
ALEXANDER
GHEDI
WEHELIYE
FEENIN
R&B MUSIC AND
THE MATERIALITY OF
BLACKFEM VOICES AND
TECHNOLOGY

FEENIN

Duke University Press
Durham and London
2023

ALEXANDER
GHEDI
WEHELIYE

ENIN

R&B MUSIC AND THE MATERIALITY OF BLACKFEM VOICES AND TECHNOLOGY

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Warnock Pro and Flama
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Weheliye, Alexander G., [date] author.
Title: Feenin : R&B music and the materiality of BlackFem voices and technology / Alexander Ghedi Weheliye.
Other titles: R&B music and the materiality of BlackFem voices and technology
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023011214 (print)
LCCN 2023011215 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478025214 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478020318 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478027294 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Rhythm and blues music—History and criticism. | Soul music—History and criticism. | Blues (Music)—History and criticism. | African Americans—Music—History and criticism. | African American women singers. | BISAC: MUSIC / Genres & Styles / Soul & R 'n B | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / American / African American & Black Studies
Classification: LCC ML3521 .W445 2023 (print) | LCC ML3521 (ebook) | DDC 781.644—dc23/eng/20230612
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023011214
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023011215

Cover art: *All I Need*, 2018. Collage and ink on magazine page. 16 in. × 19.5 in. © Krista Franklin.

For Cheryl A. Wall and Abena P. A. Busia

For Marlena and Aaliya Weheliye

A playlist is available on the Spotify streaming service: http://bit.ly/3Zhc0zg.

Good day in my mind, safe to take a step out
Get some air now, let your edge out
Too soon, I spoke, you be heavy in my mind
Can you get the heck out?
I need rest now, got me bummed out
You so, you so, you, baby, baby, babe
I've been on my empty mind shit
I try to keep from losin' the rest of me
I worry that I wasted the best of me on you, baby
You don't care
Said, not tryna be a nuisance, it's just urgent
Tryna make sense of loose change
—SZA, "Good Days" (2020)

TRACK 0.0

GOOD DAYS

R&B Music and Critical Fabulation in the Frequencies of the Now

December 26, 2020. Chicago, Illinois: The second wave (of what will turn out to be many) of high numbers of coronavirus infections, resultant hospitalizations, and deaths has overtaken most of the United States as well as many other parts of the globe. It also happens to be the day after the release of SZA's "Good Days," which I play on a continuous loop, streaming it on repeat without realizing until later that I'm already on my tenth listen of the day. Over the next few months, I will engage this song a few hundred more times. Though I obsessively lent my ears to Jazmine Sullivan's "Lost One" over the preceding six weeks, because I was happy about Sullivan's first publicly available recording after five years of radio silence and because the song

gave shape to some of my feelings about the sudden death of a very close friend, there was something different about Solána Imani Rowe's (SZA's government name) latest release, with its soothingly foraging and baroque-sounding acoustic guitar loop, tender yet persistent drums, sampled seagull noises, intermittently undecipherable lyrics due to SZA's unique delivery, and extended outro with the following reiterated mantra: "Always in my mind, always in my mind, mind."[1] These lines succinctly encapsulated in the form of a gorgeous four-minute, thirty-nine-second R&B song the preceding nine months, during which life took place for many almost exclusively in their minds and on their screens, that is, if life occurred at all.

All these factors amalgamate into something akin to a vibe that might best be described as melancholic jubilance or euphoric melancholy. When combined with those parts of the song's words that are readily discernible and that address interiority, being in one's mind, the potential dangers of the outside, the end of the world, and particularly the repeated invocation of "I be on my empty mind shit," they combine to form a pandemic anthem.[2] A hymn that is not too thoughtlessly celebratory but that wistfully insists on good days both in the song's Now and in the hope for a (post)pandemic future. In this scenario, as in the "real world," the pandemic will most likely not end anytime soon, but many people's lives, both those that did and those that did not die, will have been incontrovertibly altered regardless.[3]

As intimate as it is capacious in lyrical content, sung intonation, and sonic architecture, "Good Days" is very of its—of this—of our—moment: unambiguously from and of the Now while at the same time amplifying the extensive history of R&B music's deft fusion of the personal and the political. Accordingly, SZA's lyrics pertain to a romantic relationship gone awry as much as they tackle through interior monologue the broader dimensions of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the inarticulacy of parts of the "Good Days" lyrics, which results from SZA's unique style of vocalization, which has been dubbed by some disparagingly as "singing in italics," consti-

1 SZA, "Good Days," Top Dawg Entertainment, 2020, MP3, https://www.discogs.com/release/16639632-SZA-Good-Days. For a recounting of how the record was made by SZA's cowriters and producers, see Phillips, "'It's Just a Family Record.'"

2 I identified with these lines especially, because quarantine "brain fog" hit me full force in the late fall of 2020, just before "Good Days" was released. See, for instance, Grose, "Why Your Brain Feels Broken"; and Cushing, "Late-Stage Pandemic."

3 See Jordan, *Some of Us*.

tutes a part of what makes the song so special and able to give expression to the complicated life situation defined by the COVID pandemic, where death is even more lurkingly ever present than it is in a "normal" cisheteropatriarchal anti-Black world.[4] "Good Days" sounds newly emergent forms of heart/////break without forgetting the preexisting conditions that got us here. It carries forth the tradition of R&B music speaking obliquely, in hushed sotto voce tones, to the politics of its age, for instance, Aretha Franklin demanding R-E-S-P-E-C-T or Sam Cooke imparting that a change is going to come (see track 8.0 for more about this), while also conjuring what I've referred to elsewhere as the nonwordness of sound.[5] SZA's singing style takes on this extralinguistic dimension because Rowe frequently enunciates words in ways extremely counterintuitive to how they would be pronounced in everyday English-language speech, in either "standard" or "colloquial" idioms, and as a result exquisitely boosts their sonic materialities and aesthetic virtualities to realms beyond linguistic meaning. Hear, for instance, how Rowe sings the English-language word for female dogs on "Love Galore" (from *Ctrl*) in a manner that makes it sound like the title of that 1980s movie starring Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey—yes, the one with that song with the wind and the wings.[6] Here are the lyrics in question:

