

Recently, after a talk on a college campus, a black girl stood up and told me that she was "frequently" stopped by police while driving in this bucolic and liberal college town. A professor on the same campus told me that blacks there faced an "unwelcome atmosphere"—unwelcomeness being a newly fashionable estimation of racism's potency on college campuses today. Neither of these people offered supporting facts. But I don't think they were lying so much as "spinning" an estimation of racism that shored up their political identities.

We are terrible at discussing our racial problems in America today because we just end up defending our identities and the political power we hope those identities will align us with. On that day in Manhattan, I caught the first cab that came along. And I should have been happy just for the convenience of good service. That I also saw this minor event as evidence of something, that I was practicing a kind of political sociology as well as catching a cab—that is the problem.

Stanley Crouch

Stanley Crouch, born in Los Angeles in 1945, is a playwright, actor, drummer and band leader, and author of several books of social criticism in which he explores such topics as feminism, black power, and the films of Spike Lee. In his early years he was a black nationalist, but he is now regarded as conservative—though his essays almost always contain surprises even for readers who think they are familiar with his work.

Race Is Over

Even though error, chance and ambition are at the nub of the human future, I am fairly sure that race, as we currently obsess over it, will cease to mean as much 100 years from today. The reasons are basic—some technological, others cultural. We all know that electronic media have broken down many barriers, that they were even central to the fall of the Soviet Union because satellite dishes made it impossible for the Government to control images and ideas about life outside the country. People there began to realize how far behind they were from the rest of the modern world. The international flow of images and information will continue to make for a greater and greater swirl of influences. It will increasingly change life on the globe and also change our American sense of race.

Stanley Crouch, "Race Is Over," *The New York Times*, 9/29/96. Copyright © 1996 by The New York Times Co. Reprinted by permission.

In our present love of the mutually exclusive, and our pretense that we are something less than a culturally miscegenated people, we forget our tendency to seek out the exotic until it becomes a basic cultural taste, the way pizza or sushi or tacos have become ordinary fare. This approach guarantees that those who live on this soil a century from now will see and accept many, many manifestations of cultural mixings and additions.

In that future, definition by racial, ethnic and sexual groups will most probably have ceased to be the foundation of special-interest power. Ten decades up the road, few people will take seriously, accept or submit to any forms of segregation that are marching under the intellectually ragged flag of "diversity." The idea that your background will determine your occupation, taste, romantic preference or any other thing will dissolve in favor of your perceived identity as defined by your class, livelihood and cultural preferences. Americans of the future will find themselves surrounded in every direction by people who are part Asian, part Latin, part African, part European, part American Indian. What such people will look like is beyond my imagination, but the sweep of body types, combinations of facial features, hair textures, eye colors and what are now unexpected skin tones will be far more common, primarily because the current paranoia over mixed marriages should by then be largely a superstition of the past.

In his essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," Ralph Ellison described a young "light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual who could have been taken for anything from a sun-tinged white Anglo-Saxon, an Egyptian, or a mixed-breed American Indian. . . ." He used the young man as an example of our central problem—"the challenge of arriving at an adequate definition of American cultural identity. . . ." While the youth's feet and legs were covered by riding boots and breeches, he wore a multicolored dashiki and "a black homburg hat tilted at a jaunty angle." For Ellison, "his clashing of styles nevertheless sounded an interrogative, vernacular tone, an American compulsion to improvise upon the given."

The vernacular tone Ellison wrote of is what makes us improvise upon whatever we actually like about one another, no matter how we might pretend we feel about people who are superficially different. Furthermore, the social movements of minorities and women have greatly aided our getting beyond the always culturally inaccurate idea that the United States is "a white man's country."

We sometimes forget how much the Pilgrims learned from the American Indians, or look at those lessons in only the dullest terms of exploitation, not as a fundamental aspect of our American identity. We forget that by the time James Fenimore Cooper was inventing his back-woods-men, there were white men who had lived so closely to the land and to the American Indian that the white man was, often quite proudly, a cultural mulatto. We forget that we could not have had the cowboy without the

Mexican vaquero. We don't know that our most original art-music, jazz, is a combination of African, European and Latin elements. Few people are aware that when the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung came to this country he observed that white people walked, talked and laughed like Negroes. He also reported that the two dominant figures in the dreams of his white American patients were the Negro and the American Indian.

Are we destined to become one bland nation of interchangeable? I do not think so. What will fall away over the coming decades, I believe, is our present tendency to mistake something borrowed for something ethnically "authentic." Regions will remain regions and within them we will find what we always find: variations on the overall style and pulsation. As the density of cross-influences progresses, we will get far beyond the troubles the Census Bureau now has with racial categories, which are growing because we are so hung up on the barbed wire of tribalism and because we fear absorption, or "assimilation." We look at so-called "assimilation" as some form of oppression, some loss of identity, even a way of "selling out." In certain cases and at certain times, that may have been more than somewhat true. If you didn't speak with a particular command of the language—or at a subdued volume—you might have been dismissed as crude. If you hadn't been educated in what were considered the "right places," you were seen as some sort of a peasant.

But anyone who has observed the dressing, speaking and dancing styles of Americans since 1960 can easily recognize the sometimes startling influences that run from the top to the bottom, the bottom to the top. Educated people of whatever ethnic group use slang and terms scooped out from the disciplines of psychology, economics and art criticism. In fact, one of the few interesting things about the rap idiom is that some rappers pull together a much richer vocabulary than has ever existed in black pop music, while peppering it to extremes with repulsive vulgarity.

One hundred years from today, Americans are likely to look back on the ethnic difficulties of our time as quizzically as we look at earlier periods of human history, when misapprehension defined the reality. There will still be squabbling, and those who supposedly speak in the interest of one group or another will hector the gullible into some kind of self-obsession that will influence the local and national dialogues. But those squabbles are basic to upward mobility and competition. It is the very nature of upward mobility and competition to ease away superficial distinctions in the interest of getting the job done. We already see this in the integration of the workplace, in the rise of women and in the increase of corporations that grant spousal-equivalent benefits to homosexuals because they want to keep their best workers, no matter what they do privately as consenting adults. In the march of the world economy, the imbalances that result from hysterical xenophobia will largely melt away because Americans will be far too busy standing up to the challenges of getting as many international customers for their wares as they can. That is, if they're lucky.