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Chapter 5

“Lapse of Happily”: Consuming Everyday Banality in American Experimental Poetry

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Abstract

Robert Fitterman’s *Sprawl* and Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* take a conceptualizing approach toward everyday life and ordinary, banal language. *Sprawl* consists mainly of recycled material, specifically online reviews of stores that are typical in an American mall. Rankine’s book contains, along with personally reflective passages of text, appropriated lists, quotations and pictures. Both books comment on staple, banal aspects of contemporary Western everyday life, such as the availability of a large number of choices and the desire to seek temporary satisfaction through consumption. In this chapter, I argue that the writing of Fitterman and Rankine proposes ways of acknowledging, but not necessarily revivifying, the contingent relations between happiness and sadness, or satisfaction and dissatisfaction, within the ordinariness of the everyday.

There is a button on the remote control called FAV. You can program your favorite channels. Don’t like the world you live in, choose one closer to the world you live in. I choose the independent film channel and HBO. Neither have news programs as far as I can tell. This is what is great about America—anyone can make these kinds of choices.

(*Lonely* 24)

Claudia Rankine, in her 2004 book *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, writes about the choices that we, as people and consumers living in Western countries, are presented with in our contemporary everyday lives. The speaker of the passage is consumed by sadness or anxiety and does not want to watch the news so as to avoid having to deal with complicated feelings (*Lonely* 23–24). The passage appears in a text that is itself a document of the number of choices available to the writer and to anyone. Rankine’s book is a multi-genre text, part personal narrative, part creative non-fiction essay, part a prose poetry work, consisting of materials that are sometimes appropriated or quoted from different sources. The book is categorized by the publisher as “lyric essay/poetry”.

A certain anxiety about choices available in everyday life is a prominent concern also in Robert Fitterman’s *Sprawl* (2010), which takes the American shopping mall as its topic and consumer reviews of stores as its content. Consider the following passage as an example:

J. Crew N101

I mean what do you think I should have in my closet? The coat I have is the most finely assembled piece of clothing I own. Beaters in every color, black or brown flats, dressy shirt and dressy black pants, and jeans. Here, you can go from casual to elegant for every occasion. I scored a lot of new items—many will become staples in my closet for this season and many future seasons to come.

(*Sprawl* 30)

Both Rankine's and Fitterman's works can be classified as experimental writing, though they are fairly different from each other on the surface. Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* deals with intensely personal experiences and reflects, for instance, depression and sadness, while Fitterman's *Sprawl* relies on consumer experiences and language that we use to speak about shopping, the discourse of advertising and lifestyle magazine articles discussing how to, for instance, amend one's wardrobe. *Sprawl* consists of text that has been appropriated from online consumer reviews of stores and retail chains (see Stephens 2013, 767; Alexander 2013). Judith Goldman compares the work to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which is about "modern commodity fetishism" as viewed through 19th century Paris (Goldman 2011).

Both Rankine's and Fitterman's books are, in their own ways, concerned with what happens to the self in a world immersed in the abundance of choices available in media and consumer culture, or more particularly, in television and shopping malls, respectively. Both books are about everyday life which is often discussed in terms of recurrence and repetition (see Lefebvre 1971, 17). Everyday life is also, according to Henri Lefebvre (14), characterized by "familiarity", the assumption that we know "what is happening around us". Indeed, both Rankine and Fitterman make use of familiar, appropriated material that has been adapted from various sources, and their work thus has a relation to *conceptual* poetry, albeit to different degrees. Conceptual writing has gained momentum in American poetry in the early 21st century, as Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin have affirmed (Goldsmith 2011, 1; Dworkin 2011, xxiii, xlii). Dworkin and Goldsmith's anthology *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011) seeks to display texts that "share a tendency to use found language in ways that go beyond modernist quotation or postmodern citation" and "that does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies", as Dworkin writes in the introduction (Dworkin 2011, xliii–xliv). The anthology features work from both Rankine and Fitterman, along with other recent as well as older artists, including Samuel Beckett, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage.

I suggest that considering Fitterman's highly conceptual writing in comparison with more obviously personally oriented experimental work like Rankine's, as poetry that is concerned with the expression of experience and affect in everyday life, is beneficial for reading the content of both of their work. As they accentuate a personal relation to everyday banality, Rankine's and Fitterman's poetry explores the complex ways in which everyday happiness and sadness, or ordinary satisfaction and frustration, are contingent, consumable states. I argue that their conceptual writing maximizes a focus on personal expression in order to conceptualize our involvement in the banality of *ordinary choices*. Consuming ordinary discourses in the context of poetry thus explores ethical relations within the banality and ordinariness of everyday life and the choices involved in it.