> Skrrt, skrrt on b****es
> I don't know these b****es
> Dig dirt on b****es
> Do it for fun
> Don't take it personal baby
> Love 'em all lately[7]

Not coincidentally, this also represents a moment where queerness slyly disrupts the traditionally heterosexual proceedings of most pop music with SZA admitting that she's dated a few ladies:

> Luh-love to my ladies
> I dated a few

4 Townsend, "SZA Sang in Italicized."
5 See Weheliye, *Phonographies*.
6 If one must listen to *that* song, it should at least be the original: Gladys Knight & the Pips, "Hero," on *Visions*, CBS Records, 1983, LP, https://www.discogs.com/release/1590822-Gladys-Knight-The-Pips-Visions.
7 SZA, "Love Galore," on *Ctrl*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2017, MP3, https://www.discogs.com/release/10416609-SZA-Ctrl.

Given that I generally tend to not experience pop music lyrics as content transmissions but as textural frequencies of nonwordness, the queerness of these particular lyrics had to be pointed out to me by students in my fall 2017 The Politics of Black Popular Music course at Northwestern even though I'd listened to this song countless times. When I asked the class whether SZA had ever addressed her queerness in her music, three students recited these lyrics almost simultaneously. Though queer content in R&B has existed for years in the oeuvres of Me'Shell Ndegeocello, Rachid, Kehlani, Moses Sumney, THEESatisfaction, Serpentwithfeet, Janelle Monáe, Rahsaan Patterson, Syd, MNEK, Frank Ocean, Tevin Campbell, Wuhryn Dumas, Sylvester, Durand Bernarr, and Jackie Shane, among others, queer listeners are often still compelled to engage with the genre through the frequential wavelengths of what Treva Ellison calls a "Black Femme Praxis," which Ellison defines as "a lived politics of double-crossing, or making queer use of, racialized and gendered labor constructs and heteronormative nuclear familial relations."[8] In general, R&B lends itself to "making queer use of" because of its emphasis on the affective and domestic in interpersonal (mostly) heterosexual and normative relations.

Along with Frank Ocean, SZA has been instrumental in introducing new vocal and thematic languages into R&B music as well as into everyday observational styles of singing that move away from the church-derived melismatic dramatics that once defined the genre to embrace more introverted, restrained, observational, and conversational topics and modes of vocalizing/singing. The constitutive opacity of SZA's lyrics, sung delivery, and the overall sound of the instrumentation make "Good Days" perfect for conjuring the meeting point of low-level claustrophobic anxiety and reticent pleasure precipitated by the realities of a COVID world. The critique of vibe singing and R&B's increasing dissociation from Black churches as spaces of musical apprenticeship has for some positioned post-1970s R&B music as inauthentically Black, as unable to sonically illuminate Black folks' lifeworlds. Though the genre has surely undergone some fundamental shifts during this time, it remains *the* foundation for most other popular musical styles, ranging from Afrobeats to country and hip-hop, and I believe its discrediting is clearly due to the genre's perceived femininity beginning with the disco era and continuing with the ascendancy of hip-hop (see tracks 7.0 and 8.0 in this volume) as well as to the more universal devaluation of BlackFem critical and creative

8 Ellison, "Black Femme Praxis," 14.

labor.[9] Thus, while surely charting new territories within the genre, Rowe's and Ocean's oeuvres remain unmistakably Black and unambiguously R&B, very much bearing witness to and fabulating with Black life, theirs and ours.

This mistreatment of R&B, which is frequently tethered to the narrative form of the genre's putative decline, if not its altogether unceremonious death, has dominated scholarly and journalistic commentary on the genre; but there has also been some excellent scholarship that takes post-1970s R&B music seriously, by writers such as Daphne Brooks, Francesca Royster, Robert Patterson, Mark Anthony Neal, Elliott Powell, Simone White, Jason King, Treva Lindsey, Michael Awkward, Ayanna Dozier, Richard Iton, Brittnay Proctor, and Farah Jasmine Griffin.[10] With *Feenin* I aim to contribute to this ever-changing archive of conversations, which do not neglect the changes hip-hop has wrought on R&B music, and vice versa, at the same time as they still hear the genre as a viable and thriving venue for the continued expression of Black thought and life. Good day in my mind.

I have taken Deborah McDowell's *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995) as a model for this volume; it has not

9 Analogously, Matthew Morrison shows how beginning in the nineteenth century what he calls "Blacksound" provides "a way of uncovering the political implications of embodying, making, and commercializing popular music in the United States, from its origins in blackface to the present." M. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 783.

10 The locus classicus for this narrativization of the decline of post-1970s R&B remains Nelson George's *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*.

I should further observe that because much of the journalistic and scholarly criticism of Black music is still produced by white writers, it remains imperative for me to contribute to the growing counterarchive represented by the following critics. See Brooks, "'All That You Can't Leave'"; Brooks, "'It's Not Right but It's Okay'"; Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*; Griffin, "When Malindy Sings"; Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*; Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*; White, *Dear Angel of Death*; Patterson, *Destructive Desires*; Lindsey, "If You Look in My Life"; Neal, *Black Ephemera*; Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life*; Neal, *Soul Babies*; Powell, "Addict(ive) Sex"; Powell, "Funking Our Way to Freedom"; Proctor, *Minnie Riperton's Come to My Garden*; Proctor, "'Shout It Out'"; J. King, "Any Love"; J. King, "Sound of Velvet Melting"; D. Smith, *Shine Bright*; Awkward, *Soul Covers*; and Dozier, *Janet Jackson's "The Velvet Rope."*

