



## What am I Equal to?

Curriculum Unit 94.04.02  
by Alan K. Frishman

Barbara J. Fields defines race as “neither biology nor an idea absorbed into biology by Lamarckian inheritance,” but as an ideology. And, as an *ideology*, “lives on today” only because “we continue to create it today.” (1)

While disagreeing with the economic basis for Fields’s theory, I do agree that the concept of race, like that of any political or organizational affiliation, is not biologically determined, and needs to be continually recreated. Further, I consider race to be a subset in a larger arena of differentiation called specialness.

Specialness is the great dictator of . . . wrong decisions. Here is the grand illusion of what you are. . . . He who is “worse” than you must be attacked, so that your specialness can live on his defeat.

Would it be possible for you to hate [a person in the designated group] if you were like him?

Those who are special must first defend illusions against the truth. (2)

If, then, it is not “possible . . . to hate [someone] if you were like him,” and—for whatever reason—there is importance in “hating” him, it becomes crucial *not* to be like him. We see the results of this “logic” applied again and again throughout history where, indeed, much harm has come from *specialness*.

A member of a *special* group, protected by his own sense of impunity, is able to do and say certain things without having to take conscious, or personal, responsibility for them. (“Those who are special must first defend illusions against the truth.”) Furthermore, he is frequently rewarded with the moral high ground, its comforting righteousness yet another buffer from the truth. In U.S. history, political leaders have often tolerated or even encouraged Americans to think they were more “special”—that is, superior—if they were white, or Protestant, or male, etc.

How can this toleration, even encouragement, of certain harmful *special* groups be understood in view of this country’s stated intention that “All men are created equal”? Are we all absolute hypocrites? As a high school U.S. History teacher I need to address these issues.

Moreover, if this general agreement on *in* equality is, as Fields suggests, continually recreated, then each of us needs to become aware of his own participation in this recreation if any discussion is to be meaningful. Such an examination would be particularly useful for my students, whose ideas of personal affiliation are

either still being formed or so fresh as to be easily influenced.

Another point: Perhaps it is inevitable that a person needs to feel special. If so, then there are two important questions to be asked. (1) *How can we channel the need to feel special into areas that are helpful to others, and to society?* For example, a special talent in science might lead to a useful life as a research physician (as opposed to inventing new ways of torturing political prisoners). (2) *How can we legitimately feel special while also recognizing and respecting the way others are also special?* In other words, how can we teach that ascribed valuations are not absolute?

An additional benefit of discussing racism as a subset of a more general *specialness* in a classroom of largely African-American and Puerto Rican students is to place this potentially charged subject in an academically protected environment, precluding both sloppy thinking—I want my students to learn to think for themselves—and knee-jerk hostility. Ultimately, the box of racist thinking can be escaped only, first, from *within*—from an honest inventory of its contents and, then, from above—with the overview of objectivity.

Accordingly, I have prepared a curriculum unit, “What Am I Equal To?” This unit includes six basic, cumulative themes. The application of these themes is achieved through four specific objectives. Here is a list of the themes and objectives:

## THEMES

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1. *Specialness* is learned.
2. *Specialness* has value.
3. This value is culturally determined.
4. *Specialness* may be used as justification for notions of superiority, for divisiveness, and for oppression.
5. Those who use—or misuse— *specialness* in this way are generally unconscious of their doing so.
6. We can begin to change this misuse by raising the individual’s level of conscious awareness.

## OBJECTIVES

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1. To propose an alternative to the customary “biological” definition of race, to encourage students to invent their own series of distinctions, new races or arenas of specialness.
2. To encourage students to become aware of the prevalence of their own *specialistic* tendencies, so that they may learn to take personal responsibility for their behavior based on such distinctions.
3. To encourage students to become aware of the prevalence of affiliations of *specialness* that exist in the culture.
4. To demonstrate how prevailing belief systems have been used historically to justify social concepts of *specialness* .

For the next several pages I will discuss these four objectives in greater detail, followed by specific strategies to be used in the classroom.

OBJECTIVE ONE: TO PROPOSE AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CUSTOMARY “BIOLOGICAL” DEFINITION OF RACE, TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO INVENT THEIR OWN SERIES OF DISTINCTIONS, NEW RACES OR ARENAS OF *SPECIALNESS* .

