

OLUO, from page 4

were doing. But now it's something where I have to think about whether it's something they'd be comfortable with or just ask them, "Do you want this to go online or not?"

LE: *In the book you describe white supremacy as a pyramid scheme and later you make the point that problems within the labor and class movements is that they will have you believing in trickle-down social justice. White allies often want to take the path of least resistance.*

I.O.: I encounter it constantly. I think any black person, a person of color in this work, encounters it all the time, and you don't even have to be in the work. I think even

just conversations among people on the so-called left pop up time and time again – these kind of compromises that people expect us to make, but it's really our humanity that's expected to be compromised. We're constantly told to wait to meet these "majority" needs first and then will be addressed eventually, and it's really common and it's another form of white supremacy that people don't like to acknowledge. The

thought that they would come first even if they are the least suffered or the least harmed. And it's something that if we're ever going to have with movements that are effective and that continue to hold the attention and the effort of people of color and are going to be effective in fighting oppression, we really have to start in-house first. We really have to look at where you absorbed these harmful ideas.

L.E.: *You write about your relationship with your mother frequently. In the book you recount a conversation about race you had with her stemming from a joke she told at work. Did you talk to her about it before you put it in your book?*

I.O.: I didn't talk to her about it before I put it in the book. My mom and I have had a lot of conversations about my work over the years. We had long talks when I first started writing about, you know, how my life is going to intersect with hers through a lot of the stories where perhaps maybe she didn't quite get something right and it's going to have to be included because that's part of the story and it's part of my story. It's not to hurt her or anything like that, but it's simply because we all have to live with what's happened in the world. And part of how we move forward is by being open and honest, and it will always have a reason or a point. It will never just be "I want people to know what my mom did." We had that discussion a long time ago.

My brother (Ahamefule Oluo) also references our mom in his work a lot. He's a musician and a writer and a storyteller, so our mom has had a couple of years to get very comfortable, and I always do try to think – I never want to harm her. I try to figure where she is in the conversation. My mom actually has absolutely no problem

Willamette Writers

Ijeoma Oluo will be among the featured speakers for this year's Willamette Writers conference, Aug. 3-5, at the Sheraton Portland Airport Hotel, 8235 NE Airport Way.

Other speakers include:

Portland's **Chelsea Cain**, a New York Times bestselling author of crime thrillers

David Ebershoff, former executive editor at Random House, whose books include "The Danish Girl"

Charlie Jane Anders, whose writing has won the Hugo, Locus, Nebula and Lambda awards

Gayle Brandeis, poet, essayist and fiction writer

Vivek Shraya, musician, writer and artist

Sonia Simone, chief content officer at Rainmaker Digital

Steven Spatz, writer, marketer and book distributor

Registration fees vary, with early-bird discounts available to those who register by June 30. Details are available at willamettewriters.org.

with the chapter at all. The only complaint she had was that I didn't include more things that she had said that were not helpful at all in the conversation.

L.E.: *Growing up your mother made a point for you to know about your culture and encouraged you to embrace your Nigerian roots. That doesn't always happen when white people raise black and biracial children. Why did your mom make that decision?*

I.O.: I think part of it is my mom's nature. My mom is probably one of the most open and curious people I've ever known, so I don't think it would have ever crossed her mind that black was something she wouldn't want her kids to be. It's almost embarrassing when she runs across someone who is from a demographic that she hasn't encountered. The light in her eyes! She's like "more people!" Just completely fascinated. Part of that, you know, I think is her nature. Not to say no white supremacy infiltrated her – of course she's a white woman. But the idea of white supremacy held no sway with her whatsoever.

My mom wasn't really accepted where she grew up and wasn't incredibly close to her family growing up. When my mom married my dad, they moved wherever Nigerian immigrants were. They lived in a really close, close-knit Nigerian-American community, and that was, I think, the first time my mom ever felt like she had a family and community. And the thought that you would be loved and accepted and you didn't have to fit any sort of ideal and that people would be open with their affection and their love was the exact opposite of what she had grown up with.

For her, there was just this deep love for this community that was really, I think, as close to a large family that she had ever really gotten. And when our dad went back to Nigeria, she was just I think really

devastated at the thought of us not having that. It was the best thing in her life and she really wanted us to have that. So she was constantly trying to seek out ways to keep us connected so that we could have, kind of, some of that joy that she had had in those years when she was with our dad.

L.E.: *As a black woman, I'm grateful for all of the anti-racism work that you are doing, but it also places you in the cross hairs of trolls and racists. How do you handle retaliation?*

I.O.: First of all I'm incredibly privileged that I'm able to pay all my bills writing – and writing about *these* issues. Because I don't actually have to worry about a financial impact. I turn down work often when the request doesn't align with my values or when the editing process starts to pull my work away from my voice or what I feel like needs to be said. I don't have to worry about an office job and getting fired, or creating a hostile work environment for myself. A lot of times people are like, "I'm going to get you fired." And I'm like, "From where?" (laughs) Where are you going to get me fired from? From all the places who already know everything I say, who read this essay and decided to publish it? How?

A lot of writers, especially writers of color, especially black women writers, are not able to sustain themselves financially just through their writing. And I wouldn't say it's just my writing, but my writing and my speaking and things that are related to my words. And (other black writers) are in a tricky position because they really can be fired from a job for talking about these things.

L.E.: *You cover a lot in your book. Is there a topic that was a "must cover?"*

I.O.: Pretty much all of them were musts for me. If someone had said I couldn't include the chapter on the model minority myth, I probably would've pulled the book. I don't think one is more or less important than the other. A lot of them build off each other.

L.E.: *What's been some of the feedback that you've gotten?*

I.O.: The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. I was actually surprised. When you're getting ready to publish the book after this couple years of process, you start thinking of every horrible thing that people could possibly say about the book and all the flaws they might find. Definitely none of that really happened. There was some critique here and there. The reviews were all positive. Part of it I think I hadn't realized at the time that I realize now which is that racists don't want to read an entire book that they're not going to like.

It's been really wonderful to hear from people of color who are using the book practically because that was my goal. I felt like if it wasn't actually helping people of color, I wouldn't have been able to call it a success. To hear from people of color who are using it day-to-day in the way that I hoped they would. People who are saying, "I work in this field where people are

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