her injury from the abuse would never be healed through that testimony, but rather renewed. Her words would become the object of disbelief, and her person would be demeaned. Nevertheless, she testified, and while visibly struggling with the experience of trauma, she referred to the science of trauma to defend herself against anticipated pushbacks and to bring into view the conditions of the lawsuit she found herself in. With the help of that concept, of which neuroscience is one component, Ford created a space for herself which allowed her to acknowledge her memory gaps without them discrediting her testimony—which is to be expected if a witness appears unable to fully remember what happened. Ford's testimony drew on neurological explanations of traumatic events to explain how the incident in question had gotten stuck in her memory, as well as how parts of it were unavailable to her. She could remember the event and some of its details, but she could not tell the time and place where it happened. In this case, calling Ford's state and experience "trauma," especially with all the scientific implications she could explain, helps to create space and acceptance for the pain and suffering that is the concept's content and that remains hard to reconcile with the language of law.

When asked how she could be so certain she recognized her perpetrator, Ford, who is a professor of psychology, specifically referenced the neurological details of traumatic memory, explaining that "just basic memory functions and also just the level of norepinephrine and epinephrine in the brain that as you know, that neurotransmitter that encodes memories into the hippocampus, and so the trauma-related experience is locked there, whereas other details kind of drift" (Global News 2018, 1:29:40).

Ford strengthened her credibility in the hearing by establishing the scientific coherence of her memory gaps in the very moment when they appeared. Viewing the recoding of Ford's testimony evokes the impression that the use of scientific language increased the attention for her words in what must have felt like a hostile environment to her. Moreover, I would argue that the trauma concept itself supported her as a subject who had suffered but was unable to give a full account of the circumstances of her suffering. The relation to herself as someone who cannot remember what happened to her is stabilized by the concept of trauma. The concept can protect subjects from assuming that they are indeed insane by referring to an injury they could not have prevented as the cause of their suffering. Mentioning the term trauma might also have protected Ford from further invasive questioning and from heightened pressure to reveal more details about the horrific incident she had described in her opening statement. The presence of the word and the shared understanding of its meaning, its psychological consequences, and the obscurity it

entails, create a little bit of space for Christine Blasey Ford to take a position in hindsight about her pain, without being reduced to that pain. As a concept, trauma makes space for the inconsistencies of the mind that pain can inflict. It allows a subject to insist on the damage experienced and the neurobiological consequences of that damage, even when there is no memory of it.

7. Being Attracted—Affective Concepts

In her study on conceptual art practices of the ’60s and ’70s, the art historian Eve Meltzer (2013, 8) gives an account of the affective occupation of systems, concepts, and other forms of abstraction. Meltzer turns to these practices in order to trace the meaning of the word “conceptual,” which marks a shift in how things are read. It includes a movement away from the focus on human emotional states and toward an interest in the “antihumanist” qualities of “the grid” (Meltzer 2013, 65), which means patterns and formulas. This shift in reception accompanies a theoretical shift toward structuralism and poststructuralism. Thus, as conceptual art develops in the twentieth century, these shifts are performed by the dissolving of human subjects in “structure” (9). Against that reading of conceptual art and structuralist theory, Meltzer is looking for affective human traces within artworks that are generally considered as *purely* conceptual. This is how she forms a theory of affective sedimentation that rejects the simple claim that conceptual art remains free of feeling.

Meltzer helps us understand concepts as aesthetic constructions that become meaningful through the affects they carry. One feels attracted to a concept because of that affective quality. Meltzer challenges the view that conceptual art is sufficiently characterized by saying that it is playing with “pure” information. Instead, she observes that many systems created in the artistic context of conceptual and “information” art are inhabited by the contents of (human) life. She even thinks that the artworks in question operate through their engagement with affective questions (Meltzer 2013, 19, 22). Her aim is to clarify how affect pervades all levels of human activity.

Meltzer’s first example is Mary Kelly’s “Post-Partum Document,” in which the artist documents the first weeks, months, and years of her child’s life through “scientistic discourses and diagrammatic aesthetics” (Meltzer 2013, 12). Meltzer notes that the artwork falls squarely within the classical conceptual canon of a disengaged and antisensational aesthetics. She observes that the collection of information Kelly put together “seems disaffected, dry, and intellectually distant, especially given that the artist’s son is the subject of her work” (12). Yet Meltzer argues that despite the dryness of forms, the artist’s relationship with this information is one of attachment. The numbers and figures are to be read not as a distant objectification of her postpartum years but as proof of an affective obsession

with them. Through this appropriation of data, Meltzer sees Kelly becoming a "mother (as well as father) of the discourses as well as to her child" (12).

By this statement, Meltzer suggests that the choice of data and its figures and diagrams will always be made carefully and responsibly when the object they refer to is affectively charged or, in this case of a baby, simply loved. Here, the a priori notion of objective and clear articulation as a result of distance collapses. Instead, conceptual precision appears as a result of proximity to the object that is being described.

