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Stella Frances

Writer Alexis Okeowo opens Arts & Lectures' Justice for All series

What happens when a journalist returns to the Deep South to ask how race, faith and power shape life in America today?

For Alexis Okeowo, the result is "Blessings and Disasters: A Story of Alabama" (Henry Holt and Co., 2025), a vivid, lived-in and deeply researched portrait of her home state at a crossroads. A child of Nigerian immigrants, Okeowo grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, and in her new book returns there to explore how its people are navigating a time of profound social change. With grace and nuance, Okeowo uncovers an Alabama full of contradictions, resilience and hope amidst political and cultural turmoil.

Okeowo kicks off UCSB Arts & Lectures's Justice For All programming on Tuesday, Oct. 14, at 7:30 p.m. in Campbell Hall. Sharing stories that define today's American Deep South, Okeowo will join in conversation with UCSB's Alice O'Connor, a history professor of inequality and public policy and director of the Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality and Democracy. Following their discussion, Okeowo will sign copies of "Blessings and Disasters," which can be purchased at the event, courtesy of Chaucer's Books.

Earlier that day, Arts & Lectures will partner with the Office of Black Student Development (OSBD) and the Educational Opportunity Program to host "Lunch and Learn," a special event featuring Okeowo. Hosted by Julianna Swilley, OBSD's

Coordinator of Black Student Life, the dialogue will take place from 2-3 p.m. at the African Diaspora Cultural Resource Center in the Student Resource Building. This intimate event offers students and UCSB community members the opportunity to engage directly with Okeowo about her journey and to discuss how identity and community inform the stories we tell about our homes. Arts & Lectures will provide food.

A staff writer at The New Yorker and winner of the National Magazine Award, Okeowo's reporting examines the moral and political nuances of local and global fights for justice. Her previous book, "A Moonless, Starless Sky: Ordinary Women and Men Fighting Extremism in Africa" (Grand Central Publishing, 2018) was named a finalist for the PEN Open Book Award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. In "Blessings and Disasters," she brings the same sharp insight and deep empathy, capturing generations of Alabamians challenging tradition and reimagining what Alabama and America can be. Okeowo raises the question of progress on a local scale, inviting her readers to understand the South from a new perspective — even perhaps, as a trailblazer for the country's future.

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