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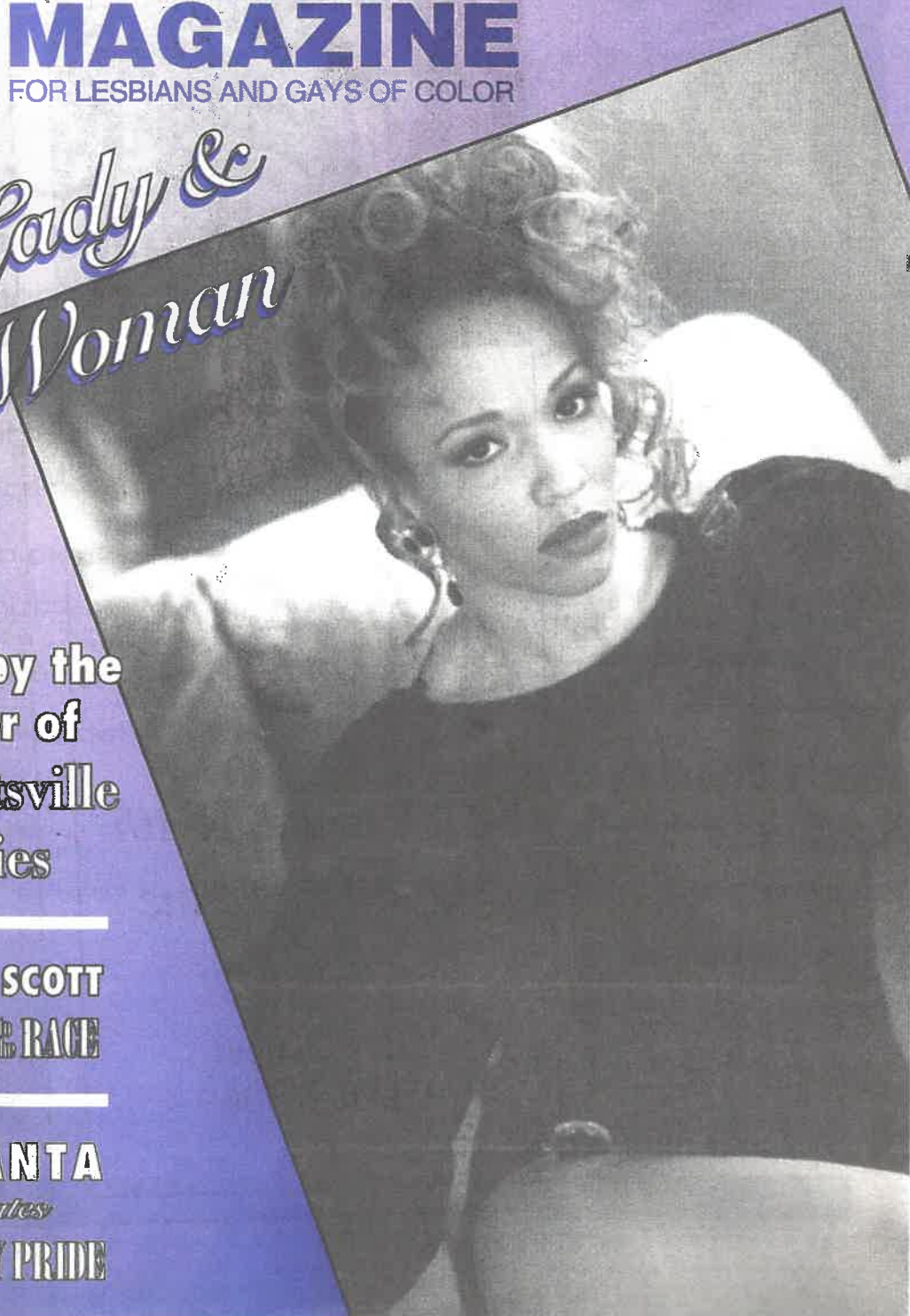
**A Play by the  
Author of  
The Cotsville  
Stories**