merely provided a template for content but also serves as my prototype for form, since it for the most part collects McDowell's previously published essays, interspersing them with a few retrospective and connective pieces.[11] The essays and conversations included in *Feenin* were produced over the past twenty years, and though prompted separately by different occasions and often by conversations with specific collaborators, interlocutors, and respondents, collectively the tracks also represent an intensive and ongoing documentation of my thinking with and about the fate of R&B music as a genre in the postsoul moment since the late 1970s. What has struck me over the years about *The Changing Same* is how resolutely McDowell's essays engage with the present of criticism even when the literary texts under discussion (Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Emma Dunham Kelley's *Four Girls at Cottage City*, or Toni Morrison's *Sula*, for instance) hail from earlier time periods. The temporalities of address, reception, and dialogue are rendered even more complex in this context, because many of the novels McDowell considers were not widely available until the 1980s. In fact, McDowell's brilliant essays about Larsen's (1929) and Kelley's (1895) novels were initially published as introductions to critical editions of these texts that made them accessible to larger audiences for the first time since their initial publication.[12] McDowell writes about and to the states of Black feminist criticism and theory in the Now of the essays and preserves those initial contexts for their compiling in the 1995 book.[13] The preservation of their previous format, however, does not imply that the essays do not shift in their potential significations, since they retain some of the "original" impulses yet also gain new layers of signification by being recontextualized via the interfacing with the other essays in *The Changing Same*. Similarly, I have chosen to largely leave the pieces in this volume intact to demonstrate, orchestrate, visualize, and choreograph methodologies of bearing witness to the Now via the frequencies of R&B music. It appears that we currently have at our disposal a much more robust

11 All but one of the essays included in McDowell's *The Changing Same* were first published between 1980 and 1989.

12 See Larsen, *"Quicksand" and "Passing"*; and E. Kelley, *Four Girls at Cottage City*.

13 Beyond the pathbreaking essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," which was first published in 1980 as a response to Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), the direct conversation with the Now of criticism is most apparent in the final, previously unpublished chapter of McDowell's book, "Transferences: Black Feminist Discourse: The 'Practice' of 'Theory.'"

set of questions and approaches to Black life in the historical past than we do for Black existence as it unfolds in the present tense. Where to find the languages and parameters of the Now in Black studies?

One of the central debates in the recent history of critical Black studies has revolved around Saidiya Hartman's concept "critical fabulation," especially as it pertains to the enslaved within the context of the archive as violently fraught conundrum.[14] Critical fabulation becomes a necessary analytic/method, according to Hartman and others, because so few echoes of the enslaved remain in official archives. As Hartman writes, "The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration. The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation."[15] Although critical fabulation as theoretical and methodological praxis germinates in the immense gaps in the archival vestiges of racial slavery, Hartman does not so much seek to suture these caesural lacerations as call attention to the violence of the lacunae in ways not possible through either a "detached" historiographic lens or the allegedly "freer" fictional imagination. It is important here to indubitably differentiate Hartman's work from the ways this concept/methodology has been taken up by other scholars from either straight-up historiography or fiction, not because of any adherence to strict disciplinary protocols, but because critical fabulation genuinely represents an approach, a modality of thinking, that diverges from both. Black women novelists like Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Jewelle Gomez, Octavia Butler, Maryse Condé, and Shirley Anne Williams have explored and reimagined the violent interruptions in the archives of racial slavery in their fiction since the 1970s, and

14 Beyond the original salvo—Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts"—see, for instance, Haley, *No Mercy Here*; Haley, "Intimate Historical Practice"; McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life"; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Fuentes, "Genres of History and the Practice of Loss"; J. Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*; Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*; Nyong'o, "Unburdening Representation"; Campt, *Black Gaze*; Smythe, "What Is to Be Done?"; Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*; Allen, *There's a Disco Ball*; Young, *Illegible Will*; Greene-Hayes, "'Queering' African American Religious History"; Valdés, "Afterlives of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg"; Edwards, "Taste of the Archive"; and T. King, *Black Shoals*.

15 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

even as these novels without a doubt overlap with contemporary feminist historiography of plantation slavery, there also exist, it must be said, some profound differences in terms what these modes of thought and practices of writing allow us to conjure and thematize. As Tavia Nyong'o maintains, "Critical fabulation is not a genre or a discourse but a mode by which both genre and discourse can be set into oscillating tension, through the upsetting of a key demand of representational mimesis: the demand that a representation be either true or false, either history or fiction."[16] Refusing to disentangle history from fiction in order to posit some ultimate form of transparent truth makes it possible for critical fabulation to cautiously emerge from the shadows to take its improper place as the ghost in the machines of fiction and historiography.

In another part of the essay, Hartman highlights how her critically fabulist narratives seek "to bridge the past and the present" at the same time as they "dramatize the production of nothing—empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste."[17] If critical fabulation serves to connect the past and the present, my questions are, What occurs in the absence of traditional archives, as fractured, nonexistent, entombing, and violent as they may be? What takes their place as the building blocks for critical fabulation for the Now? What are the "empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste" of the present? In her 2019 book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, Hartman has moved away from the period of de jure enslavement and extended her approach into the middle of the twentieth century, albeit without forgetting to carefully pinpoint the numerous ways the structures and affects of slavery are forcibly bequeathed to these subsequent historical epochs. Accordingly, it remains imperative for Black studies to not completely cede the study of the contemporary to the social sciences and their complicated—if not outright violent—relationship to Black life.[18]

In her expansive and sinuous analysis of Black studies' history until the mid-1990s, Hortense Spillers describes how the student protests of the late 1960s, which put pressure on administrations in mainstream US universities to admit more Black students and include Black studies in their curricula, led to two subsequent interrelated institutional phenomena:

16 Nyong'o, "Unburdening Representation," 77.

17 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

18 See Judy, "Untimely Intellectuals and the University"; and R. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, esp. 15–42.

