

The Tragedy of Stanley Crouch; he said what they say in private.

By Ishmael Reed

I had some enjoyable encounters with Stanley Crouch. He was smart and witty. His humor dark and droll. But there was something wrong with Stanley in the head. Something that his groupies in their eulogies ignore. These were white groupies whose relationship to Stanley was like that between Jim and Huckleberry Finn. Stanley seemed to be constantly searching for someone who would do him great physical harm. As long as Stanley bullied Black people, his Neo-Con supporters in admiration called him "pugnacious," but when he slapped Dale Peck, a white book reviewer, a backlash set in. His supporters also ignore the fact that Stanley was a poor gladiator, the quality that his white fans seemed to admire above all. He got punched out from time to time. Badly. Quincy Troupe, with whom he feuded, knocked him out. The writer for *Mother Jones* talked about his relationship with Amiri Baraka. What he left out was Crouch, a heavyweight at the time, threatened Amiri Baraka, a lightweight, in *The Village Voice*. He had signed up to be the enforcer of those Black writers whom the establishment considered, "Troublemakers." I remember his threatening me. After the incident, we were still in contact. But I never will forget the incident and I'm still angry about it.

I met Stanley in the early seventies. I stopped off to see him in Los Angeles after he contacted me about my books. Ivan Dixon, the late actor and I were on the way to see Quincy Jones about his possible co-producing my western, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, the "antecedent" of "Blazing Saddles,"* as a result of Richard Pryor introducing the book to the studio that produced it. Stanley wanted to tag along. He wanted to call Jones an "Uncle Tom." I refused his request. At first, Stanley wrote some articles that lauded my literary output. Even stuck his neck out by writing in *The Village Voice* that "Blazing Saddles" was a rip off of my surrealist western, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, a connection that is still being made.* Andrew Bergman, one of the scriptwriters for the film, wrote a letter to *The*

Voice denying such a connection. What Bergman failed to mention was that Richard Pryor was his co-writer. Pryor read my novel in Berkeley and wrote a letter to the late actor D'Urville Martin, in which he said he was considering making a film based on the book. Alison Mills, an actress and filmmaker, whose novel, *Francisco*, was published by Steve Cannon and me, mentioned in the book that a friend of hers, who worked at the studio that produced "Blazing Saddles" told her that they were reading my book.

Stanley wrote a favorable review of my non-fiction work, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. Then, out of the blue, Stanley did a hatchet job on my book *The Terrible Twos* (1982). The review was published in *The Nation*. The review was one of two hatchet jobs on my work sponsored by Philip Roth groupie and feminist Elizabeth Pochoda. Roth got her the job at *The Nation*. The other one appeared in *The New York Post*.

Although I continued to talk to Stanley for years afterward, the review, which was more of a blast at me and my efforts in founding the Before Columbus Foundation, a coalition of writers from diverse backgrounds, I was startled to see such a sarcastic scathing review. Though Crouch went so far to the right that his death was mourned by the NYC Police Benevolent Association, his initial effort in New York was to seek sponsorship from the left. When I arrived in New York at the age of 22, I was told by a very wise white radical friend, who survived a brutal beating by the Gestapo--he lost a kidney--that I would only succeed as a Black writer if I got someone to take me "uptown." I thought that he meant someone escorting me to an unknown destination on the subway. What he meant was that I needed a powerful white patron to succeed as a Black writer. By the time I left New York, I knew what being taken "uptown" meant. In the old days, it was individual patrons, like the Park Avenue matron who sponsored Langston Hughes for a time. My response to the Crouch hit in *The Nation* was to write a letter. A mistake. Clashes between Black intellectuals that occur in *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic* and elsewhere are viewed as entertainment for the readership of these magazines, the majority of whom are white. Sort of like literary "Thrillas in Manila." In the letter, I pointed out that Stanley had endorsed Ronald

