

# Diaspora, Beyoncé, and Law School: Simone Drake's Academic Journeys

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## SPEAKERS

Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Simone Drake, Eva Dale, David Staley

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- E** Eva Dale 00:00  
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:31  
Simone Drake is the Hazel C. Youngberg Trustees Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of African American and African Studies, The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. She has a wide range of research interests, including critical race, gender, and legal studies, theories of black feminism and black masculinities, visual and popular culture, and the literature of the African diaspora in the Americas. She is the principal investigator for the OSU Discovery Theme pilot project, Transnational Black Citizenship, and a team member on a second Discovery Theme project, Human Rights in Transit. And I'm pleased to welcome you to Voices, Dr. Drake.
- S** Simone Drake 01:12  
Thank you for having me.
- D** David Staley 01:13  
So, your first book was titled, "Critical Appropriations: African American Women and the Construction of Transnational Identity". Tell us about this book, tell us about your research in

this book.

**S** Simone Drake 01:24

So, that book focused on black women writers and artists who were situating their work or located in the United States, but they draw on various cultural theories of identity from outside of the U.S. And so, that's kind of where the idea of the critical appropriations comes from, they're sort of taking these ideas or appropriating them, but in a very conscious and deliberate way, because a lot of times appropriations are done without a certain level of consciousness, or also in a way that, or manner that is... that does not serve well those who it's being taken from. So this is a bit different, so it's writers, it's artists like Beyonce who are appropriating theories like Vodoun or Candomblé.

**D** David Staley 02:16

Candomblé is...?

**S** Simone Drake 02:18

Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion, and Vodoun would be more situated in Haiti. And so, they're appropriating these kinds of cultural theories of identity in order to kind of make sense of their own location and experiences within the United States. So, I call it a kind of immobile transnationalism.

**D** David Staley 02:40

Immobile transnationalism, okay.

**S** Simone Drake 02:44

Because, they aren't actually leaving the United States to go to these other places, largely within the Americas. And the reason why I really wanted to look at that is because, being trained in diaspora studies and thinking about how the diaspora, at least from the African context is often constructed and theorized, it's largely around movement and mobility. And in doing so, there's a real gender privilege, in which men are privileged and kind of at the center of diasporic studies and theorizing, and women are marginalized. And so, I wanted to think about the ways in which women move differently, when they do move, and then when they don't move, how knowledge still flows transnationally across boundaries, even without the people themselves making those moves. So, what I was finding in literature, film and musical performance, is that that is happening, even when the protagonist or, you know, real life people are not moving.

**D** David Staley 03:55

Give me a quick definition of diaspora for those not initiated

Give us a quick definition of diaspora, for those not initiated.

**S** Simone Drake 03:59  
Diaspora, yes.

**D** David Staley 04:01  
Which I know is a complex question.

**S** Simone Drake 04:03  
No, I teach a diaspora class on which students often say they don't understand what diaspora is. But I mean, in the most simple way, and in kind of the Greek roots of the term, it's a dispersal. And at least, initially with the African diaspora, it was really approached as the forced kind of movement, forced migration, removal.

**D** David Staley 04:24  
Through the slave trade.

**S** Simone Drake 04:25  
Through the transatlantic slave trade. But now, I think there's many more dimensions of diaspora, whether it's with, like, you know, people willfully pursuing migration, whether it's through civil conflict within nations and they're moving; but initially, it was just really kind of that part of it being the forced removal or dispersal. And then, the diaspora then becomes all these different geographic locations in which people of African descent end up making a home.

**D** David Staley 04:56  
So, the Americas, the Caribbean, Brazil, these sorts of places?

**S** Simone Drake 05:00  
I mean, now even places like China, right? So you know, that's where you can really capture the way in which, with time, the movement can change, the reasons for it. You know, China, there's labor migration and things like that.

**D** David Staley 05:14  
So you mentioned, for instance, Beyonce as one of these, one of these performers who

engages in these critical appropriations. How so, give us an example of how Beyonce does this?