Conceptual Poetry and Recycling the Ordinary

Conceptual poetry is very much a poetry of the ordinary and the everyday, and what that means requires discussion here for the purposes of this anthology on ordinariness. One of the best-known and most extreme examples of conceptual poetry is Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), which recasts the entire text material of an issue of the *New York Times* from September 1, 2000, in the form of a book with more than 800 pages. *Day* consists of appropriated material, with no original text added. Along with repurposed news stories, Goldsmith's conceptual production includes works titled *The Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007),

and *Sports* (2008). Conceptual writing like this catalogues everyday media material, presenting it as poetry. A fascination with the everyday is, according to Andrew Epstein (2016, 17, 290), an increasingly significant concern for contemporary poetry, exacerbated by the so-called “crisis of attention” that is evident in contemporary life. Conceptual poetry works, he notes, to “highlight the fact that poetry as a genre has had an especially longstanding and potent commitment to rendering the everyday and processes of attention” (Epstein 2016, 28).

Conceptual writing is certainly not an entirely new approach to literature. Goldsmith (2011, 6–7) notes that examination of the possibilities of conceptual appropriation and plagiarist techniques has come to poetry later than to visual arts, where such practices have been commonplace at least since Marcel Duchamp placed a urinal (titled “Fountain”) in the Society of Independent Artists exhibition at the Grand Central Palace (New York) in 1917. Conceptual writing has variously been suggested to be related to 20th century collage poetry (like Eliot, Pound, or Burroughs), concrete poetry, Language Writing, Jeff Koons’s visual art, and remixes and samples used in hip-hop music (Goldsmith 2011, 5–7; Perloff 2010, 11–14; Reed 2011, 760, 768; Reed 2013, 151). Nevertheless, conceptual writing uses appropriated material on a larger scale, thus challenging the centrality of personal expression in poetry.

Due in no small part to experiments like Goldsmith’s, conceptual poetry has been described as “emotionally neutral” by its very nature (Bedient 2013). For Calvin Bedient (2013), who criticizes conceptual writing on these grounds, such writing attempts to challenge “the supposed naïveté of literature that aspires to be original, hence writing that is likely to be affectual”. Contrary to this claim, David Kaufmann (2017, 99, 120) has recently shown, in a discussion of Fitterman’s *No. Wait. Yep, Definitely Still Hate Myself* (2014), that this view is misguided and that the “poem thematizes affect”. I maintain that perhaps the affective qualities of conceptual writing should have been obvious all along. Fitterman’s customer reviews in *Sprawl*, too, are emotional and affective throughout though they do not express his personal affect.

Designating appropriated writing *as poetry* also has implications for how it might be read in terms of emotion and personal expression. For Kaufmann (2017, 161), “Uncreative Writing [Goldsmith’s term for appropriation-focused conceptual poetry] makes most sense when read closely in terms of the lyric tradition”. The lyric features of Fitterman’s writing become more obvious in comparison to Rankine who is less prominently conceptual. As noted above, her book is subtitled *An American Lyric*. Epstein (2016, 28) notes of Rankine’s later book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) that has the same subtitle and a similar style that the style underscores that lyricism should be understood more broadly than it currently is. Reed (2013, loc. 219 of 6005), too, remarks that referring to certain conceptual texts as poetry is important because certain assumptions come with such a designation. He does not, in this context, explicitly discuss what such assumptions might be, but I have two suggestions that are relevant here: the centrality of personal expression and the notion that poetry investigates what it means to use language for expression. Poetry is often viewed as virtually equivalent of the lyric “expression of personal emotion” (Perloff 2010, 2–3, see also e.g. Blasing 2007, 2). Secondly, poetry uses language in such ways as to “call attention to its own materiality”, deviating from “ordinary”, “transparent” uses of language through the use of, for instance, prosody and polysemy (Perloff 1990, 28; see also e.g. Farber 2015, 218). When conceptual poetry uses appropriated materials, it uses ordinary rather than poetic language, but when a text is designated as poetry, readers may be predisposed to view such ordinary language *as poetic* and its expression as personal and affective.

A useful conception for understanding conceptual writing's relation to ordinariness and affect is provided by Sianne Ngai (2012, 2), who briefly connects Fitterman's conceptual poetry to her concept of the "interesting" as an aesthetic category. In her discussion, the "interesting" is defined differently at different historical times, but in relation to conceptual art, it examines, simply put, how an ordinary object or a text becomes "interesting" enough to be considered relevant as art (Ngai 2012, 140, 146–53). Epstein explains that Rankine and certain other contemporary poets working with the everyday are "conscious that *any* effort to represent the overlooked and mundane in art inevitably turns it into art, framing it, aestheticizing, and preserving it" (Epstein 2016, 35, emphasis original). In other words, conceptual writing explores when and how a transformation of the mundane into art happens, and we as readers and our thinking are central in the process. Ngai's (2012, 139) "interesting" as a category indeed "link[s] affect and cognition". She illustrates this by using Ed Ruscha's conceptual art as an example, noting that it examines "modest flickers of affect" in response to ordinary subject matter – her example is Ruscha's photography book that contains pictures of, as the title reveals, *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964) – and the thought process through which such affects are created (147–52). Ngai does not discuss Fitterman in detail, but *Sprawl*, too, presents a variety of ordinary materials for affective/cognitive processing. It contains many emphatic moments that might generate interest or other kinds of affective responses but the discourse of consumption is also obviously banal. We are invited to consider how we, as readers, choose the level of engagement to invest in banal discourse on consumption. In what follows, I will discuss how Fitterman and Rankine examine affect and cognition within everyday ordinariness.

