

## Review

***Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology.*** By Alexander Ghedi Weheliye. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. 304 pp. ISBN 978-1-4780-2521-4  
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*Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology* provides an excellent discussion of contemporary R&B (1995–2010) and its relationship to gender, sexuality and technology. Weheliye's collection of essays and interludes covers general themes in R&B but takes a special interest in understanding the cultural politics and theory behind the music *and* – in turn – how the music impacts cultural politics and theory. This review describes the book's title, organisational design, musical corpus, gains in understanding R&B and gains in writing technique.

The title *Feenin* refers to the 1993 Jodeci song by the same name. The term is derived from '*fiend*' as in *drug fiend*', but instead denotes a fiend for love (p. 72, emphasis in original). Weheliye shows that Jodeci's song moved R&B beyond 'traditional humanist provenances' by using an auto-tuned 'vocoder effect' to 'emphasize one particular aspect of the lyrics' (p. 72). The argument is that the voice and technology helped push 'desire to the extreme' (p. 72). *Feenin's* title is also related to an Afrofuturistic LISTSERV (also called 'Feenin') that became a 'hub of conversations about Blackness, science, technology, and science fiction at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s' (pp. 15–16). Overall, the title indicates the book's concentration on the 'mechanic distortion of human vocalization' and the ability to push the human voice in different ways though auto-tune and other techniques (p. 15).

The organisation of *Feenin* is a distinctive element of the book. *Feenin* is arranged as 11 'Tracks' (or chapters). These progress from Track 0.0 to Track 10.0. There are also 'Interludes' in between some Tracks. In fact, the 'Interlude' sections often provide some of the most exceptional, succinct and thoughtful content. Most Tracks are self-contained essay arguments, but there are also interviews, interview reflections and other similar work. There is a section of the book that is crucial to understanding the overall argument (pp. 15–21); however, the 'Tracks' (or chapters) could probably be read in any order. There are tracklists in the book too. A tracklist of about 50 songs related to #BeyondDeepBrandyAlbumCuts is part of 'Interlude 3' (pp. 156–7). This hashtag refers to an 'early 2013 Twitter flare-up', as Solange Knowles attempted to draw 'attention to the serious deficiencies in the coverage of contemporary R&B'. An example is Brandy, who is an artist that is 'not seen as an innovator by the public at large'. Yet, for BlackFem artists such as Jazmine Sullivan, Jill Scott, Kelela and Solange, Brandy is seen as the 'vocal bible' or blueprint for a type of sound. The hashtag asks people to take R&B seriously as a critical discourse (p. 154). *Feenin* also has a Spotify playlist with a QR code at the front of the book. This organisation makes reading *Feenin* similar to playing an R&B album on a vinyl record, compact disc or even cassette tape (by rewinding and fast-forwarding to songs).

The musical corpus in *Feenin* is both US-centric and non-US-centric. It would be unfair to characterise the book as only US-focused because of its wide-ranging US R&B corpus from the mid-1990s to the 2010. *Feenin* makes very significant points about musical styles from Germany (techno), the UK (new wave) and other non-US locations. Additionally, the US corpus is almost always contextualised beyond the US (and often beyond R&B). The US coverage shows how R&B artists from 1995 to 2010 helped archive musical classics from R&B singers of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The book discusses US-based artists and groups such as: Brandy, Destiny's Child, Drake, Erykah Badu, Fantasia, Frank Ocean, Ginuwine, Jazmine Sullivan, Jeremih, Kandi, Kelly Rowland, Mary J. Blige, Mariah Carey, Me'Shell Ndegeocello, Rihanna, Shamir, Solange, SZA, T-Pain, Tevin Campbell, Tink and TLC. The international analysis of R&B is significant, as Tracks 4.0, 5.0 and 6.0 focus on Europe. Track 4.0 centres on the Brothers Keepers and Sisters Keepers organisations in Germany and R&B performed by Xavier Naidoo and Glashaus. Track 5.0 follows the evolution of techno clubs, music and groups in Germany. Jazzanova and Kraftwerk are examined in the Track. Track 6.0 looks at how music from Prince and David Bowie pushed new wave music in both the US and Europe.

*Feenin* also helps readers understand the cultural politics of R&B. Rather than considering R&B as non-political or a-political music, *Feenin* shows that recently, the genre has fulfilled the role of bringing 'attention to the Black Lives Matter or the prison-industrial complex' and that 'the private, the interpersonal, and the erotic are not outside of the purview of the political' (pp. 19–20). Weheliye effectively highlights R&B's interpersonal statements as a form of micro politics. The book builds far beyond that, but the interpersonal argument alone is enough evidence to prompt a further look into R&B's cultural politics. Weheliye makes the case that the politics of R&B are mentioned less than Hip Hop (or indie rock), and that 'the critical conversation about R&B still lags considerably' behind discussions of Hip Hop and indie rock (p. 154). Weheliye also writes about Blackness as a concept and its relationship to R&B: 'Instead of focusing on the bounded historical continuity of the nation-state, diaspora offers pathways that retrace layering of difference in the aftermath of colonialism and slavery as well as the effects of other forms of migration and displacement' (p. 101).

The book makes major gains in writing technique, particularly in the way that Weheliye directly addresses the reader. Weheliye regularly breaks down the 'fourth wall', and these moments are highlights in *Feenin*. In one example, Weheliye writes: 'Dearest of readers, if you're anticipating a broader thematic climax or a big splashy crescendo with a succinct teleological end point, I'm terribly sorry to disappoint: instead, as so often, there's simply living on, living with' (p. 200). Breaking down this 'fourth wall' also speaks to the importance of interpersonal politics in R&B. This is an example of what helps *Feenin* excel in making detailed arguments about gender and sexuality, while also bringing tremendous value to conversations about technology and communication devices, Black culture and philosophy, popular culture and theory, and sound production and design. Weheliye's arguments around mobile technology (pagers, cellphones, text messaging, social media) in R&B's content are extremely compelling.

Overall, *Feenin* is great for readers interested in learning more about the intersection of R&B, gender, sexuality and race. The book offers a tremendously deep discussion of R&B from 1995 to 2010. The Black diasporic focus and book's organisation around a tracklist are also exciting features. The tracklist is fitting, as *Feenin* helps

readers better understand some very popular R&B songs that they may enjoy, remember and have a few questions about. *Feenin* will also open larger conversations about the cultural politics of contemporary R&B and other genres of Black popular music.

Lavar Pope 

Loyola University Chicago, Arrupe College  
[Lpope1@luc.edu](mailto:Lpope1@luc.edu)