Reagan for president, which might have provoked his takedown of my novel. My portrait of Reagan in *The Terrible Twos* was not flattering. Each of the major Northeastern magazines which are read by the American elite has a house Black, someone who would take their readers on a sightseeing tour of the Black Experience, though most of the film, literary, and media representations of Blacks are controlled by whites. Stanley wanted to be *The Nation's* house Black. (Currently, they have two. One is a kid who believes that Black men should pay Black women reparations. The other one writes about Black American issues from England.) I wrote Victor Navasky, the publisher, and told him that if he needed a Black writer to write for *The Nation*, I would. Up until faux feminist Pochoda was hired by *The Nation*, my books had received favorable notice. Since the Stanley hit, my books have been ignored by the publication; I have published articles there. (Nowadays people of color have been recruited by the New York literary Establishment to behave as gatekeepers for traditional Black Americans, so a critic of Indian ancestry was enlisted to do a lukewarm review of my play, "The Haunting of Lin Manuel Miranda." She ended the review by implying that the late Amiri Baraka could have written a better play. I was the one who published two of Baraka's books, not Nation Books.) My next response to Stanley's hit was to take Stanley's job. I told Victor Navasky that if he needed a Black writer to write for *The Nation*, I was available. I'd heard through the grapevine that Stanley was furious and was going to fight me. And so I ran into him in the Village, from where he wrote about Black issues. I said, "Stanley, I hear that you're looking for me." He came toward me and knocked some books out of my hand. His then-girlfriend intervened and restrained him. He was trying to engage me in the kind of entertainment that plantation owners used to stage. A slave brawl. Two bucks going at each other before whites. This time white passersby in the Village. Still pissed, Stanley then showed up at the Miami Book Fair and stalked the directors of the Before Columbus Foundation, where our American Book Awards were being staged. In *The Nation*, he'd call the Foundation, sarcastically, "Ishmael Reed's Literary Army." Since that time members of the Literary Army have won major prizes and two have served as U.S. Poet Laureates. One of the founding directors of Before Columbus, the late Rudy Anaya, received both a

National Humanities Medal and a National Medal of Arts. These writers are now part of the Canon. I think that Stanley was going to do another put-down, this time for *The Village Voice*, where he was later fired for attacking a writer, an act that delighted his now NeoCon sponsors. He began to hang around with powerful Modernists, and NeoCons like Saul Bellow, whom he flattered obsequiously, and Ralph Ellison, who stabbed Stanley in the back when he refused to endorse his sloppy book about Charlie Parker. But Bellow recommended Stanley for a MacArthur grant, which he received. I got ahold of the recommendation letter. It had nothing to do with Stanley's writing ability. He praised Stanley for likening Black protest to a teenager asking his father for the car keys. Of course, Stanley, by praising Bellows' racist book, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, provided cover for a book in which a portrait of a Black man was consistent with images of Jewish men created by Nazi cartoonists. Writer Cecil Brown did a brilliant takedown of that scene in *The Evergreen Review*. Stanley had found the folks who would "take him uptown." He aligned himself to the "victimization" scam, that the problems of Blacks are self-inflicted and their protests about discrimination are part of a con game or a "decoy." Of course, this belies the thousands of reports and studies and books that show that Blacks are victims in the key areas which define success or failure in this society. They are treated differently from whites by mortgage lenders, the health industry, hiring, the criminal justice system, to name a few. Those who believe that their being victims is an incident of victimization are not using the word "victim" found in real dictionaries. They're using a twisted definition possibly created in a right-wing sponsored Think Tank. No, it wasn't the Jazz criticism that excited his groupies who know little about this art form. It was his taking down those with whom they deemed competitive with those writers and intellectuals whom they championed. Toni Morrison told me that the New York Literary clique, "The Family," was sore that she received the Nobel Prize for literature instead of Philip Roth, a mean bigoted and provincial writer. I guess Ms. Pochoda missed the comment made by his ex-wife, Claire Bloom. She said of Roth that he had "a deep and irrepressible rage" toward women. Writing in *The Tablet*, Tony Badran

gave the real reason why, in their eulogies, Stanley's Hucks called him "Towering," and "Great." Badran wrote:

"Crouch had no patience for the self-pitying race politics of grievance and authenticity. He saw it as the hustle and had nothing but contempt for its toxic sales pitch. He arrived at this conviction the hard way, as he explains in the prologue to his fabulous *Considering Genius*:

'The tribal appeal is always great and there is nothing more tempting to the most gullible members of a minority group than suddenly hearing that merely by being born, one is not innately inferior to the majority but part of an unacknowledged elite. I was not so sophisticated that I could avoid the pull of those ideas and found myself reading all kinds of books about Africa, and African customs and religion. ... I would have been pulled into the maw of sub thought, from which it might have taken longer to emerge if Jayne Cortez hadn't introduced me to Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act*. ... Unlike those younger black people who were busy jettisoning their heritage as Americans and Western people—both of which brought the built-in option of criticism—Ellison took the place of his ethnic group and himself as firm parts of American life and a fresh development in Western culture.'"