Conceptualizing Everyday Life: Rankine's Television, Fitterman's Mall

Both Rankine's and Fitterman's books take a conceptualizing approach toward everyday life. In Fitterman's *Sprawl*, contemporary American everyday life is viewed through the mall, while for Rankine in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (abbreviated as *Lonely*) television is a central element particularly because of the repeated black-and-white images of television screens that punctuate the pages of the book. Rankine juxtaposes and offers a variety of materials for a poetic reading: along with personal narrative describing events, occasions and feelings and television screens, it contains black-and-white photos from the media, pictures of medicinal package slips, references to philosophers and news articles in endnotes, as well as a list of big pharmaceutical companies operating in South Africa. The desperate message of a friend who has Alzheimer's is displayed as a picture (*Lonely* 17). Another picture displays the U.S. Postal Service's advice for dealing with suspicious mail. Through such references, the book catalogues recent political events like 9/11 and its aftermath (see also *Lonely* 91). The list of pharmaceutical companies is one of the most obviously conceptual elements of the book, and it is also reprinted in Dworkin and Goldsmith's anthology.

The book revolves around the experience of one person, an "I" who narrates her experiences, but not all of the material is the author's own writing. Christopher S. Nealon (2011, 151–52) aptly describes Rankine's work as a "scrapbook", where her mixture of a variety of materials like quotations and photographs accentuates the friction between the materials and her own thoughts and emotions. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, appropriation shifts focus from the writer's or the speaking self's subjectivity to facts and information: for

instance the list of pharmaceutical companies presents its numbing strangeness for the reader to consider and to consume. The text proceeds in the following manner for two pages:

**ALCON LABORATORIES (S.A.)
(PROPRIETARY) LIMITED**

BAYER (PROPRIETARY) LIMITED

**BRISTOL-MYERS SQUIBB
(PROPRIETARY) LIMITED**

(*Lonely* 116)

The list is presented in the context of discussing the pharmaceutical companies' lawsuit against generic AIDS drugs in the 1990s and restrictions on the drugs' availability in South Africa, but the context is only given after the list (*Lonely* 117). The list itself is, at first, free of emotional content and value judgments, but the reader, of course, can attach emotional values to it. The commentary following the list provides a description of the context, along with the notion that the news story about AIDS drugs being made available to South Africans has physical affective consequences for the speaker: "My body relaxes. My shoulders fall back" (ibid.; see Welch 2015, 140). The message, like so many other notions in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, comes to the speaker through the media, this time from a newspaper. Indeed, everyday life in Rankine's poetry operates between newsworthy events as they are presented to us through media and attempts to maintain one's singularity in the midst of the repeated events of everyday life.

Sprawl, as I have already mentioned, is more explicitly conceptual than *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as it draws from online consumer reviews of stores. While Rankine's book comments on living in the United States after 9/11, *Sprawl*, appearing as it did in 2010, installs itself into the world after the 2008 economic crisis. Nealon (2011, 140–43), discussing poetry at the time of the economic crisis, notes that "[o]ne of the more puzzling messages sent by economists to the average citizen during the crash was that they could help pull the country out of its slump by spending more, but only if they also saved more" which meant, as a newspaper article he cites stated, that Americans were now in a double bind with malls.¹ In such a situation, people are presented with an impossible choice. Nealon (2011, 141–46) proceeds to discuss how poetry like *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* might show us "how selves are solicited to participate in this phase of the life of capital, and [...] how they struggle to respond to the tones of that solicitation, which range, of course, from murmur to threat". Nealon does not mention *Sprawl*, but the aftermath of the economic crisis is clearly, and even more obviously than for Rankine, the world in which Fitterman's shopping mall poetry exists. With reference to sociologist Randy Martin's *Financialization of Daily Life* (2002), Nealon (2011, 143) discusses "the consumer as a subject who uses the language of business to organize her psychic life". Indeed, this is what happens in *Sprawl* as it documents the affective experiences people have to consuming.

¹ Over the recent years, perhaps even more than before 2010 when Fitterman wrote his book, the position of the mall in the United States has become unstable as more and more malls are closing. The reasons cited for this include, for instance, online shopping, more so than economic crises (see e.g. Higgins 2017; Sanburn 2017). In this sense, though, *Sprawl* might be read as a testament to an institution that is becoming less central.