**S** Simone Drake 05:24

Well, the one that I focused on was one of the earlier ones, and she since has participated in many, but this early one was on her "Birthday" CD. I focused most closely on her collaboration with Shakira, and so, looking at the ways in which... and the function of Latinidad within their collaboration, but also in the larger disc, because she also had duets with other Latino, Latina artists. So, that's what that chapter focused on. And I looked at both the kind of benefits that might come out of it and looking at kind of transnational feminisms, but also the risks and, you know, what might be lost from making those types of appropriations, and that is something that I did with all of the work that I looked at it. I think, in some ways, the focus on Beyonce allowed me to get into more depth, and just questions of, you know, appropriation, Because it's not just Latinidad, but then within the music video, there's like ancient Middle Eastern characters, like writing that's on the wall, and there's belly dancing, which Shakira draws from both Latin American and Middle Eastern backgrounds. But, just thinking about that when it's not necessarily critical, when it's sort of uncritical appropriations in which people probably have not thought through consciously. What are the implications of this?

**D** David Staley 06:55

And that's what you mean by critical, right? That there's, like, a self awareness of what's being done, is that a fair definition?

**S** Simone Drake 07:01

Yes. Whereas I think, sometimes with the literary text, you get much more of a consciousness, I mean, at least in the sense that an author like Toni Morrison does a lot of research at the same time that she's writing. So, there is a more critical aspect, it's not that she just picked out something and said, Oh, hey, I liked that, or I heard about that, I'm going to incorporate this into what I'm doing; she really spends time working through it. Now, I would say that I think that, since that album...

**D** David Staley 07:31

Since Beyonce's "Birthday".

**S** Simone Drake 07:32

Since.... yeah. Her appropriative behavior has become much more critical. You can see that with "Lemonade" and her more recent work, where it does seem like she's kind of dived much deeper into understanding what it is that she's doing and how she's using these different sorts of ideas and cultural kind of practices. So yes.

D

David Staley 07:56

Well, and I think you've already done this to a degree, but I wonder what were the sort of common patterns that you found across literature and music and film and all these different media, different types of performance?

S

Simone Drake 08:08

One of the commonalities, and it's one that led to the next book project was, were heterosexual dynamics, or rifts, where it seemed that men often kind of got in the way of the women being able to, sort of be at home in diaspora; in order to kind of locate safe spaces, to form their own identities, and things like that. And it consistently came up in every single text, whether it was Erna Brodber's novel, "Louisiana" - in which the protagonist is literally, like, depleted of all energy and dies, because of the kind of spiritual and psychic and cultural knowledge and energy that she gives to others, particularly to black men, sailors who come to her - to all of the women being massacred in Toni Morrison's "Paradise", or even "Eve's Bayou", in which you have a cast of women and girls who put this man up as a hero, and he can't really sustain that status. What keeps dividing or creating rifts in what these women are trying to do is these relationships with men. So, that's when I started thinking about the ways in which black masculinities are constructed, understood, performed, and that led to the next book.

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David Staley 09:34

Well, that's an excellent segue. So your most recent book 2016 was titled, "When We Imagine Grace: Black Men and Subject Making". So, tell us about this book and how it grew out of the previous book.

S

Simone Drake 09:46

Yes, it took quite a while to become, in some ways, I think it went through lots of changes from what I initially thought about as I was really still working on the first book, I kind of like to work on more than one thing at a time. So, I was starting to work through the ideas for that, and I'd have to say that what I started with, it's definitely different than where it ended up. And part of that is, I think that's just the way that ideas work, but also, towards the beginning of really digging in to start to write that second book, I also decided to go to law school. And so, so many of the chapters...

D

David Staley 10:26

And I definitely want to ask you about that, but. Give an example of this.

S

Simone Drake 10:28

Yes. Actually, a number of the chapters were written for seminar papers in law school, and that kind of reshaped how I was thinking about the project. But ultimately, I wanted to kind of rethink. question. challenge. a lot of rhetoric in black masculinity studies around the notion of