Meltzer (2013, 65) describes the idea of conceptual purity as a "dream of the information world," which is "a fantasy about being in and of the grid." She further characterizes this abstractionist, Cartesian "dream" by attributes such as the conformity to laws: "Self-restriction; arbitrariness; that disciplined autonomous, device-like quality of being both 'run' and 'followed' at once; the proposition of an absolute visibility that defies the very conditions of the phenomenal world; the very unquestionability of the laws that govern the system; and the proposition that 'if law is anywhere, it is everywhere'—these are the conditions of the grid" (65) And finally, she states that this "dream" is directly opposed to the confusing quality of affective states I mentioned above. Instead, it promotes the idea of absolute transparency through a "scientistic claim to reason, and its peculiar notion of visibility as all-seeing, immune to opacity, and powered by, to repeat Descartes's formulation, the 'inward vision of [the] mind'" (65).

Meltzer is interested in the query, how subjectivity can be sketched anew between the dream of dissolving subjectivity into signs and patterns on one hand and the unquestionable love and affection for objects and human beings on the other. Mary Kelly's work suggests the coexistence of both through her exploration of her own body and the child that it has born. Meltzer's investment in the term "antihumanist" gives an account of subjectivity as an expansion into the material world rather than a rejection of that world. Kelly's "disclosure of her own captivation with the dream of an information world" (Meltzer 2013, 21) performs an expansion of an intimate and affective relationship into seemingly dry signs and patterns. Through that process, the signs and patterns themselves gain affective qualities.

Concepts as shelter are nurtured by the same contradiction: they are not mere formulas, nor are they simply containers for subjective needs and projections. I make use of Eve Meltzer's treatment of the term "systems" in the title of her book *Systems We Have Loved* in order to further calibrate the affective dimensions of theory. One such calibration is noting that not only do the contents of theory provoke affective responses, but theory itself becomes an object we feel attached to. Meltzer argues that it is precisely this attachment—in her case, to systems, such as the signs and patterns mentioned above—that allows for a reconfiguration of attachment itself. Allowing for bonds of feeling to evolve in relation with abstraction opens the possibility to let go of subjectivity as we know it (Meltzer 2013, 26). The idea that

affective attachments occur in other than human relations is a key proposition in contemporary affect studies that turns out to be the case for methodological questions as well (Kahl 2019; Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner 2019a, 2019b; Slaby and von Scheve 2019). Affect research must reckon with its own weights and effects, including the difficulties of methodology when it considers the affective preoccupations of the researcher who applies it. This is less a problem than an opportunity to appreciate what is being brought to a question or a concept through the researcher who poses it, something which might otherwise slip from view.

Eve Meltzer's perspective on conceptual art and its affective layers provides an understanding of how abstraction becomes meaningful beyond discourse. For the creation and use of concepts, this dimension is not to be neglected. The support a concept gains by means of a person's attachment is certainly one of the forces that keeps it in use and that actualizes its validity according to the changes of popular discourse. This might be seen as the irrational part of conceptual work: at some point, the choice of a concept is no longer primarily a result of thorough consideration but also the result of familiarity and prior attachment. The affective life of a concept is its history of material significance. This history reveals why the concept has been instantiated in the first place and, at the same time, offers connecting points that might seem unrelated at first glance. I use the term "attraction" to describe the promiscuous quality of concepts. Their uses and limitations are not predetermined but can be repurposed by anyone who encounters them. Being attracted to a concept means strongly hoping that it will be able to explain what one wants it to explain. In Eve Tuck's case, her familiarity with Deleuze's concept of desire renewed this hope over and over again. It continued to do so until a painful goodbye had to be performed in order to avoid further damage to the experience that was at stake.

8. Conclusion

We have seen that concepts provide accommodation, a home for real-life issues: It is precisely when individual(ized) experience, political struggles, or suffering escape description or naming that they can then be sheltered by concepts. Feelings, failures, and negative experiences settle into the concepts and give them meaning. Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant have provided elements to craft a theory of concepts which gives an account of them being situated in felt experience. I have used the examples of homemaking and trauma to demonstrate the affective dimension of concepts. I have argued that concepts can bear political implications and that these implications matter for their validity. My understanding of concepts as shelter is based on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of concepts and aims to make space for the meaningful aspects of concept creation, which Eve Meltzer has shown in the context of conceptual art, that might be erased by a notion of concepts primarily focusing on transparency and precision. Gayatri Spivak's use of the concept of the subaltern

shows how, in that case, the lack of exact equivalence shelters the concept's most important aspect.

9. Epilogue: A Note on Real Shelter

Shelter is not just needed in the form of concepts. Shelter is needed anywhere because the survival of the most vulnerable is at stake. Shelter is a still-unrealized human right. Shelter is necessary for safety, for the ability to move securely without danger of getting infected, of falling victim to a catastrophe, or of being shot, imprisoned, or killed in one's own home. Shelter is more than housing, because oftentimes, it is mobile. Sheltering refugees, for example, includes evacuating the refugee camps in Lesbos, Greece. It means allowing those who are stuck there to move where they want and providing what they need to do so, rather than perpetuating the threat of holding them in place. Shelter that moves with people must be provided not only by the state but also by the social and material environment of those in movement. For example, the COVID crisis has taught us that we can enact shelter by social distancing. Likewise, climate change has taught us to do so by taking care of ecosystems.

We do not provide any of these things when we describe a concept as shelter. Perhaps it can modestly contribute to sheltering those in movement if it can host the subject's mind, when their body is busy surviving. Material shelter need not be firmly in place for conceptual shelter to be of value. But without material shelter, the subject cannot survive.

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