The second section of *Sprawl*, which I will mainly focus on here, is titled “Indian Mound Mall”. It begins with a mall directory, complete with references to the mall map:

Directory

Street Level

J. Crew	N101
Macy's	N104
Payless ShoeSource	R114
Kate Spade	E112

(*Sprawl* 15)

The mall map itself is not in the book. Following the mall directory, there are passages of text, let us call them poems, dedicated to each store listed in the directory. In *Sprawl*, the majority of the material is appropriated and the author's intention and writing enter the text through his selective process and organization. Goldsmith (2011, 100) uses Fitterman's “Directory”, an early version of the text that appeared in a 2009 issue of *Poetry* magazine, as an example of his by now well-known concept of “*thinkership*” that supposedly virtually erases the need for reading. However, if we consider Fitterman's *Sprawl* in its entirety, we surely need to read its content more closely instead of simply dispensing with the book after we have considered the concept. *Sprawl*, after all, is more obviously about reorganizing materials than some other examples of conceptual writing like Goldsmith's own work.

In Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, *personal expression* is more prominent than in *Sprawl*. The “I” as an experiencing persona is present in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as it intertwines emphatic personal moments, such as getting a prescription for antidepressants or contemplating her 40th birthday, with politics and news events (*Lonely* 29–32, 103–04). Nealon (2011, 153) discusses Rankine's “lyricism” as an antidote to the constant “image stream” produced by television, which seems to be an omnipresent force in Western everyday life and which is represented in her work through the images of television screens with static on them (Nealon 2011, 153). Contemporary everyday life is, indeed, constantly interrupted by such disturbances or noise (Bell 2009, 94). Rankine's lyric sensibility, then, is an attempt to resist the tediousness of the flow of information that we receive through the media in our everyday lives.

The lyric can also serve other, more complex functions: as Mutlu Konuk Blasing (2007, 3) argues, lyric poetry is inherently connected to “remembering and displaying the emotionally and historically charged materiality of language”. The language of a lyric poem comes charged with individual associations, which for Blasing (45) have emerged through complex psychic processes and the process of language acquisition, and readers are free to connect their personal meanings to it. Lyric poetry, then, is by nature equipped to transmit a rich emotional history. Furthermore, for Blasing (30), poetry can be ethically oriented when there is an “I”, an individual subject that can forge personal connections. Precisely the variable, often “multiple and fragmented” (Welch 2015, 125) emotionally charged presence allows Rankine to productively engage with public forms of expression. Rankine's poetry negotiates public language, such as the list of pharmaceutical companies or language in television commercials for antidepressants, emphasizing a personal relation to them (*Lonely* 29–30, 115–16). Much like personal language for Blasing (2007, 3), such public language becomes “materially charged” by the lyric presence (see also Welch 2015, 124). The various materials resonate with each other. As noted above, the list of pharmaceutical companies triggers a strong affective reaction in the “I”. The language of an antidepressant

advertisement that she reports seeing on television is shown to be designed to cater to emotions, as the slogan goes: “Your life is waiting” (*Lonely* 29). The “I”, describing how she encountered the commercial on television on a sleepless night, recognizes the complexity of such language without really analysing or evaluating it (see Welch 2015, 125).

Conceptual experimentation, like the use of lists, images and other forms of representing a mass of information as part of the poetry draws attention to the flow of information and language that we, like Rankine’s subject, are constrained to negotiate in contemporary everyday life. This awareness of how the self is connected to and influenced by larger processes (Welch 2015, 127) allows Rankine to engage in an ethical inquiry toward language and the self and its connections to others in a media-saturated, commercialized world where crisis seems to be constant. Fitterman’s *Sprawl*, too, engages in conceptual experimentation in order to offer a variety of materials for our consideration. The availability of possibilities for consideration is in this sense structurally central to Rankine’s and Fitterman’s books, but the consideration of a number of choices is also prominent on the level of content.

Moments of Contentment, or a Temporary Victory in the Face of Wardrobe Anxiety

Both *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Sprawl* explore choices. The availability of a nearly endless number of choices in contemporary life is a commonplace notion, demonstrated, for instance, by Barry Schwartz’s popularized bestseller study *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (2004). Schwartz (2004/2005, 1–44) spends the first 44 pages of the work virtually exclusively mapping the different areas in life where we, and more specifically Americans, now have more choice than ever. Fitterman’s mall directory is a document of choices, as well as emotional and affective reactions associated with them, available in an American mall. But even though there is a range of options, they are also limited by what stores happen to be available at the mall. Paul Stephens (2013, 768) writes of Fitterman’s “Directory” that the poem “mimics the rhythms of everyday life in a consumer society; it reproduces redundancy through wholesale serial copying”. Besides being offered opportunities at the mall and in *Sprawl*, we are offered redundancy, which is also characteristic to everyday life which, Maurice Blanchot (1969/1992/2003, 239) notes, is often “tedious, painful, and sordid” and difficult to capture. *Sprawl*, in this sense, reproduces the tediousness and difficulty of choosing in the everyday.

