

Esteemed Author on Prison Justice

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

1980s and 90s, and mandatory sentencing laws for all contributing to extreme overcrowding in prisons, a result that she says is both cruel and unusual punishment as well as a war on people of color.

On a recent journey to visit with inmates at the Oregon State Penitentiary, she expanded on her views and thoughts, “How do we go about imagining different ways of existing without prisons?” she asked.

The same subject was the topic of her book, “Angels with Dirty Faces: Three Stories of Crime, Prison and Redemption,” which won the 2017 Oregon Book award.

“I strongly believe in prison abolition, the idea that prisons make us all less safe, and that there are ways of creating community accountability without relying on police and prisons,” she said. “The book focuses on the lives of three people who have dealt with harm, as well as how the prison system itself is harm.”

Imarisha does a lot of volunteer educational work in the criminal legal system. She personally reaches out to people currently under lockup, evidenced by her heading to the prison in Salem for a meeting with Uhuru Sasa, a black cultural group for inmates.

“They put on amazing programs and events in prison, and also do incredible work connecting with the community and being a positive force, she said about the organization,” she said. “This past sum-

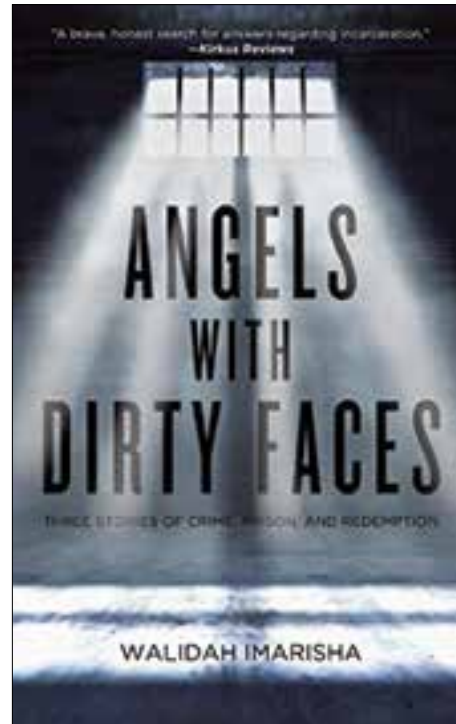
mer I facilitated a 10 week cultural workshop to really explore black culture and how it is a positive force in the community, historically and currently.”

When considering all the communities in Oregon, Imarisha said the people housed in prisons must be counted in as well, because “If you are not talking about the black people who are incarcerated, you are not talking about the entire black community.”

She stresses a number of ways to support our incarcerated brothers and sisters.

“There are myriad ways to get involved in prison justice, to connect with organizations doing that work in that area,” Imarisha said. “There are prison writing groups, groups working on legislation, and community-based leadership programs, and you can work directly with organizations working in the prisons as well, pending approval. There are many ways to encourage people to do research and connect with organizations doing work they are interested in to support the people inside.”

Imarisha teaches creative writing in the masters of fine arts program at Pacific Northwest College of the Arts, as well as conducting community workshops both in the community and at several different state prisons. She has also taught at Stanford University, Portland State University and Oregon State University, and created the Oregon Black History Timeline, available on YouTube, exploring key moments in Oregon black history.



PHOTOS COURTESY WALIDAH IMARISHA
Walidah Imarisha, the nonfiction book author of ‘Angels with Dirty Faces: Three Stories of Crime, Prison and Redemption’ won a 2017 Oregon Book award.

She also co-edited the anthology, “Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,” a collection of 20 short stories and two essays written by organizers, activists and change makers.

Imarisha said one premise behind “Octavia’s Brood” was that you need to

imagine a just prison system because one doesn’t exist.

“So every time we imagine a world without prisons, without borders, without oppression, that’s science fiction because we’ve never seen that world,” she said. “But we can’t have what we can’t imagine, so we absolutely need imaginative spaces like science fiction that allow us to imagine beyond what we’re told is possible.”

Imarisha also talked about racism in Portland, the whitest major city in America.

“Institutional racism is built in every aspect of society and our lives and the way power functions, and unless folks are committed to keep doing the difficult long term work of uprooting institutional racism, and recognizing the extent of oppression, they aren’t committed to making real change,” she said.

She was even more pointed in a recent speech at the University of Portland on honor the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday:

“Portland specifically, and Oregon in general, has been incredibly good at marketing itself in a multiplicity of ways as a progressive city, as a liberal city, as a city that cares about diversity and inclusion. How is it possible to be a city that proclaims itself to be the liberal capital of the United States, and be the whitest city in America?” she said, as quoted in the University of Portland student newspaper the Beacon.

“The reality is Portland and Oregon are exactly as they were intended to be: a racist white utopia. That is the foundation

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