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**DERIECK SCOTT  
TRAITOR & RACE**

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# Shades of Grey: Self, Sexuality, and Race in America

An Interview with author Darieck S. Scott

by Douglas E. Jones

**T**raitor to the Race cannot be dismissed as another black-boy-loves-white-boy story.

Such a reflection is too pat, ridiculously easy and far from the truth in these troubling times where people, black, white, or otherwise, are searching for simple answers to the difficult questions of communal responsibility, individual freedom and the meaning of a worthwhile, substantive life. In this, his first novel, Darieck S. Scott takes the reader on an introspective trip that has more to do with questions of self-identity and courage than the problematic dynamics of race in America. There is a collision of realities here which demonstrate the polemics the main character, an African-American brother named Kenneth, must juggle while existing within the multiple traumas of a homophobic and racist America and a homophobic and ignorant African America. This is important reading, valuable stuff and Darieck has beautifully captured the tension of a Black man at the crossroads of various points in his life. But, *Traitor to the Race* also reaches beyond itself and demands the reader remember what it was to learn of one's blackness in

white America...or what it will be to understand one's whiteness in the diversity which exists in America today.

**Venus Magazine:** Is the book autobiographical?

**Darieck S. Scott:** In terms of what happens it's not autobiographical, but the themes of it are for the period in which I was writing it. They were issues of concern to me at that time.

**VM:** What inspired you to write the book?

**DSS:** I started writing it as a short story in a creative writing class at Yale when I was working on my Master's in Afro-American studies. One of the instructors said that we should actually try to write a novel because that was a way to get out there and get published; short stories are not seen that often. You know, I was kind of drawn to these two characters because the short story was essentially the first game they played and a couple of their first conversations. I guess they were



PHOTO BY: JULIAN OKWU

*"Traitor to the Race" author Darieck Scott.*

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working through some issues that I needed to work through. That kind of led me on. Also the form worked for me at that time—writing in small vignettes that are laced together. I just worked on it. I started in the summer of 1990—I was supposed to start working at a law firm, but I quit the day before and started building the novel from the short story.

VM: Those vignettes, I guess the styles and forms that you play with, your use of them—specifically the fantasy and the eroticism—are those meant to heighten the reader's awareness of Kenneth's struggles and his attempts to reconcile himself to himself?

DSS: Yes, they are and that happened in a way that I was not entirely clear about when I was writing it. In retrospect, it looks to me that the fragmentary style is a way of charting Kenneth's relationship to his own identity and how complicated that is. Also, it represents how multifaceted, how multivalent that relationship is. I think what the novel was trying to do is to track the way in which a Black gay identity—this particular Black gay identity—would have to exist and have lots of different relationships to the rest of the world, so that Kenneth is looking out at other people, fantasizing about them, pulling aspects back into himself, projecting his own stuff onto other people and in the

process of doing that—working in his unconscious—developing who he is and bringing that to consciousness, which I hope he begins to do by the end of the novel. So, it represents the complicated process of the relationship between fantasy and politics and who you are in terms of sex, sexuality, eroticism, and desire. I am trying to put all those things in play with that structure and what's going on in those particular structures.

VM: Ummm. Collision of several different questions, I'll try to separate them: First, 'inhabitation,' the living through of other people's experiences—I guess a process of becoming something else, experiencing something else through someone else and structuring that Black gay identity. Do you feel that we, as Black folks in a white America—to stretch further, as Black gay folks in a white gay America—are living through those inhabitations daily?