> (1) an appointment in black studies, as some of the programs fashioned an Afrocentric/Africanist response to the traditional disciplines, heavily influenced by the American social science paradigms and their empiricist concept of 'reading,' or (2) an appointment in one of the traditional disciplines in the humanities or social sciences, with a complementary appointment in black studies. In some instances, the institutions pursued a mix of procedures, with the black studies protocol filled in by both disciplinary and extra-disciplinary appointments.[19]

What remains significant about this bifurcation is that the putative inter- or antidiscipline of Black studies outside of traditional sociology, history, literature, or political science departments was and still is heavily defined by US social scientific discourses and the empiricist valences that accompany, if not downright define, them. Of course, historiography, also usually in varieties characterized profoundly by empiricist "readings" at sight, has secured its permanent residency along with sociology as the defining critical modality of Black studies as it is practiced in Black studies programs and departments across the United States today. Though there exist exceptions, Black literary/cultural studies and Black critical theorizing mainly take place beyond the confines of African American/Africana/African diaspora/Black studies administrative units in the US university system, as does much of Black feminism as well as Black queer and trans studies. I'm dwelling on these institutional protocols because critical fabulation (and the debates it has engendered) represents a pivotal contemporary formulation of Black studies' critical edge not beholden to empiricist proprieties, neither sociological nor historiographical. Rather, critical fabulation offers conceptual and inventive pathways to theorizing the status of the historical within the context of Black studies—gracefully smudging its deeply entrenched empiricist sheen—and, as such, it epitomizes the creative reimagining of the complex interstitial entanglements betwixt and between historiography, literary studies, and critical theory in Black studies.

In this vein, I'm trying to ascertain what a critical fabulation of the present would feel, look, and sound like so as to make it speak to archives that cannot be

19 Spillers, "Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," 463. In addition to Spillers's important essay, see Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory." It bears mentioning that these two important critical theorizations of the Black studies project come from Black feminist literary scholars working outside Black studies departments. I thank Henry Washington Jr. for inviting me to think about these disciplinary questions in a more explicit fashion.

found in the strict historical past. Or, phrased in a different register, although all scholarly work has the potential to be creative and fabulative, where does nonempiricist Black studies scholarship that centers on or takes off from the contemporary/the Now/the current fit into the vital conversations around critical fabulation?[20] What is the conceptual status of the Now in Black studies? What particular methodological and conceptual apparatuses become de rigueur for imagining the contemporary as not merely always already there and present-at-hand? To be flagrantly candid, I am not looking to the contemporary as a ruse to indulge in shameless ahistorical presentism but am instead after something approximating the opaque density of synchronic and diachronic frequencies that thrust the present toward multiple concurrent—and at times diverging—presents (synchronic) as well as a plethora of possible pasts and yet-to-comes (diachronic) so as to approach the potential forceful fullness of the Now.[21] This method is less concerned with the periodization of the contemporary as such than with how to simultaneously think from *and* through the Now in all its complexities. As categorically muddled and difficult to disentangle as the synchronic and diachronic may be under any circumstance, my point is that they are differently ensnared when they concern primarily the present.

There's something to be said about being able to access the ambience and "vibes" of the historical eras one has lived through and having scholarly writing explicitly reflect these temporalities. A note of caution, though, since this neither means that everyone experiences the Now in the same ways (depending on many different factors such as gender, sexuality, or geopolitical location) nor implies that this Now is in any way straightforwardly accessible. Therefore, something along the lines of critical fabulation also becomes

20 On the potential inventiveness and creativity of scholarly work in the humanities, see Weheliye, *Phonographies*, especially "Outro: Thinking Sound/Sound Thinking (Slipping into the Breaks Remix)."

21 David Scott fruitfully poses the following questions about the temporal cum conceptual parameters of the contemporary: "So, how should we think the time of the contemporary? What kind of time is this? What experience of temporality marks it? Is the contemporary usefully thought of only as now-time, the shared or coexperienced present? What present is it that one can be copresent with? What is the duration of contemporariness? How do we know when one contemporary has been eclipsed by another?" Scott, "Untimely Experience of the Contemporary," viii. See also Scott, "Preface." For a consideration of the fleeting present represented by contemporary queer and trans archives, see moore, "DARK ROOM."

vital for ruminating with and writing about the present, since it gives shape to the leap that introduces invention into existence and the spark that enfleshes being.[22] How does inhabiting and being possessed by a zeitgeist, that conglomerate of "vibes" and atmosphere of a specific historical epoch, shape scholarly writing, whether it's explicitly addressed in the text or not? How can we unearth and amplify this zeitgeist, render it unfamiliar and make it usable for critical nonempiricist Black studies projects, especially for the varied frequencies of critical fabulation? McDowell's essays, for example, make no secret of tackling head-on the Now of criticism at the time of their writing and initial publication; nonetheless, this present becomes transformed once the essays are assembled in the 1995 volume with the additional material that retrospectively reflects on some of the pieces included in *The Changing Same*. Comparably, critical fabulation arose within the context of Hartman's research for *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), which is at least partially a "memoir" concerned with understanding the originary breach of racial Blackness, the rift between the African continent and its violently established diasporas from the purview of Now, as is so aptly encapsulated by the book's now well-known Hughesian aphorism: "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery."[23] While Hartman phrases the statement in the present tense ("I, too, am"), the overarching temporality establishes just how intensely the Now is constituted by entwined constellations of pasts assumed to not exist ("the afterlife of slavery"). So much so, in fact, that the past transfigures into the present, and vice versa.

I intend to inquire about "objects" of study and the ways we as scholars interact with them in the same movement as considering the leaps of imagination needed to produce any form of academic analysis, which means insisting on the *fabulation* part of *critical fabulation*. Is fabulation required only for the past, and, if not, how do we describe and imagine contemporary archives? How do the archives of the contemporary participate in the entombing of Black life? Are the records of the present just as violent, only differently so, as those concerned with the annals of the historical past? In the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon unequivocally thematizes his compulsory situatedness in the temporal Now, fabulating about the repercussions thus:

> Every human problem must be considered from the stand point of time. Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future.

