



Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal

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In this incisive and unflinching study, Randall Kennedy, author of *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, tackles another stigma of America's racial discourse: “selling out.” He explains the origins of the concept and shows how fear of this label has haunted prominent members of the black community—including, most recently, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Barack Obama. **Sellout** also contains a rigorously fair case study of America's quintessential racial “sellout”—Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. In the book's final section, Kennedy recounts how he himself has dealt with accusations of being a sellout after meeting fierce criticism at Harvard upon the publication of his book, *Nigger*.

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Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal Details

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Socraticgadfly says

This is a great book that provides an insightful and even-handed look at the use of the word "sellout" by some African-Americans against other blacks.

Kennedy is personally qualified, as he notes near the end of the book. Besides being a professor at Harvard Law and the author of previous black sociology/studies type books, he has himself been a target of the "sellout" moniker more than once.

At the beginning, Kennedy explains that the word is used as part of efforts to maintain racial solidarity. He then notes that other groups use similar tactics, and later in the book draws some parallels to the gay/lesbian community.

But, for groups in general and black in general, this raises new questions that Kennedy tackles.

What are the defining points of the community, and here, specifically, the black community? And, who are the guardians and gatekeepers?

On the former question, Kennedy says it is, without a doubt, affirmative action. He then devoted an entire chapter to exploring how this rubber hit the road with Clarence Thomas.

Kennedy isn't afraid to point fingers at many black "guardians" for merely engaging Thomas on his point of view, rather than any evidence he may have for it. He links this to the larger problem of black "guardians" writing off black conservatives in general. He makes clear that wrestling with an opposing point of view on empirical grounds does not necessarily mean agreeing with it.

No. 2, after affirmative action, from how I read Kennedy, he would probably say is interracial marriage.

And No. 3, quite relevant today with Barack Obama and Tiger Woods, is racial identity. Kennedy defends an ABC reporter a year ago asking Obama about how he identified himself, in part by referencing Woods' "Cablinasian" self-designation.

Rekha says

2.5 stars, really.

If you're well-versed on identity politics, culture wars, or the like, there won't be anything new for you here. Still, it's a nice, brief treatment of the concept of the "sellout" in African American history. The chapter on Clarence Thomas was the most interesting part of the book to me.

Gregory says

Seems like it was too short great read though

b bb bbbb bbbbbbbb says

A thoughtful, well considered and interesting exploration of "sellouts" and "race traitors". The commentary and insights are often relevant and applicable in areas beyond race as well.

Kennedy is perhaps overly reasonable and too willing to consider opinions from all sides of an issue as valid, often assuming good motives for others when that might not be the cast. This, combined with the lack of exhibited passion makes the material feel more scholarly, yet also more bland and lacks a sense of urgency and call to action.

Overall, I learned things and it was thought provoking. For that reason I'm glad to have read it. I'd love to read a thoughtful counterpoint or rebuttal to some of the arguments and statements made in the book.

(more like 3.5 stars)

P. says

Randall Kennedy of 'Nigger: the strange career of a troublesome word' has written another legal brief masquerading as a book. The author discusses the concept of 'sellout' and documents the concept very well. His discussion of accusations that he is a 'sellout' is very on point. The discussion in chapter 2, however is very weak from the point of view modern DNA analysis. The chapter (2) is entitled 'Who is Black?' Kennedy accepts American cultural/racial classification, amorphous and quirky as it is.

A further missed opportunity is Kennedy's almost complete failure to explore the world of Rap and various other criminal cabals as they relate to the concept of 'sellout', most famously in the manner of relations between various rappers and the police and legal system. All in all, another good book that does a fairly good job of laying out the terrain of America's racial landscape.

Faith says

I enjoyed reading this book. Kennedy has a very engaging writing style that makes a rather grave subject accessible. I didn't agree with all of the conclusions that Kennedy made (i.e. his comparison of racial outing and sexual orientation outing) but Kennedy looks at the issue of selling out with a rigor and nuance that is refreshing and often convincing. It made me completely rethink even my own ideas of what this term means and how it is applied. For instance, I found myself feeling more empathetic to the plight of blacks who "passed" during and after slavery, even though I still find the idea wrong. I would recommend it anyone who wants a better understanding not only of the term sellout but also the idea of racial solidarity among African

Americans and how it affects our politics.

Qu says

9 – I delineate the negative effects that attend...

