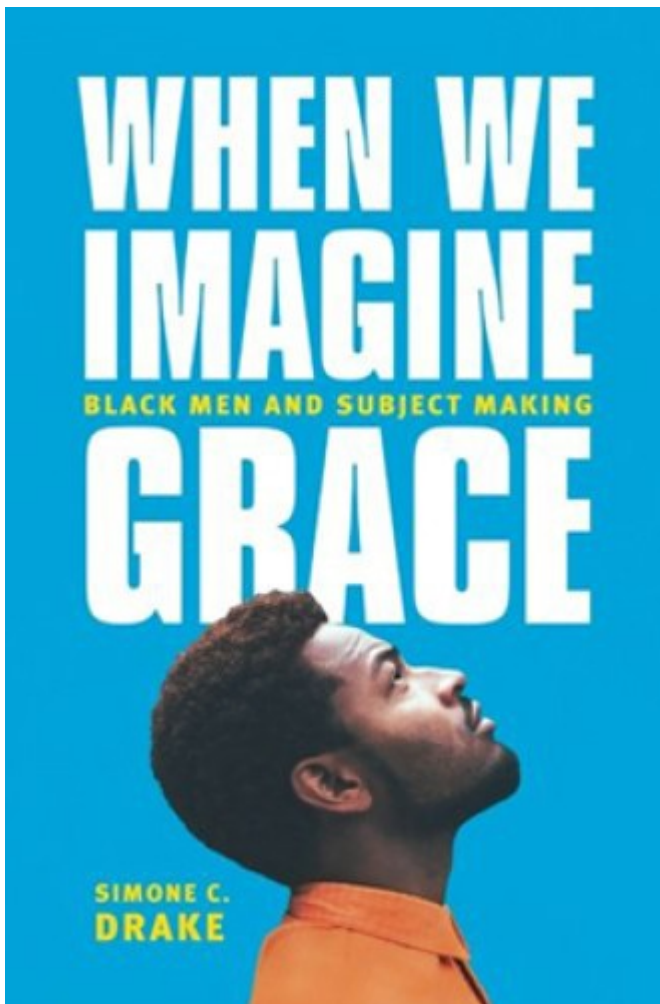


Imagining our way out of systems of disgrace

Simone Drake's book helps readers grow in understanding of a deeply marginalized group: black men.

by [Cara Meredith](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

In Review



When We Imagine Grace

Black Men and Subject Making

By Simone C. Drake

University of Chicago Press

Reading is occasionally an illicit experience for me. Intrigued by a title, theme or popular response, I dive into a book. I read and absorb the material, but along the way, an awareness arises: *I am not the intended audience. I am not the one for whom this book was written. Should I even spend my time reading it?*

Simone C. Drake's book had this effect on me. Drake, who teaches African-American and African studies at Ohio State University, desires to "empower black people." I am a white woman. My marriage to a black man and the birth of our biracial sons do not (and will not ever) provide me with an innate understanding of what it means to be a person of color in America today. But these relationships have propelled me toward understanding what it means to grow up with skin different from my own. With discomfort, I've leaned into new viewpoints and sharpened my understanding of my misperceptions. And I've learned that I can no longer deny nor feign ignorance when it comes to issues of race.

In this sense, Drake's book is not illicit. It's crucial for readers of all races. It affirms that everyone must seek to grow in understanding in relation to members of the most marginalized of racial and ethnic groups: black men.

Drake draws many of her early arguments from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Inspired by the character Baby Suggs, Drake encourages her readers to imagine for black men "a liminal space suspended between the realities of their racialized existence and the possibility of something else." This liminal space has parallels in the *already but not yet* of Christian theology, but it's also a claim about how African-American men might be viewed differently in American society.

Another character from *Beloved*, Paul D, is the springboard for Drake's analysis:

Being *willing* to throw off the pretense of invincibility, and making the choice to reject notions that real men are "strong," allow Paul D to imagine a black masculine self that is not bound by societal definitions, a self that is produced by imagining what has not been extended to him by the nation—grace.

The reader begins to imagine grace for Paul D as he strives to push back against popular conceptions of masculinity. By naming the fragmented pieces of belief we've placed upon black men, says Drake, we begin to think differently about assigned gender roles—just as we begin to see vulnerability as empowering, rather than disabling.

Drake roots her arguments in the lives of historical figures as well as fictional characters. Expounding on a forgotten part of history, she portrays the African-American cowboy and Pullman porter Nat Love as “an exemplar of how race, gender, sexuality and class become intricately intertwined within the black interior.” Love navigated race in a predominantly white western narrative and created a world in which he could have autonomy and self-actualization. His story tears down stereotypes and boosts racial pride for black individuals.

How does Love's narrative translate to workplaces, neighborhoods, and churches today? It imagines that blackness—or whatever skin color one boasts—is not erased from life's story, but celebrated wholeheartedly. My husband and I celebrate the dual heritages of our sons and work to ensure that people who look like both Mama and Daddy surround our family. We help our young boys find racial pride through characters in books and by interacting with people who look like them at our church. Drake shows how Love did the same, helping black people create “images of themselves and their accomplishments.” There is, perhaps, no greater use for imagination.

Drake brings together an unlikely trinity when she pairs orator Marcus Garvey, record producer Berry Gordy, and rapper Jay Z (aka Shawn Carter), all of whom were crucial in creating a “hip-hop genealogy of black entrepreneurship.” In a country where the 14th Amendment mingled with Jim Crow laws, African Americans have not been afforded the same opportunities as their white compatriots—and thus have had to build a brand for themselves. This brand building is what Garvey, Gordy, and Jay Z have in common.

Nobody living in the 21st century can deny Jay Z's influence on the music industry and beyond, given the reign he shares with his wife, Beyoncé. His early work capitalized on its portrayals of hustling—that is, a black man from the projects doing whatever he needs to do, legally and illegally, to make it in a white man's world. Hustling, Drake asserts, is a far cry from grace, and she shows how Jay Z moved beyond it both lyrically and economically. Still, “in the context of how Jay Z presents

the hustle lyrically, it is bound up in imagining grace.” And so, his music—and his business of *self*—becomes a poetic gift, a complex form of art that cries out for justice.

As long as systems of *disgrace* continue to plague black men in America, grace must be imagined. To do so isn’t illicit; it’s necessary. That is the heart of Drake’s argument. What does this mean for readers who aren’t black men? We start at the beginning, extending grace as individuals and allies, so racial justice might be communally recognized and ultimately achieved.