The need for distinctions. Congenitally blind persons who later gain the use of their sight have to learn to distinguish triangles from rectangles. No doubt the ability to do so has value in our society, as does being able to determine how fast a car is coming when we cross the street. Other distinctions, like knowing the sex of a pigeon roosting in a neighboring building, might not (for most of us anyway).

Accordingly, I will present examples to the class of how one’s livelihood, even one’s life, might depend on the ability to make certain specific distinctions. And that these distinctions—or, more precisely, the importance of these distinctions—are culturally determined.

*A Masai, whose wealth/status is defined by his skill at cattle raising, must be able to discern the slightest differences among his cows: which is pregnant, which is stubborn, which is sick, and so on.*

A Formula One driver approaching a chicane at 140 mph better be in the right gear. If not, he could blow up his engine, or himself. Without time to look at his tachometer, he can tell only by the vibrations through the gear shift lever.

A sales executive for Boeing, negotiating a multi billion dollar contract for 777’s with Saudi Airlines, must distinguish the most subtle of signals in his potential buyer—signals unseen by you or me—to close the deal successfully.

And how long would the lion last if, surveying a herd of gazelle, she lost her ability to select an old one, an immature one, or a weak one—one she has a decent chance of catching?

I will ask students to give examples from their own lives of *the distinctions that are important to them* .  
(Perhaps, which history teacher gives the fewest, or the easiest, tests!)

Then, after discussing both the whys and the hows of these distinctions in their lives, I will present the class with pictures of fifty people. challenging it to divide these people, *based only on their appearances* , into ten different categories.

I will expect such divisions as:

1. male/female
2. tall/short
3. fat/skinny
4. good-looking/plain looking
5. well-dressed/poorly dressed
6. black/white/Latino/Asian/etc.
7. healthy/sick
8. able-bodied/disabled
9. contented/distressed
10. old/young.

Then I will have the students rate, first, the importance of each category. Race, for example, may be important; tall/short may not be important. Second, I would have them rate the distinctions within each category. From these figures for each student he and I could generate a grid that would contain two columns: On the left would be the name of each category. On the right, directly across from its corresponding category, would be the rating assigned to it.

So, the “ideal” might be a young, contented, able-bodied, healthy, well-dressed, good-looking, skinny, tall, black female. The “worst” might be an old, distressed, disabled, sick, poorly-dressed, plain looking, fat, short Asian male.

After examining each student’s grid privately I can then produce a master grid for the class as a whole on the blackboard. But first, as an exercise—and to make the process more accessible—I would have the students guess, in the manner of the TV game show “Family Feud,” which categories were most “popular” and which scored highest in their valuations.

The next step would be to have the students create distinctions that may be *important to the them, but cannot be determined only by appearance* , such as:

has boyfriend or girlfriend/ doesn’t have boyfriend or girlfriend

homosexual/ heterosexual/bisexual

outgoing/shy

smart/not smart

keeps clean/needs to bathe

rich/poor

law abiding/not law abiding

industrious/ lazy

Christian/non-Christian

generous/stingy

articulate/not articulate

funny/boring

calm/hyperactive

kind/mean-spirited.

Then, as before, I will have the students (a) rate the *importance* of each category and (b) rate the *distinctions* within each category. Once again, after this process was completed I could generalize the results for the entire class on the board, using the now familiar methods employed earlier.

For my next step I would propose to the students certain distinctions that might at first glance seem to be completely arbitrary or valueless. However, with more information, placing each distinction within a particular context, these “valueless” distinctions become charged with significance. Examples would include:

*big ear lobes / small ear lobes* (the former being a sign of enlightenment to Buddhists)  
*grey eyes / blue eyes* (grey being the preferred color for a woman in Northwest Medieval Europe)  
*astrological sign—water/earth/air/fire* (important distinctions to many in the New Age)  
*month and day of birth* (of immense importance during the Vietnam War draft lottery)  
*Connecticut resident / non-Connecticut resident* (in-state residence lowering the cost of tuition to state colleges).

Finally I would suggest several distinctions that—to the best of my ability— are arbitrary, such as:

*can make a “U” with his tongue/ cannot make a “U” with his tongue*

*student ID number ends in an odd number/ ends in an even number*

I now ask the class whether, in fact, these distinctions are arbitrary (and, therefore, valueless). I will challenge them to (1) suggest completely arbitrary distinctions and (2) interpret their classmates' suggestions in a way that adds value to them.