DSS: I think that the condition of being African-American in this country, and the history that we've had, is that we are both integral to and a part of this culture, the whiter culture—whatever you call American culture, whatever that composite is—as well as never feeling quite at home in it and being outside of it. So you get to the case of a Black gay person,

someone who is conscious of themselves as such, that you are both within the African-American culture and the African-American community, but because of all the silence around the presence of gay men and lesbians in the African-American community and the way in which we're not really included in representations of ourselves as African-Americans, we are both fully part of that and outside of that as well. It's a fragmented perspective given what we're told; it has to become something which is unified and united and coherent and whole for each of us by what we do with it. We have to come into the consciousness of being able to stand in all those different places and bring them all together. Inhabitation, in a broader sense, would involve looking at all those particular pieces that you get thrown at you from the culture about what is to be Black or what it is to be a Black male or what it is to be Black, male, and gay or what it is to be gay or whatever and how those things get separated—that's sort of what Kenneth is doing. He's taking pieces that are given to him and then transforming them into something which makes sense to him. I think that is the central theme of the novel: something about being able to resist whatever labels you get, but at the same time knowing that you're taking part in some of them because you live in the

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culture and you can't separate yourself from it altogether. You have to find your own place within all of that.

**VM:** We come to see Kenneth through a slow process of evolution—watching his frustration and growth through his experiences and fantasies. Does the inhabitation underscore the overall taboo—in terms of societal and communal definitions—of being Black and gay, of being Black and gay and involved with a white man?

**DSS:** Yes, I think it does go along with that very well and I think the title of the novel—the idea of being a traitor to the race—comments on that as well. For Kenneth that is the central theme, the label that he has to resist. He has to find some way to insist that he still belongs in the community. Yes, those things are being worked together. I think the idea of being in an inter-racial relationship, which is probably the easiest way to look at the novel and say that's what it's about, is the catalyst for him to have something to struggle with that's tangible. However, ultimately the novel is about Kenneth finding a way to resist all the labels which I was talking about and complying with them and finding where he is in the midst of them.

**VM:** The Black community dealing with its issues of homophobia....are we struggling to

survive as a community and can we not "afford" to prioritize our existence in terms of the civil rights issues versus the rights of Black gays and lesbians or can we do it at the same time?

**DSS:** Is it that question, 'Are you African-American first or are you gay first'?

**VM:** Yeah, that question.

**DSS:** That question. Ummm...First, I don't see an inherent contradiction between the idea that we are in a struggle for our existence in this country and the fact that insisting that your being gay or lesbian or whatever means that you shouldn't be fully included in the community and think that the issues which keep you from being fully included shouldn't be addressed. I think that those things kind of go together because, ultimately, what Black liberation is about is about being able to be fully human and fully a part of whatever community you happen to be in and being able to be released from all the strictures that keep you from being able to do that and certainly one of those strictures both within the African-American culture and the whiter culture has to do with sexuality—and not just for gays and lesbians, but for heterosexuals, for women, for whatever. I guess the very idea that you should postpone some aspect of the

struggle, the idea that you're supposed to put something on hold so that the other thing can get done, I don't think that works. I think as a practical matter it just doesn't work.. You don't really have a community if what you're doing is faking it, pretending that some vital part of it—and Black gays and lesbians have been a vital part of the community—doesn't exist. You're not effecting community, you're not building one, you're just imposing your particular view of what you want on the rest of the community and if people are falling in line with it, that's what they're doing, but it's not really true. You will be sowing the seeds of your own destruction because you can't really face up to what's going on. It's almost like that's a sort of axiom of politics and culture in the world: You can't continually repress things, you can't continually push them off and pretend they're not there because they always, always come back. The longer you repress them the more violent they are when they return....and the more destructive.

**VM:** And we've finally gotten to the boiling point.

**DSS:** Well, there's a contemporary moment we've been living in since at least the mid-80's where we, all of us Black gay and lesbian people who are conscious of ourselves as being that, are making ourselves

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known more. There's a lot more to be done there. As far as reaching the boiling point maybe this is it, but there may be worse to come yet because I still don't see that the issues are being taken up as much as they ought to be. We need to be concerned how we, as African-Americans, are treating each other around these issues of sexuality. There's a great deal of resistance in broaching the issue and there's been a long contemporary history, at least since the 1960s and the Black Power Movement, of saying that, 'Oh, it's just a white man's disease,' etc. All that kind of stuff really has to be addressed and really has to be deeply reformulated. That is what I would consider one of the most pressing issues for us to deal with. I don't know how we do it, but when I say the worse is yet to come, I think the worst is coming around that issue of struggling to get everybody else to say, 'OK, you're a part of us.' We're going to have to deal with our homophobia and that's very difficult. Very difficult.