22 See Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality"; and Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*.
23 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

> And this future is not the future of the cosmos but rather the future of my century, my country, my existence. . . . I belong irreducibly to my time. And it is for my own time that I should live. The future should be an edifice supported by living men. This structure is connected to the present to the extent that I consider the present in terms of something to be exceeded.[24]

Of course, the present cannot but transcend itself, because it cannot remain cordoned off from its neighboring pasts and virtual but no less real futures, and because it is haunted by alternate present tenses: there is no such thing as a singular Now or present tense. Might we also lovingly nudge Frantz toward the "future of the cosmos," because it, too, is nothing other than part of "my existence"? How do we critically engage the present without flattening it? As the conversations around critical fabulation highlight, the very spatial propinquity of the terms *Black* and *archive* on the page already points to a fracture, a wound, and a potential abyss that we will have a difficult time choreographing our movements around.[25] How do we summon the archives of contemporary Black life not as straightforward but as always already going over and above themselves temporally, conceptually, politically, and aesthetically? As a result, critical fabulation necessarily tunes into and crisscrosses the oscillation of different historical frequencies in the form of related irregularities that recur. In this context Tina Campt offers an "an understanding of frequency . . . as an unstable temporality which produces complex forms of repetition that, rather than reproducing or replicating what came before it, creates new beginnings instead."[26] Thus, perhaps then we can envisage history and the present as a series of nonsequential but overlapping frequencies that comprise the elementary particles for both related irregularities and "new beginnings."

For Daphne Brooks, writing about the frequently concealed histories of Black women's contribution to the production of and criticism about Black music, archives take on primarily two different configurations: "the documentary record preserved by institutional powerbrokers and the faded pages we might imagine stored in an elderly sister's trunk," which we might label as the official, institutionalized and the vernacular variants of accreted knowledge, respectively.[27] In ascertaining how "Black women musicians and critics

24 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 14–15.
25 On the womb abyss gestated by racial slavery, see Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.
26 Campt, *Black Gaze*, 81.
27 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 4.

have had to negotiate in relation to their own artistic ambitions and to the problem of Black historical memory more broadly," Brooks takes an additional vital leap in stating, "Black women artists have played crucial roles as archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in for and as the memory of a people."[28] Thus, not only the torn concert tickets, brittle vinyl records with fading liner notes, stickers whose adhesiveness has long since evaporated, rusty button badges, ripped band T-shirts, disheveled copies of music magazines no longer in existence, or barely legible printed lyric sheets in the older sister's crate function as vernacular archives, but the artists themselves operate in several significant archival capacities as well. Rhythm and Blues music more broadly operates as a series of interlocking and historically mutable archives of different expressions of Black life and affect. In the universe of contemporary R&B, for instance, artists such as Mary J. Blige, Jazmine Sullivan, Me'Shell Ndegeocello, and Mariah Carey are explicit archivists of musical traditions in terms of their choices for cover versions (e.g., Blige's version of Rose Royce's "I'm Goin' Down," Ndegeocello's archive of 1980s R&B songs on her 2018 album *Ventriloquism*, or Carey's remake of Cherrelle's "Didn't Mean to Turn You On"), samples (e.g., Sullivan's sampling of "Jump to It" by Aretha Franklin on "Don't Make Me Wait"), references to other R&B singers and musicians (e.g., Carey's interpolation of Babyface's and Bobby Womack's vocal intonations on "We Belong Together"), which amplifies Brooks's insight about the wide array of archival manifestations for Black music and the important role of BlackFem R&B artists in maintaining them. These represent but a few examples of an expanded notion of the contemporary archive as they interface with R&B music and BlackFem performers/archivists.

For me Black popular music, especially R&B, has served as the primary archive of the Now, as my lane to remaining in the present while still amplifying aesthetic, political, and conceptual questions about Blackness, technology, history, humanity, community, diaspora, nationhood, and so on; the pieces in this book are both products of and testimonies to thinking with and about Black music since the 1980s. Pop music in general and R&B music in particular refuse detachment and "objectivity," often demanding an immediate response to get on the dance floor or remain in my seat at the club or party, to press either the skip or repeat button on my phone, or to turn up the volume on the car radio or rotate the proverbial dial to change the radio station in repugnance, in the process compelling me to show up more fully as

28 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 4.

a listener, a critic, a scholar, a thinker, and a fan. If, as Keguro Macharia argues, "queers need fabulation. We need to imagine and theorize and practice strategies that make our beings possible. Against our training. For something else," R&B music sets in motion this process of fabulation for me, pushing me to strain toward something else, tenderly prodding me in the direction of further frequencies of the Now.[29] In addition, Ellison's "Black femme praxis," mentioned earlier, operates as a form of critical fabulation given that it unleashes those queer frequencies—vibrating in the key "that must traditionally remain inaudible and/or relegated to the domain of the nonexistent."[30]

Rhythm and Blues music represents the portal and archive incarnate through which to critically fabulate with some of Black life's intricately complex presents. Though the tracks and interludes in *Feenin* are principally about music, they also draw attention to the continued precarity of Black life and culture in late capitalism. Because in some cases, such as the centrality of Christianity in Black German music detailed in track 4.0 or the two-way pagers discussed in track 3.0, which have both completely disappeared from the horizon, these pieces also represent a series of testimonies of and to vanishing presents, or, rather, presents that have been rendered opaque by subsequent historical frequencies. In those instances, the fabulative dimension lies in the endeavor of conjuring particular historical eras and geographic contexts that we can no longer access in the same fashion. In other cases, for instance, the perceptible use of Auto-Tune or the incorporation of mobile phones in R&B music, the pieces in this volume bear witness to and fabulate with those spatiotemporal intervals in which the main deployments of these technologies had not stabilized or become unnoteworthy. Critical fabulation via the specific frequential intensities of the present transforms this domain via an encounter with the phantoms that lurk in the crevices of the Now—the *Geist* in *zeitgeist*—in the process thrusting it beyond itself, on the path toward the

29 Macharia, *Frottage*, 136.

30 Though I don't give it fuller attention here, Kara Keeling's notion of "looking after" as an affectively charged queer ethics of care is also apposite here: "The second way that *Looking for Langston* 'looks after' Hughes is colloquially and affectively; it generates Hughes's purported homosexuality and makes it recognizable in a time when it might be useful, thereby protecting or sheltering a homosexual desire it attributes to Hughes by making it meaningful for and within a collectivity that presently needs it and therefore affectionately 'looks after' or cares for it." Keeling, "Looking for M," 572.

new and unknown, but always welcoming that something else. For something else. I, too, am the future of the cosmos.