crisis, or even prior to that, the language of like, endangered, was used. And so, I wanted to think about the ways in which black men did have agency, do have agency, in spite of the various systems and obstacles that are put in place, in society, in real life, as well as how they then kind of materialize in cultural productions, in art and music and film. So, the book delves into all of that. It looks at the law, but it doesn't center the law, so there are legal cases, but then there is visual art, film, a lot of film; I look at policy, social policy as it intersects with culture. So, it's really kind of looking at policy and law and the ways in which culture kind of responds to, but also the ways in which it might inform. So, there's one chapter that looks at a legal case, or it's framed around a legal case, related to the Cosby Show, where - I think it was an executive at NBC, I think, who filed an intellectual property claim against the broadcasting company, saying that the Cosby Show was his idea, that he had put forth proposals for a program a few years prior to the Cosby Show that was basically the same thing, and that it was based on his own life, his experience as sort of this black middle class family. And he did not win the suit, but I don't look at that part of it, I don't look at the nuance of intellectual property law, right, I mean, the people have done that with that case. I look at what it means when they say that he doesn't own his own story, or the inability for, for him to really kind of claim ownership of that. And then I look at that in relationship to public policy, that... particularly in the 90s was coming out that was pushing, like, marriage, like marriage policy, and, you know, basically trying to teach African American men how to be fathers. And then, look at the way in which we can see it play out in film. And the films that I looked at focus largely on like father daughter relationships, which usually you see father, son, if you see those types of relationships. And so, "Beasts of the Southern Wild", "Killer of Sheep", and "The Caveman's Valentine", are the three that I look at in film, to look at sort of the complexities of, of fathering, and particularly fathering girls, and with sort of this backdrop, of this public policy around fathering, around marriage, and also being able to own your own story and not have it be told by someone else, which I think is kind of... for all three of those films, there's sort of an immediate, kind of negative story that could be told about fathering and about black fathers. But, I think that there's a way, in which I think I'm successful at, of reading those with much more nuance, with much more... much more of a generous sort of humanism, to look at the ways that those fathers are navigating fathering and trying to really do a very good job at it, in spite of all the obstacles, whether it's poverty, mental health challenges, that kind of obstruct that, and how race and gender then compound those situations.

D

David Staley 14:35

You said that one of the things you did, and helped prepare this book is that you were going through law school at the time. And as I was looking over your biography, this was something that really stood out to me. I mean, you have a bachelor's in English literature, your PhDs in English literature, you're on faculty here and decided to go back to law school. You have to, you have to explain the story behind that.

S

Simone Drake 14:56

Always, I guess English has been the common strand, but like my bachelor's was also in Classics, and then I had a master's that was in Black Studies. So, English might be the constant, but the interdisciplinarity was just sort of really how I understood how you kind of approach knowledge building. But, those have all been more on the humanities side, right, and being in a Department of African American African Studies, what was appealing for my master's program,

was the outward facing, the public facing, the social justice, social responsibility aspect of it. And I was getting a little frustrated with it seeming, at least to me, as if the humanities and arts were not really seen as being able to do that work. Now, I know that's not true. I mean, if you look at like the Black Arts Movement and it's sister movement - or, the Black Power movement, and the sister movement was the Black Arts Movement - I realize that's not true. But, I was feeling like, pretty much, if I couldn't crunch numbers, if I couldn't really do quantitative work, then I didn't have that much that would be taken seriously as, you know, working towards social justice. And so, not that I thought that the law would really do that, I actually feel like the law often fails in that way. And so, it was more of a wanting to interrogate the law, as opposed to thinking about the ways in which the law could further that. And then that second book, and also the third one, was very conscious of the fact that, you know, how do people work and try to have a sense of agency when you cannot depend on the law to be, quote, unquote, "colorblind". So, I guess that's sort of how I ended up there. But really, it was, I just wanted more information on the program, and then I ended up applying. And I don't know what I thought was gonna happen next, but then when I was accepted, I think my advisor told me I could put it off for a year if I wanted to, but I just didn't see the... I mean, either I was going to do it or wasn't. So, I just decided I would do it and we were still on quarters then. So that helped, I could teach in the summer and not have quite as much of a load.

**D** David Staley 17:23

So you were doing this as an Assistant Professor, and I know that must have been quite the time challenge.

**S** Simone Drake 17:29

And I was doing it with a third child who was not yet one when I started there.

**D** David Staley 17:32

Oh dear. Well, and to be clear, this was... you were studying for a Master in the Study of Law. And so the distinction between that and a JD is...

