

Divided Loyalties? Continued from Page 25

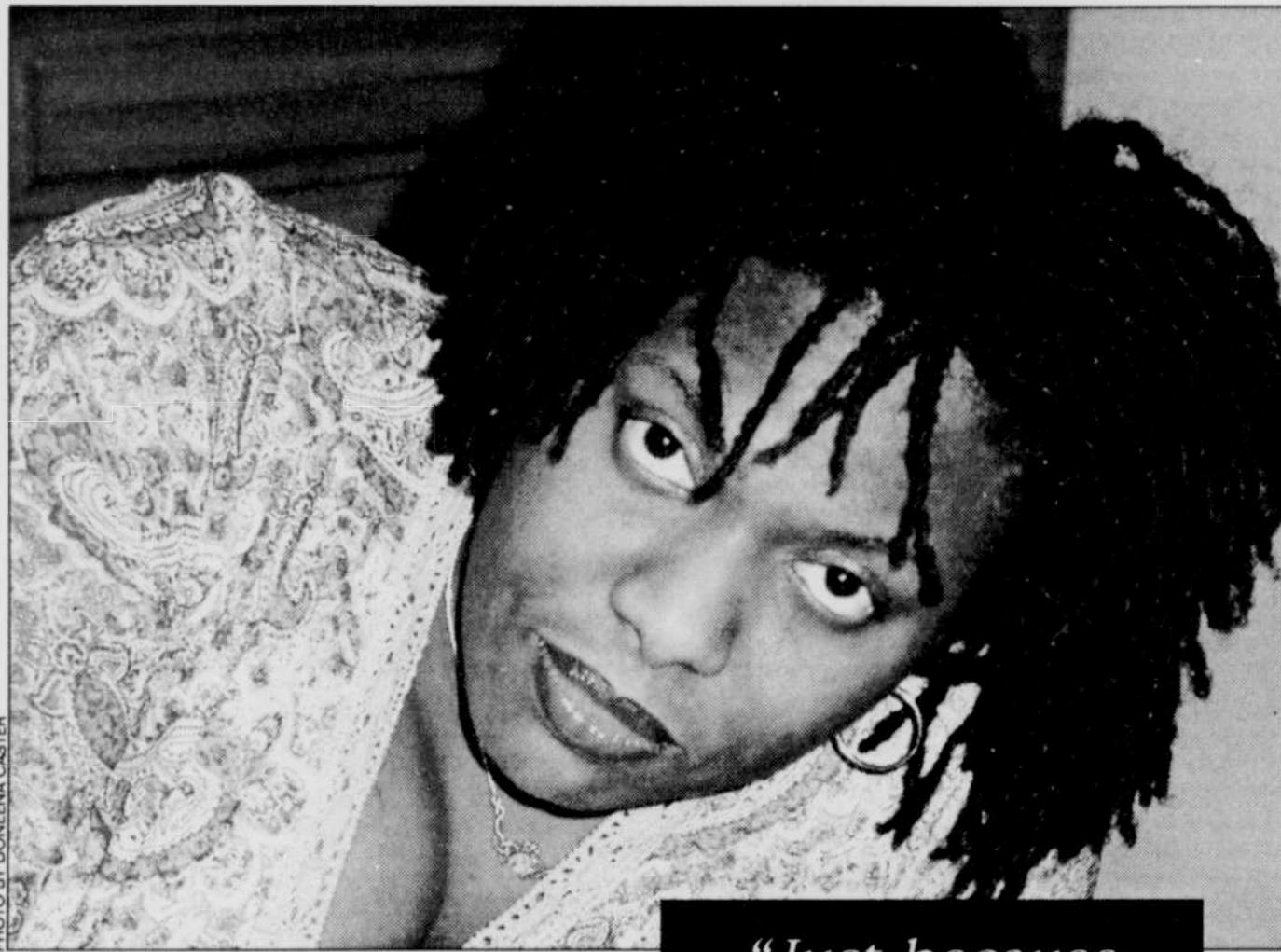


PHOTO BY DONEENA CASTER

subtle fear. The [image] of a tall black man is that he's going to be harmful. All the stereotypes come in their head; they don't want to have [anything] to do with you."

Pruitt speaks from experience: He is very tall, very built, very outspoken, very attractive—physically arresting in every conceivable way. He also happens to be sensitive, thoughtful and intelligent. "Then all of a sudden, they always come back and say: 'Oh, wow, you're really nice. Oh, wow, you're not threatening at all. Yeah, let's go out now.'" But at that point, it's often too late as far as Pruitt is concerned.

Aside from the loss of his teaching job, Pruitt says he has been discriminated against far more for being black than for being gay. Consequently, his race has become something that drives his identity more than his sexual orientation. From Pruitt's vantage point, white gay men can assimilate into mainstream culture in a way that he can't. "If they keep their mouths shut, no one ever knows they're gay," says Pruitt. "I don't even have a chance to open up my mouth and say that I'm gay before they've already decided to judge me."

Pruitt adds: "Gay issues are white issues. What good does gay marriage do for me when people will [still] judge me for the color of my skin?"

Threatened by difference

Prescod, Pruitt and Atoe agree that they encounter racism in the queer community more often than homophobia within the African American community. But the homophobia does exist.

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

—M.L. Hedgmon

"I think homophobia exists in every community," Prescod says. "One way homophobia is manifested [in the black community] is in terms of religion. There isn't more homophobia in the black community, but it's manifested more in religious beliefs. For the African American community here, there's a higher church attendance."