Rather than being arranged chronologically, the pieces in *Feenin* are loosely organized by theme, with track 1.0, "Engendering *Phonographies*: Sonic Technologies of Blackness," representing the broadest and perhaps most abstract consideration of Black music and technology. Though the track does center R&B music per se, there are plenty of references to specific recordings from the genre throughout, and certainly, many of its points are applicable to the music. Tracks 2.0 and 3.0 zoom in most patently on specific technological apparatuses (vocoders, talk boxes, cell phones, pagers, and the Auto-Tune software) while still pursuing broader questions about Blackness, technology, communication, humanity, and enfleshment. How do technologies become a part of the very historical *Stoff* of worlding?[31] What role does R&B music—and the Black singing voice more broadly—play in this worlding?

Almost all of track 2.0, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in R&B Music," was written in the spring of 2001, after I had presented a much shorter version at a symposium in the previous year. I consider "'Feenin'" my "freedom" essay, so to speak, produced after finishing my dissertation but before I began revising it into what would later become *Phonographies*. Despite—or maybe because of—"Feenin" being concerned with the machinic distortion of human vocalization, it is the first piece that felt like it was written in my writerly "voice," which was at least partially due to the fact that I was thinking with and writing about (then) contemporary R&B music in ways I had not done before. I then was able to take back what I had learned writing "'Feenin'" and apply those insights to the process of reworking my dissertation into *Phonographies*. Alondra Nelson, who edited the special issue of *Social Text* on the topic Afrofuturism in which "'Feenin'" was first published, was also the founder of the LISTSERV with the same name, and all the contributors to the special issue were active members of this LISTSERV. The LISTSERV was an amazing hub of conversations about Blackness, science, technology,

31 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 6. For some recent considerations of Blackness and technology, see R. Benjamin, *Race after Technology*; Brock, *Distributed Blackness*; Gallon, "Making a Case"; Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*; and Towns, *On Black Media Philosophy*.

and science fiction at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, and those formative conversations there influenced the ideas in "'Feenin.'"

Clearly, I would not write "'Feenin'" in the same way today, given that the twenty years in the interim have taught me much, and my thinking and my intellectual, affective, aesthetic, political, pedagogical investments have shifted, but it is surprising how much it still reflects my present-day ideas about R&B music, Blackness, humanism, and technology. Gender and sexuality would most certainly take up more analytic space in this piece if written today, but many of the other pieces contained in *Feenin* do that work within the context of R&B music. Additionally, I mistakenly attributed vocoder use to Zapp's Roger Troutman, when, in fact, he used a talk box to roboticize his voice. Though I don't suppose this changes the larger point about the audible mechanization of the Black singing voice, I've adjusted this in the version included here. I was also not aware of the name of the Auto-Tune software, just its effects, which is why I described it as the *vocoder effect*. Neither were the journalists writing about turn-of-the-millennium R&B, or at least they did not mention this specific software at that point in history; I have amended that here as well.

Retrospectively "'Feenin'" chronicles and preserves the specific historical moment (and another vanishing former present) after Cher's producers had deployed Auto-Tune so conspicuously on her 1998 megahit "Believe" and before T-Pain and other rappers using Auto-Tune came to the forefront of popular music about ten years later, when Auto-Tune was used creatively primarily in R&B and teen pop but not in hip-hop.[32] A brief historical interval that gets downright forgotten in subsequent historicizations of Auto-Tune's pivotal role in the recent history of popular music, for instance, in the episode of 2021 Netflix series *This Is Pop* devoted to the rise of audible Auto-Tune use in pop music, which completely erases the years between 1998 and 2005.[33] An omission that is clearly indicative of how R&B and BlackFem performers are usually treated when it comes to musical and technological innovation. Ready to hand for all the plundering—and I do mean *all*—R&B music receives none of the accolades.

The earliest ideas for track 3.0, "Rhythms of Relation: Black Popular Music and Mobile Technologies," began their journey with materials cut from the

32 Cher, "Believe," Warner Records, 1998, CD, https://www.discogs.com/master/69286-Cher-Believe.

33 *This Is Pop*, Banger Films, CTV Television Network, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14155414/?ref_=tt_mv_close.

published version of "'Feenin.'" The incorporation of mobile communication devices into R&B music seemed ancillary and nascent at best in 2001. Over the course of the next ten years (2001–11), however, these miniature computers qua cellular telephones had not only thoroughly suffused the lyrical and sonic universes of hip-hop and R&B but had become mainstays in many quotidian landscapes around the globe. This was when I revisited these questions to chart how mobile communication devices crested to the center of R&B music. By 2015, in the wake of the immense success of Drake's "Hotline Bling," Erykah Badu created a complete mixtape replete with eleven songs that either are cover versions or contain significant samples of R&B songs about telecommunications by such artists as New Edition, The Isley Brothers, Usher, and Uncle Jamm's Army. Though Badu does not include them in her history lesson, there also exists an elaborate archive of BlackFem R&B performers singing about telephones, for instance, Aretha Franklin's "Call Me" or Stephanie Mills's version of Prince's "How Come U Don't Call Me Anymore."[34] Badu gives us a history lesson in the form of sonic pageantry that accents the Now, since the mixtape as a whole serves to contextualize and respond to Drake's crooning about (missed) telephonic interaction, that is, why we instantly know that "it can only mean one thing if that hotline bling."[35] After several years have passed, I'm still not sure I understand why Drake deems "wearing less and goin' out more" as undesirable, though (insert shoulder shrug emoji here). Interlude 1, "Calling My Phone," surveys how these constellations play out in the early 2020s at the intersection of Black popular music and mobile technologies.

