

been so disenfranchised, they're not willing to disenfranchise anybody."

Prescod says the feeling of acceptance is amplified in Portland because the African American community here is so small. "If you do come out as queer, people still need you and love you and support you. There's a feeling of 'you're one of us.'"

Even a conservative Republican acquaintance recently took Prescod's sexuality in stride while asking for his thoughts on a related issue. This surprised and delighted him. "It reminded me of how small the community is."

The size of Portland's African American community has a flip side, however. "It's a greater risk for a queer African American coming out in this community—it's a bigger step," Prescod acknowledges. "It has a greater impact here. Coming out in a larger urban community, you have the ability to be more anonymous."

Pruitt echoes this and says, "If you go to Boston, Atlanta, places with huge populations of African Americans, they don't have the same experience as people in the Northwest. They have a black gay community that's strong. In Oregon we don't have that, so the isolation is strong and people give up their identity."

Choosing identity

"When I encounter the world it's first as an African American man, then subsequently in terms of sexual orientation," says Prescod, explaining that people interact with him initially based on his most obvious characteristic. "For some people it means 'I have to deny this part of myself.' For me it's hard to do that separation, but I think for some people they have to make a choice. They feel pressures from the black community or the queer community."

Others experience their identity with a kind of fluidity. Browning says: "I'm all of those people [a woman, an African American, a lesbian], but depending upon the situation, one of those people is going to be the dominant person. There are very few situations where it's all integrated and that's who I am."

Hedgmon concurs. "In some situations my race becomes something I'm more strongly aligned to. In others it's my lesbian identity," she says. One rare place of integration, she says, was SistaFest, an annual weekend retreat put on by the California organization United Lesbians of African Heritage. "I think that was the only space when I didn't have to pick and choose."

Explaining why people gravitate to different factions and subfactions, Prescod says, "I think it has to do with where people find community." They often feel included in certain communities based on the environments they've been exposed to their whole lives.

"Seeking out a community of black lesbians is not the most comfortable for me; it's not vital to who I am," Browning says. Having grown up in predominantly white communities with



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Nicole Browning is not comfortable seeking community solely with other black lesbians

mostly white friends, she feels "a comfort level [among whites] that not all black people do."

She goes on to say: "I refuse to confine myself to a black social circle. What we have in common is our race, so whatever we talk about is racially motivated. It's more important for me to be a part of the larger lesbian community because I don't want to limit my experience."

Many seek the safety of smaller circles because of potential violence outside them. "I think [violence] can come from anywhere; it's always a possibility," Hedgmon says.

Browning adds, "Black people have been disenfranchised so frequently that the No. 1 fear of all black people every time they walk through a door is whether or not they're going to be confronted."

Pruitt says black people "just want a piece of the pie. We want to walk into a room and be seen—to say something and be validated, not discredited."

"It's a greater risk for a queer African American coming out in this community—it's a bigger step"

—Cecil Prescod

He admits to being profoundly affected by the way he is treated and perceived by the world: "There are times I'm just tired of fighting. The thing that keeps me going is remembering it's not as hard [as it was] 60 years ago."

Between Pruitt's heartache and Cook's ability to shut out the hurtful behavior of others, there is an entire continuum of ways queer African Americans cope with the racism and homophobia they regularly encounter. According to Browning, these differences in reactions occur "because we're all so different psychologically and emotionally. We can have the same set of experiences and come out the other side completely differently. I think it's just really important to acknowledge the validity of every person's experience. I personally believe that we're the product of our experiences...or the victim of our experiences."

Browning muses, "Maybe one of these days the thread that flows through the black community—when we see each other on the street, we smile and acknowledge each other—maybe [all] gay people will do that as well." □

J.B. RABIN is a Portland free-lance writer.

Black Queer Resources

Brother to Brother
800 N.W. Sixth Ave.
Portland, OR 97209
503-417-7991

Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
5455 Wilshire Blvd. #1500
Los Angeles, CA 90036
323-933-2240
www.glaad.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
1325 Massachusetts Ave. N.W. Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
202-393-5177
www.nglftf.org

Sisters in Action for Power
1732 N.E. Alberta St.
Portland, OR 97211
503-331-1244
darlenel@hevanet.com

United Lesbians of African Heritage
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