

# Controversial book explores degeneration of gay sensibility

by Vicki Chew  
Special to Q-Notes

In *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, prize-winning essayist and critic Daniel Harris argues that the assimilation of gay culture into mainstream society is rapidly undermining gay men's sense of themselves as a distinct minority. Harris, whose work has been anthologized in *Best American Essays of 1993* and who is a

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Over time, Harris contends, essential elements of gay culture have not only changed,

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regular contributor to *Harper's*, *Salmagundi*, and *Newsday*, shows how a once vibrant sensibility, which was originally created in response to oppression, is now being eroded by social acceptance and rampant commercialization. Furthermore, Harris raises crucial questions, not only about the decline of the homosexual sensibility, but about the death of racial and cultural diversity in society at large.

With wit, audacity, and penetrating insight, Harris charts the historical development and meaning of the icons and institutions of gay culture in order to assess what is gained and what is lost when the very factors that gave rise to that culture are eliminated. What, Harris asks, lies behind the deification of gay cult figures such as Judy Garland and Bette Davis?

but have changed into their opposites; what were once vehicles of political protest have now become sanitized commodities. The veneration of actresses has become the ridicule of actresses. Butch, tattooed bodies have become effeminate, "decorated" ones. Exotic, playful drag queens have become mean, militarized gender benders. Sadtistic leather men have become macrobiotic neopagans. Conservative, assimilationist propagandists have become anti-mainstream radicals.

Harris reveals how changes have occurred not only in the most conspicuous aspects of gay culture, but in the least visible and, at first sight, insignificant ones — from the facial expressions of cross-dressers and the way actors kiss in porn films to the coverage of opera in gay newspapers and the urban homosexual's attitudes toward chest hair and tan lines; from the language gay men use to describe their preferences in bed and the words they use to identify their lovers to the literary circumlocutions pornographers have created for body parts and sex acts.

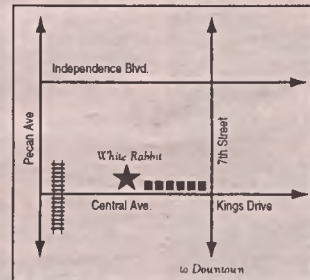
Harris writes, "The force behind these changes is the accelerating pace of our assimilation into mainstream society. What is happening to gay culture parallels what has been happening to popular culture on a much larger scale ever since the invention of a metaphor central to our understanding of the historical mission of America: the melting pot.... *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* traces the circuitous route of assimilation, following the long trail of debris jettisoned by a decaying civilization as it levels the features of the various tribes it comprises in order to create out of a racially pluralistic society a single monolithic culture. By focusing as a test case on the changes that have occurred in the gay community, I describe the gradual dissolution of the ethnic diversity of a country that demands from its minorities nothing less than a voluntary act of subcultural suicide performed to avoid both social ostracism and economic disenfranchisement."

Can gay culture maintain a separate identity as its major institutions lose their vitality and become both comfortable and familiar? And, what's more, would the demise of gay culture really be as devastating a tragedy as many believe? Only a nostalgic fool, Harris asserts, would want to prevent it from happening, since the flourishing of traditional forms of gay culture depends on the persistence of oppression. Nevertheless, he writes, "the process of assimilation is unpleasant, and we recoil from the sight of the extreme homogenization of American culture, of a monolithically uniform melting pot gobbling up its minorities.... It is this complex and ambivalent attitude toward assimilation, toward both its necessity and its ultimate ruinous impact on us as a minority, that marks the pages of this book."

At a time when gay culture is reaching its most "mature" and self-aware form, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* claims it is actually on the verge of extinction. A confrontational and brilliantly inventive work of cultural criticism comparable to Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat* and Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, it is certain to stimulate debate, both inside and outside the community. ▼

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