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INTERVIEW

LET MY PEOPLE OUT

*Daniel Harris warns that as gay identity is dispersed into
the raging homogeneity of the mainstream, a culture is lost*

by Gip Plaster

Bit by bit, the bonds of homophobia and oppression are being broken. Gay men lurking in parks hoping for a secret encounter are giving way to glossy magazines like *Out* that make “gay” look glamorous.

The gay community is going mainstream, and it's about time. But listen closely. A faint, witty-but-serious voice can be heard in the background, asking us to consider what this new-found freedom is taking from us.

Books

“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,” Daniel Harris writes in his book *The Rise and Fall of Gay 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.”

The thesis of the book is that the gay culture's movement into the mainstream is undermining gay men's sense of the themselves as distinct minority. With that, Harris says, we lose some of the things that make us unique.

“I argue that gay culture, the things that really distinguish us from other minority cultures, things like our aestheticism, our cultivation of the arts, our sense of humor, camp, that those were things that were formulated in an atmosphere of oppression,” Harris said in an interview. “If our society was going to ostracize us as immoral citizens and condemn us as outlaws and heretics, we were going to create a different kind of respectability for ourselves.”

Gay culture, Harris contends, seems to appear on every talk show and sitcom, yet that exposure is causing the things that make us worth talking about to disappear.

“So the fact that we have achieved a high degree of visibility does not mean that gay culture is flourishing. In fact, what we are seeing is that we are on the verge of assimilation and that assimilation will ultimately result in the obliteration of gay culture,” he says.

Harris points out that assimilation is not necessarily a bad thing, given that the alternative to the loss of a culture built on oppression is continued persecution. The book, though, provides interesting analysis in a refreshingly objective way, considering that the author is analyzing his own culture.

He covers a wide range of topics and in most cases analyzes them thoroughly. In fact, some of his analysis is too thorough. He spends two pages describing foreskin's impact on our culture. He

comments on the death of the era of Hollywood diva worship, the evolution of gay porn in film and literature, “glad-to-be-gay propaganda” and the unusual way our culture handles AIDS. His writing is sharp and clever.

He also has some interesting observations about how we differ from ethnic minorities.

“What sets us apart from all other minorities is that we have neither a geographic place of origin...nor physical characteristics” in common, he says. We are “utterly nondescript” and “dispersed through every social class and region of the country.”

Harris, whose essays have appeared in *Harper's*, *Antioch Review* and *Newsday*, among others, has given us quite a read. Whether you agree with his conclusions or not, the analysis is always entertaining and usually well-thought out.

His comments about the evolution of personal ads will make you think. Early ads were by gay men searching for anyone who would answer them, but as more opportunities became available and being gay moved into the mainstream, the ads changed, he notes.

“In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a new character emerges in gay personal ads: Mr. Right, a sentimental figure who, over the next decade, slowly edges out the Man Without Qualities,” Harris writes. “When gay liberation increased contact among homosexuals, it inadvertently contributed to the state of romantic dissatisfaction in which many of us now flounder.”

His observations about the difference between gay and straight men will also probably have you laughing and nodding in agreement.

“In attempting to assuage our fears of disintegrating into the battered carcasses of worn-out old queens,” Harris says, we have become “ageless, artificial creatures taut

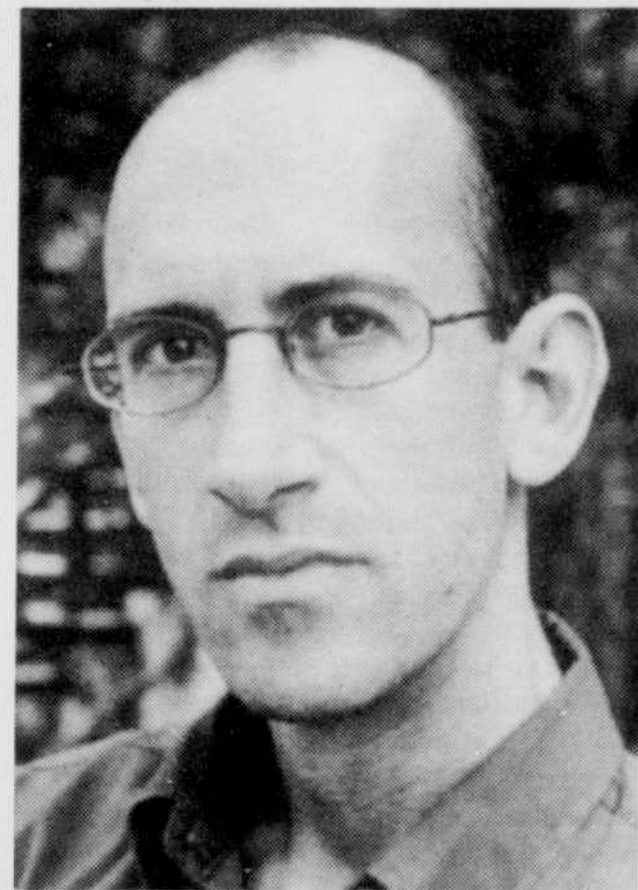
from too many face-lifts” and with “pouting, beestung lips swollen with collagen injections.”

“Straight men, by contrast, maintain their naturalness by allowing themselves to disintegrate and refusing to even lift a hand to arrest the process of aging,” he says.

Harris has written a bold and challenging work. If you agree with every word of it, perhaps you aren't reading closely enough, since there is plenty with which to take issue. But if you dismiss the book as a bitter account by someone who doesn't support his community, then perhaps you are missing his subtle call to action.

“We don't need another uplifting gay book, for God's sake. So I consciously set out to write a book that was 100 percent free of propaganda,” Harris says. “This book does not serve in any way to enhance the social status of gay people, to help us psychologically; it's not propaganda, it's pure analysis—something of an exception, I'd say, in a sea of books whose sole function is to make us feel proud and happy and secure and socially comfortable and complacent as hell.”

The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture by Daniel Harris. Hyperion, 1997; \$24.95 cloth.



Daniel Harris

PHOTO BY ANTHONY AZIZ