

Andre Pruitt has faced multiple forms of discrimination because of his race and sexual orientation

Osa Atoe, a queer student of social sciences at Portland State University, says that sometimes it's not so much about not being embraced, as just not being noticed at all. "The archetype of queer people is white," she says. "Because Portland is a white town, it's harder for people of color to be identified as queer."

To illustrate her point, Atoe recounts an episode when she was walking around Portland and saw two black women—clearly a lesbian couple—holding hands. After they passed by, Atoe says she overheard a nearby pedestrian whisper to her friend, "Oh, they must be sisters."

M.L. Hedgmon, a Portland resident and student of feminist studies at University of Minnesota, has had the experience of going to places where lesbians gather and not being recognized as one. "It sometimes doesn't occur to people. Even if you're there because you're a lesbian sometimes people say, 'Oh I never thought about it.'"

Kevin Cook, well-known performer (aka Poison Waters) and active member of organizations like Camp Starlight, Peacock Productions and the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court, doesn't deny the existence of racism and homophobia but doesn't allow them to affect his daily life. He says he made the

decision to wear "rose-colored glasses." "I don't feel prejudice because I'm black or because I'm gay, because I don't give anyone that power. The energy I have is for the positive stuff I'm doing; I'm not going to waste it being angry or on alert."

Under the spotlight: Queer racism

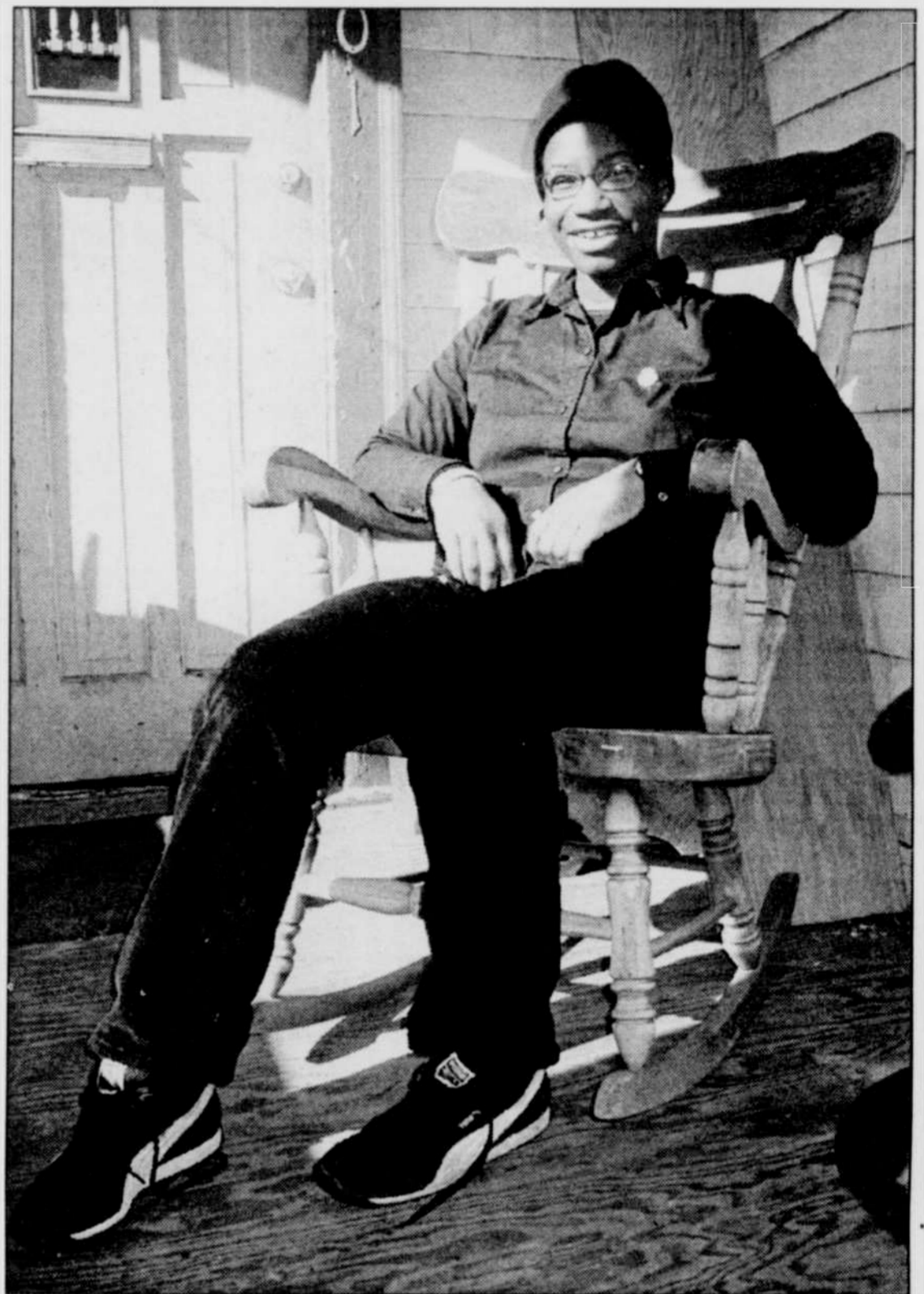
There is no question that with 60,000 African Americans in Oregon, to be black and queer in Portland is to be a statistical anomaly. Because of this, Hedgmon says one of two things happen: "My general experience has been either I'm ignored or spotlighted."

Atoe agrees. "In terms of racism, Portland is a funny town," she says. "Because there aren't that many people of color, people meet it with more of a curiosity. I get a well-meaning, tokenizing attitude. Portland is kind of a liberal town, but that's part of the problem. White people want diversity and multiculturalism, and the way they seek out people of color for their own purposes is not always welcomed."

Does a Black History Month feature article on Portland's queer African American community fall into this trap? While the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation encourages journalists to feature black queers in their Black History Month coverage, it also chastens, "Black LGBT people don't have to just represent black LGBT issues." One interviewee for this article diplomatically opined that *Just Out* would be well-advised to incorporate more queer black voices in articles throughout the year, as opposed to within a single issue.

Unfortunately, tokenizing people of color is not the only form of racism plaguing the larger queer community. "Gay people justify their racism," according to Pruitt. "We call it 'preference.' Look in the want ads, the dating columns—[white men] don't want to date black men. They say quite a bit: 'I won't date men of color. I want a gay white male.' Same thing with the lesbian column. [White queers] hide behind 'it's my preference' and won't look at the fact that it's based in racism."

This denial often stems from the belief within the queer community that one can't be a racist if one is queer. "Both lesbians and gay men...we justify our oppression of other people because we feel like we're an oppressed organization, too," says Pruitt.



Osa Atoe says she often senses a tokenizing attitude from liberal white Portlanders

Hedgmon concurs. "Just because you're oppressed doesn't mean you can't be an oppressor."

Cecil Prescod, a board member of Love Makes a Family and a minister at Ainsworth United Church of Christ, says he's seen widespread racism within the queer community. "I struggle with that more than homophobia within the African American community," he laments. "Racism is often manifested in terms of language. I was in a restaurant and the waiter was queer. [He had a] great personality...and in his attempt to be friendly he said, with a thick Southern accent, that his family had plantations and owned 60 souls."

Trying to find a date is no simple matter either, according to Pruitt. "I've noticed that if you're a black man who has an opinion and you're tall, people are scared of you. They follow their

"If you can't stand alone, be quiet because you will not be embraced by the gay community"

—Andre Pruitt

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