The class is now ready to attempt to answer four basic questions. First: *what* comprises these *determiners of value*? For example, an alligator or a polo player on a shirt might be important for one age group more than another, whereas a particular brand of sneaker or sweatshirt might have more significance for my students than for me.

I will call upon my years in the car business to show how a piece of chrome or number on the deck lid (or an extra "porthole" on the side of a 1948-1956 Buick) can induce consumers into paying several thousand dollars more for an otherwise almost-identical car. I will use as an example the "rear spoiler." Its original purpose was to create additional downforce at the tail of a car to improve its handling at speeds in excess of 120 mph. Now, of course, with most cars driven well below that speed, its primary use is to *distinguish* the "sports" model from its more prosaic, and less expensive, sibling. (Of course, this promise of great speed continues as well in the high numbers on many speedometers.)

I will ask the students to list items of manipulated (as opposed to intrinsic) value, such as:

Rolex watches, Ralph Lauren shirts, Bali shoes, Lexus automobiles, etc.

Of course I would anticipate some heated discussion about whether or not these items do contain greater intrinsic value than their less expensive counterparts. I would mention three items in particular: (1) how the Lexus 300ES is the same car as the Toyota Camry; (2) how the Acura badge is assigned only to North American cars that, for the rest of the world, are simply (and cheaply) Hondas; (3) how Sears would pay Yale students in the 1920's to present them with the latest Brooks Brothers suits so they could be quickly copied and sold—for a lot less money— *without* a label. Thereupon, cost (and prestige-conscious) Yalies could buy them and affix readily available bogus Brooks Brothers labels. Voila! An acceptable suit at a "fraction of the price."

Now the second question: *Who* comprises these *determiners of value*? I would propose, in the case of both marketers and political leaders (Is there in fact a difference?), that the mechanisms are deliberate.

In his introduction to Chapter 11, "Marketing Strategies for Differentiating and Positioning the Marketing Offer," Philip Kotler explains the game to M.B.A. students:

Suppose a company has researched and selected its target market. If it is the only company serving this target market, it will probably be able to charge a price that will yield a reasonable profit. . . . If several firms pursue this target market and their products are undifferentiated, then most buyers will buy from the lowest price firm. . . . The only alternative for the original firm is to differentiate its market offer from the competitors. If it can effectively differentiate its offer, it can charge a price premium. Differentiation allows the firm to get a price premium based on the extra value perceived by the customers. (3)

I am now ready to lead the class in a discussion of the final two questions: *Why* were these distinctions

created? And *who accepts* the importance of these distinctions?

Making the transition from the marketplace to the political arena, I will ask students to pretend they are political leaders with a deliberate “evil” intention of dividing one group in their society from another. With that agenda, what specific distinguishing characteristics might they choose, and what rationale would they propose to “prove” these claims of “superiority”?

I will next acquaint my students with relevant sections of “The Prince” and “The Discourses” by Niccolo Machiavelli, especially those sections that suggest how a leader can unite his people by attacking a target group or person:

Nothing, on the other hand, renders a republic more firm and stable, than to organize it in such a way that the excitement of the ill-humors that agitate a state may have a way prescribed by law for venting itself. (4)

And, later in the same chapter:

This occurrence [Coriolanus speaking to the Roman Senate about keeping the masses in a “famished condition” by not distributing grain secured from Sicily] shows, as we said above, how useful and necessary it is for a republic to have laws that afford to the masses the opportunity of giving vent to the hatred they may have conceived against any citizen. (4)

It is important to mention to the class at this time that “giving vent to the hatred they may have conceived” frequently stems from the ignorance of the masses. (In “Julius Caesar,” we recall, the mob kills the “wrong” Cinna.) So at this point in the lesson I need to ask the class:

To what extent do political leaders *share* this ignorance?

To what extent do political leaders encourage this ignorance, without sharing in it?

And, finally, to what extent does education reduce the *likelihood* of “giving vent to . . . hatred”?

I will suggest several more modern examples of socially condoned “hatred conceived against any citizen”: the two-minute hate in 1984; Piggy in “Lord of the Flies”; and Jackie Rabinovitz in “The Jazz Singer,” the first full-production “talkie” (1927). As related by Michael Rogin (6), the Jewish Rabinovitz—like the real-life vaudevillians, garment workers, and second-generation sons he represents—agrees with and employs African-American racial stereotypes to assist him in breaking with his Eastern-European cantor father and demonstrating his membership in an assimilated—and white—America.