**S** Simone Drake 17:41

It's just not as many hours, same coursework, but just not as much. And they market it towards - and I don't know if it's the same at all institutions that have one - but here, it's really marketed towards people who already have terminal degrees, so like a PhD, MBA, who want to use the master's to enhance the kind of research they already do. So, I remember someone else doing it at the same time that I was, was a chemistry professor who wanted to study patent law, and I think there was somebody else who was an MBA, but not working here, who was in the program at the same time. So, that's kind of the idea, and that is, I mean, one reason why I would not have pursued the JD, because you cannot practice with it, and I thought that it was important to actually study it as coursework, because the methodologies are

different. I mean, that was the... really a quite a hurdle to get over, the way that I'm trained to think coming from the humanities is really countered to the way in which I was supposed to think for exams.

D

David Staley 18:55

How so, in what ways?

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Simone Drake 18:57

Well, in the humanities, you know, you question everything, you want to interrogate everything, and on those exams, that is not what you're supposed to be doing. You are supposed to be determining what the issue is, what the precedent is, why, you know, the outcome should be the way that it was or was not, and no interest in your own theoretical or intellectually informed theoretical perspective. And so, that was just very different than what I have been trained to do.

J

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 19:34

I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for the Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs, with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of the Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at [artsandsciences.osu.edu](https://artsandsciences.osu.edu)

D

David Staley 19:59

I'm interested to learn more about the Transnational Black Citizenship project that you're leading, the Discovery Theme project that you're leading.

S

Simone Drake 20:06

Yes, so that was a two year pilot project, which ended last year, but I think there's remnants of it that have sort of... are materializing into this new Discovery Theme that we have now. And with that one, the group was trying to work on and think about the ways in which the study and theorizing of blackness and its intersection with humanism could influence public policy. So, we cycled through various policies, and really don't see a lot of social improvement. So, I really wanted to think about how can we, like from the humanities and art side, bring something that helps to conjoin blackness and humanness together, because I feel like a lot of times on policy, they're not seeing, like, people are not seeing the human, they're seeing the problem. And maybe people in policy wouldn't agree with me, but. And so, that was the idea, and so it brought faculty together from the arts and humanities, but also from outside, so from public health, from education, as well as social sciences, to think about those, to develop programming around it.



**D** David Staley 21:22

And what was some of that programming, what sorts of outcomes?

**S** Simone Drake 21:24

I had a symposium around reentry, and it was a faculty member, Townsend Price-Spratlen, who's in the sociology department, who does work on reentry, but he also does work on like, sort of spirituality. And so, it's a different approach to thinking about reentering, he has a group that he partners with, like an organization, in Philadelphia, and so.

**D** David Staley 21:51

And when we say reentry, that means...?

**S** Simone Drake 21:53

Oh, like reentry, like people who have been released from prison, so formerly incarcerated individuals who are reentering into society and, and the challenges that are inherent in that situation.

**D** David Staley 22:08

Tell us about some of the classes that you teach. You mentioned one, I think, at the beginning of the interview, on appropriation, but.

**S** Simone Drake 22:18

So, I think the class that I probably have taught most frequently is Black Visual Culture in Popular Media. And it's an upper level course, I will teach it in the fall. And we look at visual art, film, billboards, I mean, really anything visual that can be read can be interpreted. I like teaching that course, because I have an edited volume on black popular culture that will come out of Duke University Press, and - they said January of 2020, we'll see if that sticks - but I think that popular culture, and particularly black popular culture and the ways in which black people engage with it through like social media, and like, we have a term that's used called Black Twitter. And so, I think there's a lot that we can learn about structural racism, right, like systemic things, through the way in which people produce cultural texts, the ways in which people engage with them. I think we definitely should look at the art side of it, but it's not strictly art for art's sake. That's part of a long tradition of black popular culture, you can go all the way back to Du Bois talking about the -

**D** David Staley 23:35

W. E. B. Du Bois

W. E. B. DU BOIS.

S

Simone Drake 23:36

W. E. B. Du Bois talking about the place of art, the role of art, and arguing with Langston Hughes - and well, maybe not so much with Hughes - but George Schuyler was involved in it. So, I mean, this is in the 1920s. You know, Zora Neale Hurston making the case, or really pushing for black folk cultures to be documented and be understood as having value when all of her contemporaries did not necessarily agree. I really liked teaching that class and really pushing it beyond art just being for entertainment or for pleasure.