Page 10 –

Page 14 – “The Devil Fashed”

15 – Footnotes

26 – Mark L.Stobbins

Page 54 – Much of conduct

Page 59 – Definition of “soul patrol”

Page 60 – Drop Squad (1994)

Page 62- Vernon Jordan disease

Page 67 – The Real Sell outs

Page 68-69 – The Consequences that have

Page 70 –

Page 73 – Homogenizing Black America’s ideological diversity

Page 139 – 140 – requirements

Page 143 – Condoleezza’s Vice

Page 77- rather than bickering

Page 78 – Carter posits that

Page 78 – 79

Page 80 – Footnote

Page 82 – We rightly

Page 85 – Footnote

Page 85-86 – This response should...

Beardo Gomez says

Surprisingly nimble reading given the subject matter - only ever-so-slightly slowed down by parts of the chapter on "passing." Despite the brisk pace it relies heavily on well researched (and comprehensively footnoted) arguments. I love the way this man thinks and his expression of those thoughts is a pleasure to recommend.

Mark says

Much better than Ghetto Nation, which I recently read. Not that they're covering the same thing really, so that's a little unfair.

However both of these books, as well as Juan Williams' Enough do talk about how people (primarily black people, but not exclusively) deal with the many problems that black popular culture can present. To be black and reject those cultural tropes outright might well get someone branded a "Sellout."

Enjoyable, illuminating, even-handed, and excellently researched. It's not only worth reading, it's not a chore of a read at all - it's not a brick of a book that'll weight you down and bore you.

Rob says

The black community, like every other, has its “Official” history, and along side of that history it has “Things we wish weren’t true, and we’re trying to forget about, so please stop bringing it up!”

I imagine that many in the black community see Randall Kennedy as a sellout, for the fact that he won’t shut up about the things the self-appointed black community police don’t want us to know. Like how black people were sometimes slave-owners (or paid for their work), and how there was great disagreement amongst black intellectuals about their race and the future of it. We didn’t all have a dream!

In the early part of the book he focuses on the one-drop rule and how it was created by people interested in white supremacy. He then juxtaposes this racist concept with the modern belief held by many blacks that if you’re any part black, you are black. I found this a compelling part of the book because I am half-black and half-white, but I look Latino. This has put me on the outside of black culture, because for the longest time I couldn’t understand why anyone would want me to embrace half of myself, to the exclusion of my other half. And when I finally did understand that I was being asked to adopt a matriarchal society and reject a patriarchal society, I refused – I’m a man and a breadwinner, not a woman’s disposable baby maker.

This book made me think about a lot of interesting race-related topics. For example, take the bus boycott in Montgomery. What if you were a black person who just wanted to get to work and the bus was how you did it? The boycotts asked you to, essentially, give up your livelihood in order to “stay black” which meant not get beat up by a group of people who called you a sellout and a traitor. (And I’m not just making that up, it’s mentioned in this book that there is court testimony that blacks who tried to ride faced violence eerily similar to what a Klansmen might engage in.) Coercion is never valid, and always betrays the underlying movement it purports to advance. The blacks who were afraid to ride weren’t blacker because of their fear, and would simply “sellout” in less visible ways.

You either have group unity or you do not; enforcing it by force is inherently invalid. This is why groups are supposed to be small, like maybe family sized? Certainly not the size of an entire race.

Randall Kennedy has put together a book which contains an excellent argument for voluntary race-group belonging, saying that “black” is in your mind and your behavior, not on your skin. I disagree with him, and I think that we need to exist in a post-racial world, eschewing race as a concept, but hey, I’m a mixed guy who looks like a Latino – what else would I think? Randall Kennedy cites a lot of sources and the book is a jumping off point for much more detailed reading. I did find the footnotes to be long and distracting, though. It felt like there was another whole book down there and sometimes the ACTUAL book had fewer words on a page than the footnotes, and they often ran for multiple pages.

My main problem with this book is the length of time Randall Kennedy spent discussing Clarence Thomas. This section could have been a lot shorter (it was 57 pages in my version, the longest chapter), and I would have appreciated the space this took up being used for interviews with “normal” black folks who hold these stupid notions of “being against affirmative action means you’re not black.” In a book about an accusation, he doesn’t spend nearly enough time speaking in the voice of the accuser, or letting that accuser have the floor via quotes. Mr. Kennedy – show us how this affects us day to day folk. Most of us are not on the

Supreme Court.