Track 4.0, "My Volk to Come: Specters of Peoplehood in Diaspora Discourse and Afro-German Popular Music," and track 5.0, "'White Brothers with No Soul': UnTuning the Historiography of Berlin Techno," focus on Germany's recent past and Black music's vexed place in it. "My Volk" makes an intervention into the then-central debate in critical Black studies about diaspora and its significance for Black populations in Europe, fusing it with a consideration of how religious discourses were being marshaled by Black German R&B musicians in the early part of this century. In this way, the musical part of this piece offers a continuation of my discussion in the last chapter

34 Erykah Badu, *But You Caint Use My Phone*, Motown Records, 2015, MP3, https://www.discogs.com/Erykah-Badu-But-You-Caint-Use-My-Phone/master/1057379.

35 Drake, "Hotline Bling," Cash Money Records, 2015, MP3, https://www.discogs.com/release/7312552-Drake-Hotline-Bling.

of *Phonographies* of how the German group Advanced Chemistry deployed hip-hop to present themselves as both Black and German. Highlighting the complexities of envisaging community, the theoretical and the musical halves of track 4.0 bring attention to the complexities of being Black and German, both in relation to other Black diasporic populations and within the context of the shifting administrative and ideological borders of the German nation-state. Undoubtedly, Blackness and Black music, whether R&B or techno, resolutely defy any such borders and distinctions given that Black folks are frequently imagined as existing outside of the nation-states in the western world, especially in Europe.

The localization qua making white—a reracination rather than a deracination—of techno in Berlin and many other places in Europe consisted of numerous active processes—rather than a single sleight of hand—in the early 1990s, and it went hand in hand with the extreme violence Black and other nonwhite communities experienced after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German reunification a year later. These public forms of violence against Black and other nonwhite people in the years around reunification are now vigorously expunged from the celebratory historiographies of techno in Berlin and the founding of the "Berliner Republik." My own experiences as a teenager with the clubbing scene in West Berlin as well as the fundamental anti-Blackness of German society in the 1980s and early 1990s provided the spark here, since the retrospective considerations of techno in Berlin through oral histories and documentary films, which started appearing around 2010, rarely addressed the presence of Black music in the city before the advent of techno and seldom mentioned the violence against nonwhite people during that time. Both this violence and the presence of Black music in Berlin disrupt the celebratory narrative that techno music offered the common musical ground for the frictionless coming together of young (cishet white male) Germans in East and West after reunification. In fact, this fervent whitening of techno has worked so well that any form of oontz music (an onomatopoetic rendering of four-on-the-floor dance music) is now thoroughly associated with (European) whiteness in the United States, just as occurred previously with rock music. To take just one obvious example, it was not until 2020 that Haitian Canadian producer and DJ Kaytranada was the first Black artist to win a Grammy Award in the Best Dance/Electronic Album category. Interlude 2, "Don't Take It Away," pays tribute to the often-nameless BlackFem voices found in many forms of popular music, but especially in electronic dance music, where we find a long history of integrally using BlackFem singing voices without crediting the vocalists, whether it's through session work or sampling. This centrality of the disem-

bodied BlackFem singing voice also amplifies the deep connections between R&B and electronic dance music, especially house and techno.

In the vein of track 5.0, track 6.0, "New Waves, Shifting Terrains: Prince's and David Bowie's Transatlantic Crossovers," looks back to the 1980s, albeit the earlier part of the decade, to the transatlantic postdisco moment that would a few years later lead to the creation of house music in Chicago and techno music in Detroit. In this epoch there was a spirited but clearly not unproblematic "exchange" between musical cultures in the United Kingdom (synthpop), continental Europe (Euro-disco), and the United States (R&B/funk) in which Europeans would emulate and appropriate Black US sounds—sometimes with the help of Black American musicians such as Luther Vandross, who sang for the Italian group Change—and, then, finally, Black US artists would reappropriate these sounds, now supposedly baptized in exclusively culturally alabastrine waters. Prince's 1980s career offers one very prominent example of precisely this tendency in how he and his collaborators made use of musical and visual tropes associated with white Europeanness, translating them to Black American musical and cultural idioms.

While all the pieces in *Feenin* focus at least partially on the BlackFem singing voice and highlight questions of gender, readers will detect a shift from some of the earlier pieces going into the remaining tracks in this volume in that there's much more of an emphasis on and theorization of BlackFem vocal articulations and the many ways these are both exalted and denigrated in the world of Man. Tracks 7.0 and 8.0 in particular address these questions in the most head-on manner. As discussed in track 8.0, *BlackFem* rather than *Black woman* or even *Black femme* resulted from desiring an alternative to these other gendered and sexuated categories, a term that is capacious enough to include a wide variety of femininities that traverse gender, sex, and sexuality.

Track 7.0, "'Sounding That Precarious Existence': On R&B Music, Technology, and Blackness," and track 8.0, "'Scream My Name Like a Protest': R&B Music as BlackFem Technology of Humanity in the Age of #Blacklivesmatter," return to questions of technology, albeit in a slightly different register than some of the earlier tracks, focusing mostly on the BlackFem singing voice as a technology, as a series of enfleshed forms of Black knowledge and archives. Additionally, the two pieces, but especially track 8.0, speculate about R&B's relationship to politics with a capital *P*, since the genre is now often positioned as completely lacking political vision. As the two tracks amplify, this is neither right nor OK, seeing that (a) current R&B artists have used their recordings and music videos to bring attention to Black Lives

Matter or the prison-industrial complex and (b) the private, the interpersonal, and the erotic are not outside the purview of the political. Interlude 3, "#BeyondDeepBrandyAlbumCuts," is a short interlude that contains a playlist of R&B and R&B-adjacent tracks, supplying a brief snapshot of a specific moment in R&B music history that erupted online around a series of tweets by Solange Knowles in 2013.