In a primer on homophobia in African American communities, GLAAD states: "Coming out can mean isolation from [family and church]. In many cases, a silence exists around sexual orientation—the idea that one can be gay as long as that person does not talk about it in order to keep his or her place within the family, the church and the community."

To wit, Hedgmon says, "I think the homophobia [within the black community] is more about being accepted within the mainstream community."

She imagines some of her black peers saying: "If you can't be white, at least be heterosexual, dammit. We haven't gotten equality as far as race, and they're never going to give it to us now."

Hedgmon continues: "There's a lot of fear that we're not going to be accepted. The homophobia [in the black community] is: 'You can't be a lesbian because only white people are lesbians and gay. You're buying into that.' It becomes, 'You're not really black for me.'"

Cook adds: "There are a lot of black people in the closet. When they go to the gay bars it's a one-time thing this month. I think it has to do with homophobia within the black community."

According to Cook, many of the gay black men who will talk to him at a club won't speak to him anywhere else. He says this kind of internalized homophobia is one of the reasons behind the high number of HIV infections in the black male population. In 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that young black gay and bisexual men were being infected with HIV at rates five times higher than white gay men. Says Cook, "If you're not comfortable talking to a gay man in public, you're certainly not going to walk into a clinic and ask for an HIV test."

Acceptance in small circles

All this said, many queer African Americans feel embraced by the black community in Portland. Nicole Browning, a returning student of women's studies and health education at PSU who brims with positivity, says: "Homosexuality may not be condoned, but you'll be accepted. I think black people as a group tend to be accepting of everyone. Black people will always acknowledge each other; there's always a community." She feels this is particularly true of black women, who "have

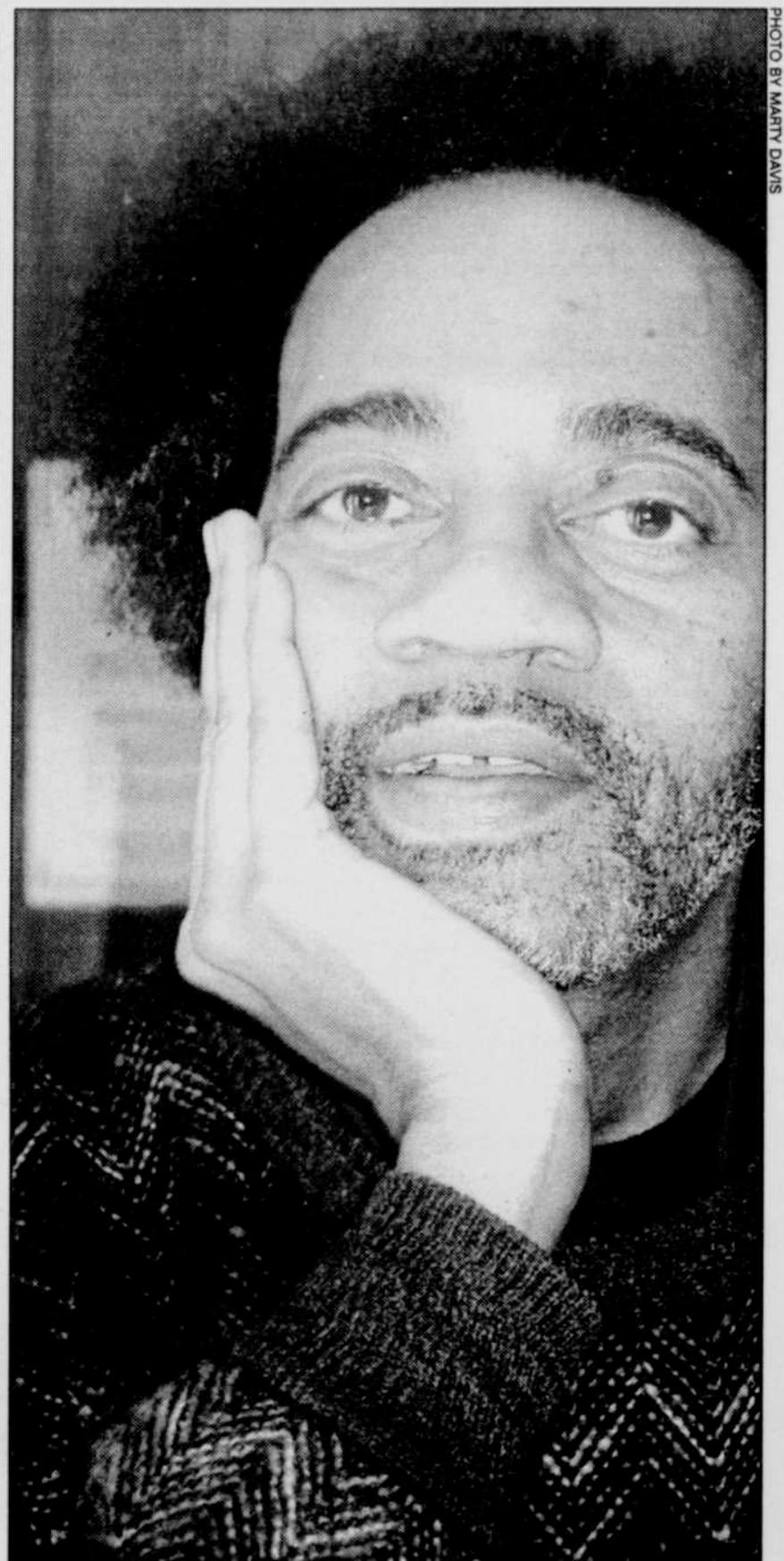


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Cecil Prescod notes that religious beliefs can be a source of homophobia in the black community

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