**VM:** And it's very clear in the book that that's Kenneth's ultimate struggle: Him coming to his own identity as a Black gay man and then dealing with other Black gay men.

**DSS:** Yeah. Yeah. And then the larger issue stemming from that is dealing with other Black men period. The first part of that is him dealing with

other Black gay men, then the next part is him dealing with Black men in general, then the construct of Black masculinity and the Black community, and he moves on from there. And all of that certainly doesn't happen in the book, but what does get done in the novel is the first part of that begins to open up for him. It's a long process that we all have to deal with because we live in a society where we're so systematically degraded it makes it very difficult for really loving and respectful relationships to occur easily between us: Between Black men and Black women, between Black gay men and each other, and so on. There's a lot of work to be done.

**VM:** What are you commenting on about the state of Black-white relations in America?

**DSS:** (laughs) I don't know that I'm really commenting that much on it. I think the state of it in general is pretty bad, but I don't know how much of it I deal with in the novel. I certainly have Evan (Kenneth's lover) in the position where he's having to deal with some of these issues. But what I like about what I did with him is that his consideration of these issues with Kenneth, with Kenneth's relationship to his (Kenneth's) cousin's death, and Kenneth's relationship to him (Evan), makes him consider his own role playing in society as a white man, as a

white man who has particular kind of looks—soap opera kind of looks—and having him confront that stuff and confront what it is to be white. I think that's clearly an issue that has to be addressed because one of the biggest impediments to white people understanding racism is that they generally don't have to think of themselves as being white, unless there's some race issue that's suddenly thrown at them and then they bond together against Black people or whatever it is that they do. Whiteness, therefore, depends on some definition of blackness and he (Evan) kind of begins to investigate that. I do think that that's a necessary thing for white people to do. Again, that's another thing that's not easy for them to do and in some ways it is counter-intuitive because in some ways their power depends upon partly pretending that they're just human and largely unaware [of this race issue in America].

**VM:** And it's an issue that they usually don't have to face until they're well into adulthood, whereas we usually have to face it very young in childhood.

**DSS:** Right. Much earlier, much earlier.

**VM:** Did this story evolve of itself?

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**DSS:** You mean independent of my life?

**VM:** Yeah.

**DSS:** No, it had similarities to my life. I think that the reason for this story at the time that I wrote it, is that I was just coming out around that same period, which to me meant having to relieve some of the constraints on my own expression that I had really adhered to for a very long time—some of the rules of convention of what it meant to be whatever it was that I was supposed to be—and then some time after I came out I fell in love with someone who was white and I had that whole issue to deal with because I certainly never expected that to happen. I did not envision it, it was certainly not my fantasy of what my life would be like. And, you know, I kind of realized that was not the central issue, that there were a lot of other issues involved in it and I guess that it was a matter of instinct to follow this particular story because I had other stories I could have used in a novel and some of those may come to the fore later. But at that time this was something that I needed to do because it was all about what was happening for me at the same time. I needed to figure out who I was in relationship to what kind of labels were out there for me, what kind of visions were out there. Writing the story for me was part of that process, therefore it was very vital.

Funny, now I look back on it and I say, 'Oh, I'm really over that issue'.

**VM:** So, although it's not autobiographical, per se, it very much involves a lot of your thought at that time.

**DSS:** Yeah or a lot of my process of whatever process that was I was going through that was subconscious. There are things that are said through various characters which are things that I might say or pieces of myself speaking to each other, but a lot of it is really subconscious. For this writing experience, whatever was driving me to express something got filtered through this whole story that I was trying to make up. It's like your own private mythology: The story has symbols and things in it which have to do with something outside of the story.