Moreover, in the contemporary world people are increasingly responsible for their choices. For instance Stephens notes that after the financial crisis in 2008, people have become more and more individually accountable for their financial choices (Stephens 2013, 761). Such accountability for choices, financial and otherwise, is visible in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, as it displays the “I’s” powerlessness in the face of an abundance of everyday choices and public language formulations. One passage lists everyday decisions people encounter: “To roll over or not to roll over that IRA? To have a new iMac or not to have it? [...] Now it is the twenty-first century and either you are with us or you are against us” (*Lonely* 91). These are situations where personal responsibility for making a choice is paramount, but the frameworks within which such choices need to be made have often, as in the case of deciding whether one is for or against terrorists, been defined by others. While everyday choices may be tedious to make, they are also meaningful. Emotional and affective reactions are

important in such a situation, but they also need to be accompanied with cognitive processing. Conceptual writing is often concerned precisely with how emotions and an abundance of options are intertwined: as Stephens (2013, 752–55) argues, conceptual writing might help people deal with information management in the contemporary world as it appropriates information into poetry, which point Stephens (2013, 766–67) also makes about *Sprawl's* mall directory.

Like Rankine's list of pharmaceutical companies, Fitterman's mall directory with all its information and options is initially free of emotional content that would have been assigned to it by the writer. Readers are of course free to choose, for instance to feel irritation upon encountering the name of a store that has negative connotations for them or boredom stirred by the list format. Feeling or an emotional response, in this sense, becomes a matter of choice, though in practice we may not have much control over our responses because they are, as Jenefer Robinson (2005/2006, 3) explains, largely automatic. Fitterman's list, in any case, does not instantly validate a particular response through an authorial voice, and the emotional response calls for cognitive consideration. Emotionally charged content, however, is ample in Fitterman's consumer reviews/poems.

Let us consider, again, the passage I cited in the beginning of this chapter from the "Indian Mound Mall" section, titled "J. Crew N101" (*Sprawl* 30). The passage is utterly banal. It describes assembling a functional wardrobe, written by a relatively satisfied customer who presumably shopped at J. Crew and "scored a lot of new items" (*ibid.*). Of course, these texts are not authentic customer experiences from particular stores, but consist of multiple different experiences. This becomes evident if one conducts Google searches with phrases from the passage. Such searches produce few results, which may indicate that Fitterman has reworked the material or that the original material is no longer accessible on the Internet. Only the sentence "many will become staples in my closet for this season and many future seasons to come" (*Sprawl* 30) produces a match, a yelp.com review of an H&M store by "Sarah M." in 2007. Fitterman has used a part of her review also in the next poem, "Macy's N104". Though the J. Crew passage appears relatively unified, in many other passages in the book the mood suddenly changes, for instance when a jewellery store is discussed in both negative and positive terms over the course of a few sentences (*Sprawl* 40–41). Such discrepancies underscore the constructed nature and inauthenticity of these texts as consumer reviews.

Indeed, *writing*, in the form of organizing found materials, has taken place in the construction of the book, but that is ultimately beside the point. The author's "reframing" of materials is also a conscious act of "self-expression" (Goldsmith 2011, 9; Kaufmann 2017, 6). Regardless of who wrote a particular passage, as the writing of a variety of consumers is recontextualized as poetry in Fitterman's book, we can read the book as lyric, as the voice of a poetic speaker who is at times happy, at times dissatisfied. As Kaufmann (2017, 10) remarks, many conceptual writers depend on their readers' competence on how to read lyric poetry. The "Indian Mound Mall" section highlights the "I", or several "Is", who consume at the mall and use services and are variously satisfied or dissatisfied with these experiences. Normally, what we, as readers, do with such material when we encounter it online is to quickly browse through it in order to glean information that might be of use as we attempt to make our own decisions about where to shop. While it is not entirely unthinkable that a book like Fitterman's might inspire its readers to go shopping, the disjunctions between various materials also invite readings that go beyond reading for informational purposes. Fitterman's text is out of the ordinary both as poetry and as consumer review.

When read beyond its informational purposes, “J. Crew N101” presents connections to a variety of genres, when for instance the phrase “staples in my closet” resembles advertising language or the discourse of a magazine article assisting readers in their attempts at assembling functional wardrobes “from casual to elegant for every occasion” (*Sprawl* 30). The word “staple” refers to the possibility of securing something, of gaining a sense of completion or consistency. As we read it as poetry in this book, it represents contentment, a momentary escape from the need to make constant choices and from the interminable dullness of the everyday (cf. Blanchot 1969/1992/2003, 239). The phrase “staples in my closet” appears like a quasi-metaphoric moment representing the plight of contemporary everyday life. After all, as lifestyle magazines will tell us, having a functional wardrobe reduces the number of small, yet difficult choices we have to make in our everyday lives.

The notion of a temporary sense of completion is, indeed, a staple of theoretical conceptualizations of shopping and consumption. Margaret Crawford (1992, 13), for instance, in a 1992 article on shopping malls, explains that when there is a large number of items available to buy, shoppers can try on particular identities which can be “momentarily stabilized”, but “satisfaction always remains just out of reach”. A choice temporarily settles one’s identity. Schwartz (2004/2005, 3, 21), for his part, argues that as the number of choices we have in our everyday lives increases, we begin to enjoy the act of choosing less and less. In *Sprawl*, indeed, there is a sense of helplessness in the face of available choices. The overall tone in the “J. Crew N101” passage is one of satisfaction, of a temporary victory in the face of wardrobe anxiety.