D

David Staley 24:12

So, tell us what's next for you research.

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Simone Drake 24:16

Yes, well, usually juggling has been something I've like enjoyed, kind of working on projects simultaneously.

D

David Staley 24:25

Juggling different projects, not tennis balls or something.

S

Simone Drake 24:28

Yeah, juggling different projects. But, I think right now, I'm caught with how to move forward with that. So I have... there's two primary ones, as far as book projects go that I'm working on. One, which seems much more straightforward, is about film. So, it's millennial film, but this time I'm bringing in white masculinities.

D

David Staley 24:52

Okay.

S

Simone Drake 24:53

And I'm looking at the ways in which what I call "racial angst" develops in millennial film, so probably about from 1999 to 2010, and what I call black specters. So, I look at these films that really have no black characters, particularly black men, but I argue that kind of specters of black masculinity, of black manhood, really drive kind of racial angst within these films, and that it kind of is a precursor to or can help us understand the... our most recent presidential election, in which many people likely voted against their own interest. And so, kind of making

that link and making that link as well to the way in which former President Obama seems to sort of haunt the White House for its current occupant, you know, something... like, you could see this in film. And I also do, sort of a genealogy of white masculinity in film to kind of get to that millennial moment.

D

David Staley 25:55


What's an example of such a film like that?


S


Simone Drake 25:57

So, "American Beauty" and "Fight Club" are two from 1999 that I kind of start with as this, just sort of angst around white masculinity and what it means to be a man and these others sort of social factors that seem to be, sort of impinging upon and troubling that understanding of white manhood. And then move forward into like, there's...I think there's a chapter, it's not written yet, but there will be a chapter on like "True Grit" and "Winter's Bone", looking at, kind of when these men are particularly fathers can't stand in and protect their families, and you have these teenage white girls who literally take up either arms or fill that space and have to sort of avenge. I make parallels or a correlation between that and like, around that same time, the rise of the Tea Party and women being central, so Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin, who were really stepping into these positions that once, kind of strong white men occupied and sort of taking on that role. There's that project, which I feel is more straightforward than the other one, which I also started in law school, and then haven't done too much with it. But well, it's just... I needed a paper topic for for jurisprudence, and in the process, I thought, Oh, this is actually kind of interesting. So, it's looking at the ways in which black middle class parents make educational choices for their children. And so, what I'm really interested in is, kind of the difference between like formal and substantive equality, you know, that you have the equality that the 14th Amendment says that you have as a citizen, but then you have the equality that you can actually access and realize, kind of like with the "When We Imagine Grace" book, I'm interested in the ways in which, when the law fails, when it's not serving us, how do people find a way to still get by, to still...not just survive, but try to make things work for them the way that they think that they should? And so, with this book, I look at a school that's local here, called Mansion Day School, which is a small, private school that, over the years, became all black, probably because it's in the middle of the city. And so, I look at that as, sort of this model, or really based on a model now, that you saw post-reconstruction, between reconstruction and desegregation in southern schools. And, and then there's another school, a historically black boarding school in Piney Woods, Mississippi, that I visited a couple of times, and it's not entirely black, but it was historically black. And so, I look at these spaces as kind of what I call safe spaces, right, safe psychic spaces, at least in with talking to parents about why they choose these spaces, it's kind of like spaces where their children can just focus on learning. There's that, so there's the legal kind of side of that with desegregating schools, and there's the historical side of it. But ultimately, I think what it's really more about is the stories, the narratives, the ways in which parents decide where they think their children will be safe - and I don't mean physically safe, I really mean psychically safe - or if that's a way to give substance to equality when the federal state systems aren't going to do it, can't seem to do it, when policy isn't doing it. It's not quite as linear and straightforward as the film project because it's

kind of pulling from lots of different spaces. But, the second book did that too and I think that's what made it fun. It's just trying to figure out what it is I really want to do with it so that it's true to me and who I am as a scholar, as opposed to maybe what it seems like it should be doing.

 David Staley 30:04  
Simone Drake. Thank you.

 Simone Drake 30:07  
Thank you.

 Eva Dale 30:08  
Voices from the Arts and Sciences is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler. I'm Eva Dale.