Eddie S. says

Was really expecting something phenomenal from the title of the book, only to briskly read it and find out that the book was ordinary. This book exposed a lot of history I didn't know of, but the book felt like a defense of 'sambos' and race traitors.

The Clarence Thomas part was written well, but felt like a cop-out for Justice Thomas. He has parts of the book where makes some comparisons with other groups, which I disagree with, but drives home the point of not being quick to name call without proper examination.

Another glaring omission that I caught, was that he never mentioned Thurgood Marshall being a FBI informant. In his introduction he mentioned that he was an intern for Marshall during the 80's. Maybe that played a reason into him not mentioning it.

A decent read, but nothing to write home about.

Nikki says

Excellent! Excellent!

Upon reading this, I was appalled at how little of black history I knew (I'm white from California). The point of this book is that African Americans are often at odds within their community of which of their leaders has "sold out" and which haven't, leaders both historical and modern (and he includes discussion on who I personally see in the media--Obama, Oprah, Rice, Powell, Clarence Thomes, even Tiger Woods).

Why aren't historically important black leaders in the history books? Actually, now that I've read it, I think I understand. It's too complex for high school. Take, for example, a printed statement from 1868, wherein a black leader calls from the rights for blacks to own land but under white supervision, since black are, after all, inferior. The last half of that statement, under today's standards, makes the black man who wrote it a "sell out." But two things: one, it was radically progressive for its day and started the changes that helped the race that, because of those advances, today has the right to call him a "sell out", and; two, anything more radical would have shut down his newspaper and so may not be the purest form of his opinion. I'm afraid that a statement like that, read by high school students today, could be taken very, very wrongly and could even be used as ammunition for racism instead of as a means of understanding how slaves eventually, painstakingly, and with much dissension and disagreement within the ranks, climbed out of the cotton fields and into the position they hold today.

There is wonderful discussion on the politics of mainstream black America and the realities of black Americans ostracized from their racial community for their differing opinions. It asks difficult questions about the benefits versus cost of ostracizing but also warns of the danger of believing every idea meant for the black community is fine and good as long as it's made by a black. In other words, sometimes it's a good

thing to dismiss people as "sell outs." He points out that the messages of gang leaders and even some musicians could fall under the category of "harmful to the race." He would, however, like to see a more judicious use of the term "sell out" and better scrutiny by blacks in general before they'll believe the accusation of "selling out."

Very, very good. Well written and thoughtful. A true insider's look at how blacks on both sides of such issues as Affirmative Action, believe current policy is affecting themselves and their communities.

Anne says

A book I wish Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and the like would read. One that should be on the night stand of every Black community leader and activist. Kennedy pulls no punches with this book, and takes no obvious sides. He objectively analyzes and critiques arguments for and against intra-racial ostracism.

Gina says

More of a 3.5, but I'm bumping it up to 4. This book really could have been fleshed out more, especially given that half of it seems to be devoted to the case of Clarence Thomas, but it's an engaging look at how the concept of the racial betrayer reflects the boundaries and cohesion (or lack thereof) of the black community. Of particular interest to me was the way that black people have used the one drop rule to retroactively "claim" figures who would not have considered themselves black, or were not considered such by peers (see Beethoven being black).

Some of Kennedy's attempts at evenhandedness tempered down his argument to a bland call for nuance, so I would have liked to see more discussion of the black law students who were part of the impetus for this book. The dispassionate tone works for historical analysis, but less so when you're asking a community at large to respond to disagreement less dramatically. On that note, the book could have also discussed more points of racial disagreement than just affirmative action, though Kennedy paints this as the main factor of Thomas' unpopularity. There are hints about class divisions, political stances, and interracial marriage and adoption, but these are for the most part lightly touched upon.

matt says

Kennedy's tendency to go off on tangents would be more forgivable if this book wasn't so brief. His lengthy examination of Clarence Thomas is the only place where this volume seems adequate. Elsewhere, Kennedy seems to cherry pick whatever random facts about passing and African American sell-outs suit his purposes, leaving the reader with a lot of interesting facts that don't lead up to a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

That being said, I'd personally pay this man to explore the punk underground and create a multi-disciplinary exercise on what it means to be a sell-out in varying contexts. We'll even get Reel Big Fish to provide the forward!