If Blacks are hustlers they certainly aren't successful at it. The income of whites is many times that of Blacks and browns. I guess Latinx are hustlers too.

Crouch found a niche at *The New Republic*, where the Neo-Nazi book, *The Bell Curve*, was praised by Andrew Sullivan, who, recently, received affectionate treatment in *The New York Times*. I sent his admirer Ben Smith, information about the Pioneer Fund which financed *The Bell Curve*. It was founded by a Hitler admirer. One of the founders' friends was hanged at Nuremberg. Under the direction of Leon Wieseltier, who, like Stanley, couldn't conduct the kind of personal behavior that he demanded of Blacks, Stanley Crouch took down Toni Morrison and Miles Davis like a literary bounty hunter for hire. How did *The New Republic* repay Stanley? This time he was the

recipient of a hatchet job by Dave Peck, *The New Republic*, May 22, 2000. Why did the magazine that had encouraged him to demean Black talent turn on him? Maybe it had something to do with what a senior editor at a publishing house told me. He said that people were tired of Stanley Crouch attending parties and eating all of the free food and drinking all of the free drinks. He left out the part about hitting on white women, a no-no in New York and Hollywood. In the review, Peck wrote of Stanley's novel, *Don't The Moon Look Lonesome*:

"Sometimes a bad novel is a gift. This is particularly evident when that novel is written by a writer as ambitious as Stanley Crouch. Here is a book with much to say about three of our culture's most important social and literary themes--race, art, and love; and, when one has sifted through the bombast and the clumsiness to the truisms that lurk at the heart of this big book like minnows in a deep and muddy river."

When Crouch bullied Black writers, he was encouraged by his NeoCon supporters. He was like a hired scab of the sort who used to bust up strike leaders, only he used writing on behalf of his sponsors. While his right-wing supporters admired him, many Black writers found him contemptible and Black composers and musicians didn't think much of his Jazz criticism. One Crouch supporter, Robert Boynton, quoted some of them:

"Bell Hooks says 'Stanley's attacks go so far over the top they have a kind of RuPaul drag-queen quality. He apes a peculiar hybrid of jungle-bunny masculinity and new-right Fascism. He has seen that it pays off when you kiss the ass of white supremacy. Cornel West is also skeptical about Crouch's public persona. 'I admire the brother's candor, but his abrasive style is so alienating that it tends to reinforce the polarization,' he says. 'The low points, like the vicious attack on Toni Morrison, gain more attention. His brilliant jazz criticism is overshadowed. Some of his critics are too incensed even to talk. 'He's a backward, asinine person,' Amiri Baraka sputters, before slamming down the phone."

Robert Boynton is one of those literary tourists who jive white publishers into believing they know something about Black culture. At the time, Boynton was praising Black intellectuals who put racial topics

in the background. I debated Boynton, who was posing as someone who knew about Black intellectual history. He didn't know much about it. In the middle of the debate, Crouch, who was being promoted by Boynton, rushed into the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe where the debate was being held and began screaming and yelling at me. Crouch further alienated Black artists and writers when he sought to interject himself in the Baldwin family's entourage at Baldwin's funeral after writing a negative review of Baldwin's work in *The Village Voice*.

To maintain support Stanley shifted from NeoCon to far right. Crouch landed at Salon.com for one hot minute where he defended the police who shot Amadou Diallo. He wrote:

"It is too bad that some things come about this way, but there is, quite often, a sacrificial element to the expansion of civilization. Society often cleanses itself in the blood of martyrs. That Diallo could be a martyr without his killers' being murderers is probably too complex a concept for the purveyors of racial division to recognize. (Salon, March 1, 2000)."