“Indian Mound Mall” foregrounds the personal, emotional experience. In *Sprawl*, the “I” is obviously not a singular, unified persona but a composite persona who variously engages in rigorous consumption and feels the need to talk about that experience. The “Is” in the book have intentions, though they are various and conflicting. Similarly, the reader is invited to consume the text materials. The context of poetry allows for considering emotions, sensibilities and meanings within the material.

We might read Fitterman’s “J. Crew N101” passage as we would traditionally read poetry: “I mean what do you think I should have in my closet?” (*Sprawl* 30) might be an allegorical lamentation for a more general want or lack of something that the “I”, standing in for all of us as a poetic speaker, experiences. Or it might be a question about whether something, like dark secrets, should stay hidden in the closet. But the fact remains that this is also really, or at least supposedly, just a statement from an utterly banal consumer review.

In any case, the pertinence of a reading of a single line soon collapses: the question about the closet has little weight. It will soon be cancelled by any of the other passages in the book, for instance this passage which switches focus to the difficulty of making choices in a neoliberal world where money determines choices:

Bank of America ATM F200

So frustrating... I wonder why I make payments to them if they don't do anything for me. “World class service” please, a donkey’s left nut would give me better service. I wish they’d outsource they’re service to India—at least they would be friendly, and helpful and are competent enough to transfer you to the correct departments! But I guess when you do this, these call centers would shut down-and this is probably the only job these guy can get. That would mean higher unemployment, more homeless begging for money on the streets, and higher taxes. Seems to be an interesting dilemma:[sic] shitty service and allow people to keep their jobs, or outsource [sic] to India.

(*Sprawl* 36, spelling and grammar as in the original)

The passage is, again, a lamentation on the availability of choices, on the familiar topic of outsourcing, and both options, from the speaker's point of view, are bad. As readers, we are certainly aware of the reasons why companies might outsource their service, which are usually related to cost and not service quality. The comment is banal. Passages such as this, which are replete with spelling errors and inappropriate language, also replicate a conflicted situation for its readers that, Kaufmann (2017, 60, 64) argues, is common in conceptual writing at large. Discussing Ara Shirinyan's conceptual poetry collection *Your Country Is Great* (2008), which uses appropriated travel reviews to talk about various countries, Kaufmann (60) asks whether we, as readers, "[a]re [...] supposed to feel superior to the speakers", and whether the "superiority [is] supposed to make us feel better or worse". For Kaufmann (64), the question of what one is "supposed" to do is central to reading conceptual poetry like Shirinyan's or Fitterman's. He remarks that conceptual writing can "present us with a subjection that is vulnerable not only to the violent contingencies of the world but also to our aggression and condescension as readers". Conceptual writing can thus urge its readers to consider their own complicity in or resistance of particular kinds of behaviour and language.

The dilemma in the above passage is presented as unsolvable, because there are certain predetermined limits within which it has to be conceived. The book as poetry presents no angle from which to feel relief from the complexity of such a dilemma, nor does it attempt to provide further insights into the problematics of outsourcing, here to India. Some of the choices available to us as readers, then, are to feel "superior" (Kaufmann 2017, 60) because we do not speak or think like the "I" in this passage, or simply worse because outsourcing and these kinds of thoughts about outsourcing are out there. But ultimately *Sprawl*, in all its emphasis on the everyday, does not treat this writing as the discourse of an other, someone from whom we can distance ourselves. Instead, in highlighting this writing as the speech of an "I", the book presents it as something in which anyone of us might be personally invested and invites us to look more closely at its constituents, like the spelling errors and vulgar language.

The voices in Fitterman's book are varied, but invariably they seem to be voices that cannot find relief or a long-term solution to their problems of making choices and seeking happiness. In *Sprawl*, everything people do, like buy shoes or call the customer service department at a bank, is riddled with affective experiences. The book is punctuated by moments of joy and happiness, as experienced when one finds just the right black pants or shoes, and dissatisfaction, frustration or sadness, upon having received bad customer service or having realized that "[p]retty much all the big shoe companies are reckless exploiters of third world child labour" (*Sprawl* 54). Statements like these are given equal weight as any other statement in the book. The notions about outsourcing to India or exploitation of child labour are given as someone's emphatic, personal opinions. As readers of *Sprawl*, we are invited to become aware of the affective reactions associated with the banal, yet difficult choices we encounter in everyday life.

Banality, in *Sprawl*, becomes intertwined with a "pursuit of happiness", an attempt to find not exactly significance or meaning in everyday life but a temporary sense of satisfaction. "Pursuit of Happiness" is, indeed, fittingly the title of the last text in the book (*Sprawl* 81). The last section, "Cineplex 12", features movies, and it consists of material appropriated from film reviews by ordinary viewers. The passage, which refers to a 2006 movie along with, of course, to the US Declaration of Independence, provides no real sense of

conclusion or closure. The ending is as banal as what comes before it. *Sprawl* is less conclusive and less of a celebration than, for instance, Allen Ginsberg's well-known consumption-themed poem "A Supermarket in California" which, too, reflects on loneliness, America, and the availability of a disturbingly large number of items to buy (Ginsberg 1960/1999, 181–82). *Sprawl*, on the other hand, emphasizes how everything is somehow commensurate and yet relative and deeply personal, defined by one's choices. Next, I will consider the larger frame *Sprawl* presents for its available choices, the mall as a place and space.