Rogin further demonstrates how African-American contributions to music and entertainment, adapted without proper attribution, served a similar purpose. The new immigrants, eager for inclusion in their adopted land, were taught to adopt American racist values as a badge of inclusion. These lessons could be obvious, as in “Birth of a Nation” or more subtle as in “The Jazz Singer.” As Rogin puts it: “Just as Birth offers a regeneration through violence, so the grinning, Jazz Singer, minstrelsy mask kills blacks with kindness.” (7)

Here again, I will point out to the class how distinctions are used both to *exclude* (The appeal of the Eastern-European Jew to the established WASP goes like this: “Note that he’s black.”) and to *include*, as members of a special club (“Note that, like you, I’m white.”)

At this point I would show the students the episode from the Jeremy Issacs production of “The World at War”

that traces the steps used by the Nazis Party to handle the “Jewish problem.”<sup>8</sup> Having decided on their goals, the Nazis devised means that were eerily precise and efficient (and reflective, in a gross sense, of all such attempts at racial stereotyping). They started their brand of national specialness by invoking the muse of Darwin, soon followed by mass training in Jew identification.

To bring the lesson home, I would challenge my students to emulate the Nazis and pick out “Jews” among illustrations in the media. I would have them pick out other groups, only on the basis of appearance. I would have them, as a class, select a hundred different people and then construct lines of “racial” distinctions, using first conventional determiners, like skin color or hair texture, and then to invent their own. I would encourage them to be creative in their choice of determiners. I am certain much useful discussion will follow these exercises.

Following up on this concept, I will next propose that the search for the mark of *special* distinction stems, ultimately, from a sense of *inferiority*. Again I will share with my students relevant examples from my days in the car business. For example, I often noted that an old money family, presumably secure both in status and wealth, in selecting its new car, would often chose a model and color identical to its old one. One particular family in Guilford insisted my dealership *not* clean their (otherwise identical) new Saab on delivery.

Why did this old-line family want to keep others from knowing they had a new car? Did they feel guilty? Did they fear resentment from others? Or did their sense of security about possessions preclude their need to use them as indicators of *specialness*? The class should enjoy this particular discussion.

Supposing that the answer to the third question is Yes—that being secure in oneself eliminates the need for a strong public display of *specialness* (that’s what Aristotle held in his discussions of the characteristics of a man of virtue)—I will ask the class: Does the converse hold? Would a poor self-image cause a *greater* need for the world to know your specialness? More specifically: Was Hitler’s rise to power related to Germany’s humiliation (and, economically, to its immense war reparations) in World War I?

I will have the students consider the article from the New Haven “Register,” headlined “Deep within Brazilian jungle, cry goes out: ‘Avon calling.’” In this article, Ademar Serodio, an economist and president of Avon Brazil, discusses the company’s strategy of marketing its products to subsistence miners in the Amazon rain forest: “People living in mud shacks will buy crystal bottles of cologne because they see them as a status symbol.” A few paragraphs later, Amdadeus Lopes dos Santos, a freelance gold miner, confirms that the stronger fragrances are used more by the men than the women: “The gold miners particularly like strong women’s cologne.”<sup>(9)</sup>

My next step would be to generate a discussion in class on the following question: *Would a society, or any group of people, be more or less likely to be prejudiced when it is under strain?*

At this point I will return to the nature of distinction itself, spending more time on the question of how what is important to one group may be less so to another. For example, did it matter to the SS whether a particular Jew was Sephardic or Ashkenazic? Did it matter to a Klan lynch mob whether their target was light-skinned or dark-skinned? Did it matter to a Native American whether his land was stolen by an Englishman or by a Welchman?

Yet these “internal” distinctions may be of great importance among the members of the designated group. I will show the class the one-hour PBS documentary “A Question of Color,” in which African Americans discuss their own feelings about skin tone, other physically distinguishing features, and a perceived hierarchy of color



within the community. (10) I will focus on two brothers from New York City, ages thirteen and sixteen, who are certain that lighter skin will give them greater success with girls. (The younger one, talking with his parents around the kitchen table, admits, upon their questioning, that he would rather be lighter skinned.)

