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The Racial Sellout: Language, History, and Popular Culture

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What does it mean to “sell out” your race? This talk will examine the history of such accusations in the United States, moving from early 20th century debates over black leadership to contemporary scandals in popular culture. It will explain why ideas about racial “authenticity” and “solidarity” are so controversial, yet so vital. And it will explore both the unique language used to identify race traitors, such as “Uncle Tom” and “house Negro,” as well as the ways this anxiety about racial loyalty reflects a broader American anxiety with the idea of “selling out.”