Wandering in the Urban Sprawl in *Sprawl*

The overall context of the various notions, experiences and lamentations in *Sprawl* is the generic shopping mall as a place. Meaghan Morris (1988/1993, 408) has argued of shopping centres that "it isn't necessarily or always the objects consumed that count in the act of consumption, but rather that unique sense of place". Fitterman's mall is, indeed, such a place: a context for the consumption of unique experiences and emotions, like the happiness of finding just the right shoes or lamenting on child labour. It is also a place that renders such experiences indistinguishable from each other. It is much like the context of the everyday, where according to Lefebvre "modes of experience are still undifferentiated" (Lefebvre 1971, 13; see also Siltanen 2016, 152).

The title, *Sprawl*, situates the mall in the *urban sprawl*, which refers to the process of a city spreading into the surrounding more rural areas, which can then become punctuated by the all-American malls where people drive to shop. Fitterman's "Indian Mound Mall" is a fictional, composite place, though the name refers to a real mall by that name in Heath, Ohio, which is located close to the historic site of the Serpent Mound, a place that was purportedly significant for Native Americans. The poem also makes reference to Cahokia, another Native American historic site in Illinois.

The mall in *Sprawl* becomes a place that erases history and origin. Goldman (2011) briefly remarks that "Fitterman's mode of citationality does not excavate the site but echoes the mall's own history-annihilating gesture". This is evident, for instance, in how *Sprawl* treats the "Indian Mounds" in the opening text of the section which, as Stephens (2013, 766) writes, "largely eras[es] the effects of European conquest on the landscape inhabited by Native Americans". In this sense, it is no wonder there are no further insights to be offered on the predicament of people affected by child labour or by outsourcing to India. Like in everyday life, these issues become overshadowed by everything else that is happening. They are facts and contingencies that can be brushed off when something else appears. The process of *sprawling*, in the context of Fitterman's work, erases history and decenters meanings. *Sprawl* invites us to read this process through presenting its discourse of consumption, a constant but evidently futile search for contentment and significance in a world where we are continuously presented with new opportunities and choices, including the opportunity to wander around the mall, perhaps without a particular intention.

Michel de Certeau (1980/1984, 169) compares *reading* in the context of everyday life to "wander[ing] through an imposed system (that of the text, analogous to the constructed order of a city or of a supermarket)". In this way, de Certeau (1980/1984, 167–69) challenges the conception of reading as "passive consumption". Such an idea of the reader's active role is hardly new today, but I want to highlight de Certeau's alignment of reading with wandering in a supermarket. De Certeau (1980/1984, xii) emphasizes the importance of

considering and studying not simply what, for instance, is on television but “what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’” in and with the everyday, as in wandering in the city or consuming. Reading and everyday activities, like wandering in a mall or in the larger sprawling (sub)urban area, are intricately intertwined. These activities share a logic that allows for some freedom but only within established limits.

Sprawl explores what consumers “make” of consuming within “imposed” limits as it appropriates affective reactions to consumption. The structure of the book, as it relates to the mall directory that is common to many American malls, provides another level of an “imposed system” (cf. de Certeau 1980/1984, 169). Anyone who has ever been to several American malls knows that they tend to resemble each other, with similar architectural choices and a similar variety of chain stores. Wandering in, or reading, Fitterman’s appropriated mall is wandering in a place where everything is repeated, though the details may vary. In the imposed system of a mall, possibilities seem virtually endless, but they are also carefully limited by the frameworks that the mall sets.

The Everyday and the Hap in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*

Rankine’s work also seeks to obscure differences and to display how everyday life and its frustrations become intertwined with larger problems and events in the world. A long passage that precedes the list of pharmaceutical companies includes a description of a random encounter on a bus stop that turns into a reflection on “Operation Iraqi Freedom”. *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* was published in 2004, after US troops invaded Iraq in 2003. The passage begins with describing the everyday frustration of how the speaker is carrying something heavy and needs to find a taxi or a bus to get home (*Lonely* 113). Then, a comment from a woman at the bus stop about how difficult things are prompts a long lamentation of which a part is quoted here:

my packages are getting heavier by the minute and besides, what is there to say since rhetorically it’s not about our oil under their sand but about freeing Iraqis from Iraqis and Osama is Saddam and Saddam is “that man who tried to kill my father” and the weapons of mass destruction are, well, invisible and Afghanistan is Iraq and Iraq is Syria and we see ourselves only through our own eyes [...]