**VM:** We spoke about this before: In terms of language and style, it's beautifully crafted, beautifully written. Was it difficult to write?

**DSS:** No. No, it wasn't. It wasn't difficult in the sense that I didn't sweat out every word and that kind of thing...

**VM:** Well, I mean how did you come up with the forms? There were some parts where you used reverse parenthesis and then there was a play...

**DSS:** (laughs) You know I really don't know where that came from exactly. Like I said in the beginning, I think it had relationship to the theme of how you build self in a context where you are standing amongst different places. But, I'm not really sure where that came from except maybe from the kind of stories that I was reading—I've always been interested in narratives that are kind of complicated and dense and where there are lots of things put together. I think I really wanted to play with all that stuff and for some reason this particular novel came to me in scenes.

**VM:** Well, wonderfully crafted. You make reference to the very great and phenomenal Toni Morrison, one of the people you admire most?

**DSS:** Yeah, definitely. She's probably the person I admire most, not that I think there's much relationship between her writing and mine. But I admire her work because I think it's amazingly beautiful, but also because I think it's so full of wisdom. She's definitely my favorite—I know I've read all of her books more than once.

**VM:** Recently we've heard of the struggles of E. Lynn Harris and James Earl Hardy in bringing their works to the marketplace. Did you have similar experiences?

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**DSS:** I don't actually know about James Earl Hardy's experiences, but I do know about E. Lynn Harris' because I read about them before and I actually got to meet him. My experience wasn't similar to his because he self-published first and did a lot of self-promotion because he was running into difficulty getting published. My situation was different—although I don't know how typical or atypical it was because I don't know any other writers—I just wrote the thing and started sending it around to agents and was rejected several times. That was very difficult because I remember thinking, 'I'm not the self-publishing type nor the self-promoting type, so I'm going to be in pretty bad shape if I can't get an agent because I don't even know this industry well.' But, I kept looking for one and just persevered through that [rejection] because I knew that was what happened and that rejection was a part of the whole process. I just kept looking, eventually I heard that Terry MacMillan was teaching a creative writing course at Stanford, so I tried to get in it and she told me my work was too advanced for the class but to come see her. So, I

went to see her and I told her that I was in this quandary: I have this manuscript that I would like to get published but I don't have an agent. She gave me the name of a couple of agents, including her own agent. I was not successful with those agents either, however Terry MacMillan's agent liked the novel a lot and although she rejected it, she recommended me to another agent who eventually signed me. Within thirty days the manuscript was circulated to twenty publishers and Dutton eventually bought it. I think a lot of the initial resistance has to do with publishers not quite understanding what is going on in the Black gay world. For whatever reason, publishers have not recognized the opportunities from the successes of James Earl Hardy and E. Lynn Harris, that there's a market out there interested in this subject—they haven't quite gotten a handle on that.

**VM:** Right. And I guess that oversight will be an opportunity for us to start capitalizing on our own stuff and start making our own dollars and setting up those types of things that we need in our community.

**DSS:** Yeah, I think that's true. And I think you may see—although this is not a prediction—a repeat of what happened in the seventies and early eighties with black heterosexual women: They were having the same struggles with bringing themselves to voice and getting publishers to pay attention to them, to take them seriously, to recognize that there was a reading public out there that wanted these books. They were hugely successful—at least a few of them—and their names got catapulted out there in the limelight and from there they helped open doors for others. I think—my hope is—that something similar will be happening with black gay and lesbian writing.

**VM:** Definitely. Definitely. Definitely. And you're one of the ones helping to open those doors. Let me say thank you, thank you, thank you on behalf of Venus Magazine and our readership for the interview and for your example. I enjoyed speaking with you.

**DSS:** Thank you, it was a good interview; I enjoyed doing it.

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