But his most disgusting act was to accept an award from PBA president Patrick J. Lynch, who defended Daniel Pantaleo, the murderer of Eric Garner. Lynch said, "The Eric Garner chokehold cop did nothing wrong." Lynch slammed the judge's 'horrendous' recommendation to fire Daniel Pantaleo for the 2014 death and claimed that it was 'taking away police power.' The Patrolman's Benevolent Association announced on Sept. 2, 2005 "PBA NAMES STANLEY CROUCH 'MAN OF THE YEAR.'"^{***}

"Crouch will receive the award and be the keynote speaker at a luncheon to be held during the 111th PBA Convention at Kutsher's Country Club in Monticello, NY, on September 8, 2005. Mr. Crouch joins Senator Charles Schumer, radio personality Steve Malzberg, Secretary of State Randy Daniels, and many others who have held the PBA Man of the Year title."

In my last conversation with Crouch, I advised him to write an all-monologue novel. The monologue was his greatest asset. Ironically, while he held Rappers in contempt. He was a great Rapper. A great Bullshitter, who'd flit from one media clique to another. Whose weak arguments were camouflaged by a busy cloudy often tacky prose. I lost touch with him after that. He continued to be recognized for his

criticism. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who has been given control of the patronage awarded to Black writers, gave him \$50,000.00 for his novel. In a former time, patronage was a plum awarded artists which is why a young Baldwin received an award because Richard Wright admired his work. I applied for a grant from the Fletcher Foundation, one of about four controlled by Gates, where grants are likely to go to his Harvard colleagues instead of needy Black writers. I wanted to continue publishing books by African writers. He turned me down. He said that there were 96 applicants whose proposals were superior to mine. I told him that I was going to read Stanley's novel to pick up some pointers. Gates was Stanley's enabler and ideological bedfellow. He too believes that the chief impediment to Black progress is the personal behavior of "the black underclass." While Stanley and Gates scolded the Black underclass from soft perches in Greenwich Village and Cambridge, I grew up among the "underclass" and have lived among them since 1979. My view is more complex than theirs. It's based upon experience. While dismissing me and other Black male writers as "anti-Feminist," Wiki Leaks revealed that Gates awarded convicted rapist Harvey Weinstein a DuBois medal. When I heard of Stanley's poor health, it reminded me of an email he sent reporting that his blood sugar had risen to 500. He was proud. He said that he didn't experience a "Dark Night of the Soul." He saw it as a macho thing.

His friends offered him support through grants totaling over \$200,000.00. Crouch was designated a Jazz master for his criticism, which is why I've called Jazz criticism a new form of white-collar crime. The New York Family will coddle a handful of Black talent until their tokens offend them, as Baldwin did in his novel, *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*. Last I heard about Stanley, he was in bad shape. We were visiting Corrine Jennings, curator of the Kenkeleba Gallery. I was in New York from September 19-Oct 7, 2019 for the production of my play, "The Haunting of Lin Manuel Miranda." Somebody called and asked if Corrine knew where Stanley could stay. He was being evicted from his apartment. He was no longer useful to "The Family" and none of his Hucks came to his assistance. His mentor Ralph Ellison was wined and dined and romanced so that he became a pathetic untreated alcoholic with one novel. He was resentful of the rising talent, including that of his "Literary Sons." Those who call Stanley

“Towering,” and “Great” don’t get it. Stanley didn’t want to be a critic. I can tell you that it’s easier to write about Jazz than to play it. He went to New York to become an artist. He sent me a list of books where his short stories were going to appear. They never appeared. I was one of the few who published his fiction. Stanley wanted to create--instead, he became a critic, sniping at Black writers whom he saw as his and his sponsors’ competition and kissing up to those who could do him some good. He was used by people who wanted to settle scores with prominent Black artists. His vicious take down of Miles Davis appeared in Robert Gottlieb’s *Reading Jazz* because Robert Gottlieb hated Miles Davis. In the essay he displayed his pinched tastes. Rock and Roll not art? Little Richard, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and Ike Turner not artists? He wanted to be a musician and when a great musician told him he couldn’t play drums, he broke into tears. Poor Stanley.

- <https://books.google.com/books?id=cLaUWyO7CREC&pg=PA101&lpg=PA101&dq=yellow+back+radio+broke-down+blazing+saddles&source=bl&ots=Ah48MudE7A&sig=ACfU3U2JMnW2HvdK9THXWcOool3iOJ0Rew&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiG68To-KzsAhWBna0KHc8WAzk4ChDoATADegQIChAC#v=onepage&q=yellow%20back%20radio%20broke-down%20blazing%20saddles&f=false>

**<https://www.nycpba.org/press-releases/2005/pba-names-stanley-crouch-man-of-the-year>

Editor