(*Lonely* 113)

The speaker struggles to make sense of how world events are related but no conclusion can be offered, apart from the sense that “we see ourselves only through our own eyes”, the simple, banal idea that we cannot get away from our own context, though we may try. The passage itself concludes in George W. Bush’s words, according to whom “The war in Iraq is really about peace” (*Lonely* 113).

Discussing poetry and wars in Iraq and Vietnam, Peter Nicholls (2005, 14) proposes poetry as a way of reinvigorating the tediousness of how wars are discussed and casting “ethical light” on such problematic language materials. Indeed, Rankine’s poetry reframes its problematic materials, like Bush’s statements, but not in order to provide a poetic language alternative. Instead, it presents Bush’s statements and other similar problematic language material like advertisements for antidepressants “as is” and integrates them in personally invested writing, thus acknowledging how they, too, become personally charged. Though not

about war, Fitterman's *Sprawl* can likewise be related to other recent problems, such as the financial crisis.

Like *Sprawl* with its consumer voices, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* deals with seeking temporary relief from the everyday, as it refers to attempts of finding happiness in the middle of tediousness and depressing newsworthy events. Rankine connects happiness to "hap", a word that relates to luck or chance. A passage early on in the book describes how the speaker calls the suicide hotline and tells the paramedics that she

had a momentary lapse of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. This kind of thing happens, perhaps is still happening. He shrugs and in turn explains that you need to come quietly or he will have to restrain you. If he is forced to restrain you, he will have to report that he is forced to restrain you. It is this simple: Resistance will only make matters more difficult.

(*Lonely* 7)

In an endnote to this passage, Rankine provides dictionary definitions, highlighting the archaic meaning of the word "happily" as meaning "by chance or accident" (*Lonely* 133). She also makes reference to Lyn Hejinian's book-length poem *Happily* (2000), where the connection between "hap" and "happiness" is similarly conceptualized (for discussion, see Siltanen 2016, 183–84). The everyday, indeed, is often discussed in relation to *chance*, as for instance Ben Highmore notes, characterizing the everyday as tedious but also as privy to being "disturbed and disrupted by the *unfamiliar*" (Highmore 2002, 1–2, emphasis original; see also Siltanen 2016, 152). The idea of wanting to call the suicide hotline may seem to be an unexpected event to occur in the middle of the everyday, but it is nevertheless ordinary, something that might *happen*.

Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2010, 22) has discussed the etymological relation between "the hap", in the sense of the unexpected, and happiness. She suggests that even though "activity" is usually associated with "happiness" and "passivity" with "unhappiness", this distinction is not necessarily useful (Ahmed 2010, 208–10). Ahmed (2010, 221) writes that "passivity can be an ethical capacity: you have to be willing to be affected by others, to receive their influence". The notion of being "willing to be affected by others" is important for reading Rankine's and Fitterman's poetry. These texts invite their readers to connect, not necessarily with the poet or the speaker, but with the affective content, the ordinary as well as "interesting" (cf. Ngai 2012, 149–53) experiences that might occur in everyday life. We are asked to *consume* and to wander in these discourses of happiness and sadness or satisfaction and dissatisfaction as they *happen*. Consumption, which is often understood as passive, thus becomes a way of being "affected", a response that might be viewed as the beginning of an ethical relation.

The notion of a "lapse of happily" as a surrender to chance cuts through much of Rankine's text. Whatever happens is out of the speaker's control. They are viewers of television screens and media images that fall upon them, and "resistance will only make matters more difficult" (*Lonely* 7). Rankine's work is not as heavily constructed of appropriated material as Fitterman's, but there is a sense of the self as being defined in relation to public discourse, such as the news and media images or, as Kevin Bell (2009, 102) formulates it, living with "commercially/officially administered noise with which we are supposed to identify at all times". Similarly, *Sprawl* is about living with the noise of discourse

about consumption. The “hap” as happenstance and as a lapse serves as a connection between the personal and the communal, between happiness and sadness and other experiences that might otherwise appear dissonant. Fitterman’s and Rankine’s texts bring together contingent everyday experiences like outsourcing to India, finding the right shoes, invading Iraq and calling the suicide hotline. Their poetry invites us to be *affected* by ordinary materials and everyday frustrations, like the difficult decisions people make about ethical consumer choices or about what to wear. Indeed, in *Sprawl* as in everyday life, ethical decisions about which shoes to buy are commensurate with decisions about what to pick from one’s wardrobe.

As Rankine’s and Fitterman’s books recontextualize text material that has been appropriated from other sources or refer to media discourse, they invite us, as readers, to examine our own connections to and implications in such material. This means acknowledging not only the banality of such language but also the thought process through which it can become “interesting” in Ngai’s (2012, 146–53) sense. *Sprawl* and *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* invite us to respond to ordinary affective experiences, the contingency of happiness as it happens, the short distance between happiness and sadness, and a seemingly endless but ultimately limited number of options and choices. Both books share the sheer banality of the sense that in contemporary everyday life, possibilities seem exhaustingly endless but are ultimately limited. In such a situation, acknowledging and being affected by the banality of everyday life seems like a modestly ethical thing to do.

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