Track 9.0, "808s and Heartbreak," and track 10.0, "Wayward Shuddering, Beautiful Tremors (AGW's Quiet Storm Remix)," bring to the fore how the affects, sounds, sensations, and ideas associated with contemporary R&B can operate methodologically, as a way to critically fabulate about Black life in the Now, as a modality of holding on to and magnifying the present's "fierce urgency."[36] What murmurs and frequencies does an R&B analytic render audible that other approaches tend to shush? What does it sound like to inhabit the crossroads of love and pain? How can heartbreak function as a critical apparatus rather than only being felt and lived as exasperatingly damaging?

Taking heartbreak, one of the principal themes of R&B music, track 9.0 threads quotations from R&B songs about heartbreak throughout with the aim of enfleshing the supposedly abstract mechanic technology of the 808 drum machine through the conceptual lens of the generalized heartbreak of Black life. As a result, heartbreak does not function in the frequential key of individuated and privatized neoliberal affect but as a far-reaching condition of Black life in an anti-Black world that nevertheless acts on different groups and individuals gathered under in this umbrella unevenly. Take, for instance, Melvin Dixon's powerful summoning of heart////break during the height of the AIDS crisis in 1992:

> I come to you bearing witness to a broken heart; I come to you bearing witness to a broken body—but a witness to an unbroken spirit. Perhaps it is only to you that such witness can be brought and its jagged edges softened a bit and made meaningful. We are facing the loss of our entire generation. Lesbians lost to various cancers, gay men lost to AIDS. What kind of witness will You bear? What truthtelling are you brave enough to utter and endure the consequences of your unpopular message?[37]

Faced with the recent death of his longtime lover and several of his friends as well as his impending worldly demise from the complications of AIDS, Dixon

36 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 24.
37 Dixon, "I'll Be Somewhere Listening," 81.

accentuates the brokenness of his heart before the frailty of his physical body and the resilience of his spirit, showing a deeply communal, political, and most decidedly nonindividuated understanding of heart////break that exists in the same frequential universe as the manifold references to this condition that suffuse R&B music. Track 9.0 also summons specific instances from the history of R&B music (Marvin Gaye, R. Kelly, or Rihanna, for example) to explore and map different kinds of heartbreak. Making it possible for us to lend an ear to heartbreak as it appears in those lower frequencies where the hum of the bass is most certainly physically palpable but just barely audible, in the melismatic techniques of Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, and Whitney Houston, or in the more restrained vocal virtuosities of Roberta Flack, Aaliyah, or Deniece Williams, R&B music serves as an intensive archival reservoir of and provides the soundtrack to existing within the force field of the wide-ranging heart///////break of Black life. Interlude 4, "Songify Your Life," conjures the querulously heartbreaking crossroads of race, sexuality, and voice-alteration technologies through one specific example that endures as the "real-world" doppelgänger of several of the pieces included in *Feenin*.

"This world may end. Not you and I."

Track 10.0 takes Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* as a launchpad and was first presented in New York at a salon in early 2019 to celebrate the text's publication. Instead of offering a "reading" of or a conventional scholarly response to Hartman's text, this track, as the name states, takes the shape of a remix that emphasizes certain aspects surely present but not necessarily centered in *Wayward Lives*. It is a recombination of Hartman's sentences, words, and ideas, crossfading them with R&B lyrics so as to unearth the messy feelings, both negative and positive, behind the numbers, skewed gender ratios, archival intervals, and so many other "official" data pertaining to Black life.[38] Hartman narrates and fabulates with several fraught and triangulated erotic/romantic relationships in *Wayward Lives*, for instance, the love triangle between Hubert Harrison, Amy Ashwood, and Marcus Garvey; or Mary White Ovington's clandestine affair with John Milholland; or W. E. B. Du Bois's numerous extramarital

38 Heading source: Dionne Warwick, "Heartbreaker," Arista Records, 1982, LP, https://www.discogs.com/Dionne-Warwick-Heartbreaker/release/378860. On the data of Black life, especially at the turn of the twentieth century, see Womack, *Matter of Black Living*.

dalliances. As a continuation of how R&B songs of heartbreak are mobilized in track 9.0, I respond to and reimagine parts of *Wayward Lives* through the aural and philosophical lens of R&B music's vast discotheque of songs dealing with love triangles, those desired by everyone involved and—much more often—those illicit affairs that necessarily take place in the dusk of dawn or just purely after dusk in the shadows, the hallways, the hotel rooms, and the alleyways. Moreover, while derived from Du Bois's late nineteenth-century sociological and later autobiographical writings, *tremble* and *shudder* appear several times over the course of *Wayward Lives* and seem to "capture" the knotty intersection of fear, pleasure, disappointment, jubilation, and pain that the historical figures Hartman fabulates with and about experience and that contemporary R&B music has so gorgeously sounded out in greatest detail over the past thirty years.[39] An R&B method activates listening to the invisible but hearable space between *heart* and *break*: heart/////break in Hartman's written text.

Rhythm and blues music partakes in what Barbara Christian has celebrated as specifically Black modalities of theorizing, which customarily materialize "in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. . . . My folk . . . have always been a race for theory though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a . . . figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative," and thus offer some fertile topsoil for critical fabulation in frequencies of the Now.[40] As a genre with complex aesthetic and political parameters as well as with historical lineages and archival sedimentations, contemporary R&B sonically chronicles and theorizes the "beautiful and communicative" fluctuating contours that Black interior life, interpersonal relationships, and erotics take on under the protracted genocidal conditions of neoliberal racial capitalism:

> What's the sound a broken heart makes?[41]

39 See Hartman's notes on Du Bois's use of *trembled* in *The Philadelphia Negro* and *shudder* in *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 347, 375.

40 Christian, "Race for Theory," 52.

41 Shalamar, "Heartbreak," On *Heartbreak*, Solar Records, 1984, LP, https://www.discogs.com/Shalamar-Heartbreak/release/1431870.