After showing the film, I will ask each student in a secret survey to choose one physical feature about himself he would like to change. Then, collecting them all, I would discuss with the class as a whole which features were chosen, how frequently, and where these valuations were likely to have originated.

I will discuss the contemporary concept of “beauty,” using People magazine’s annual “100 Most Beautiful People” list as well as asking students to bring in pictures to form their own “10 Most Beautiful People” list. I will demonstrate, through examples, concepts of beauty from other times and places.

OBJECTIVE TWO: THROUGH THE USE OF LOGS, PERSONAL JOURNALS AND GROUP DISCUSSION, TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO BECOME AWARE OF THE PREVALENCE OF THEIR OWN *SPECIALISTIC* TENDENCIES, SO THAT THEY MAY LEARN TO TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR BEHAVIOR BASED ON SUCH DISTINCTIONS.

“Evil” may be said to come from unconsciousness. When Eichmann, in his jail cell in Israel, was interviewed, it became clear that *he really felt he was only doing his job as efficiently as possible* . In short, by “forgetting” to notice that the Jews he was killing were also people—like his own family—he was “freed” from any inefficient checks on his role in the “final solution.”

In the movie “The Manchurian Candidate,” Laurence Harvey is brainwashed by the Communist Chinese (The Chinese in this movie are, of course uniformly evil and efficient, with absolutely no regard for human life.) into being the perfect assassin, whose eerie efficiency is achieved by psycho-suggestion. *If the killer doesn’t know he’s doing something, the theory goes, then he doesn’t feel guilty* . And if he doesn’t feel guilty, then he won’t get caught. And, just like in Eichmann’s Germany, the theory works. But this after all is a movie. With the evil communists moments away from winning the Oval Office. Harvey, finally forced into awareness by Frank Sinatra, does the right thing and saves the country.

And doctors at Yale-New Haven Hospital, as related by Dr. Howard M. Spiro are capable of “torturing” [ *his words* ] dying patients for months (as they strive to keep them alive at all costs) because of the inherent *lack of accountability* in the horizontal structure of medical specialists at a modern American teaching hospital. (11)

On the bright side, though, there is also a particularly American belief that, if only we can only cast off the spell of some imposed wrong of *specialness* , things— *given time* —will work out. In this favored land, our natural, shared and “conscious” choice is to get along.

For example, isn’t this the underlying concept of integration that, *given time* , things *will* work out. In theory, our laws support our equality. Let the society be made to follow the laws and the kindness of human nature will win out.

After all, in targeting public schools as the focus of its early legal activity, putting children on the front lines—children, who are the closest to innocence—the leaders of the civil rights movement were expressing that optimism, that *if only children are allowed to get along “naturally,” without interference from their elders, sooner or later, they will learn to live together peacefully* .

I will have students keep a daily log of their own *specialistic valuations*. The lesson now becomes how to assist students to bring their own “unconscious” (that is, unexamined) beliefs about *specialness* into awareness. Accordingly, I will ask them to examine their evaluations and order each one on a scale of “real” vs. “prejudiced.” I would expect that, in discussing these lists in class, some students’ “real” determinations might be seen by the class to be “prejudiced.”

Now we expand our lists from the personal to the cultural and move on to objective three.

OBJECTIVE THREE: THROUGH THE USE OF LOGS, PERSONAL JOURNALS AND GROUP DISCUSSION, TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO BECOME AWARE OF THE PREVALENCE OF AFFILIATIONS OF *SPECIALNESS* THAT EXIST IN THE CULTURE.

Minorities are unfairly represented in the media. My minority students overwhelmingly concur. This misrepresentation has taken two forms. One is underrepresentation in “desirable” things, like advertisements/commercials, soap operas, movies—even educational film strips (if most students would consider them “desirable”!) An example from my 1993-4 U.S. History 2 class (Reconstruction to the Present) is a film strip I was showing on urban life in the 1950’s. What my African American students found particularly inexcusable was that—to their unanimous perception—the voice-over of a black man was read by a white man.

The second form in *overrepresentation in “undesirable” things*. Martin Gilens discusses this tendency.

Over the past decades, the black urban poor have come to dominate public images of poverty. Surveys show that the American public dramatically exaggerates the number of African Americans among the poor. . . . news magazines portray the poor as substantially more black than is really the case . . . [and] under-represent the most sympathetic sub groups of the poor such as the elderly and the working poor, and over-represent the least sympathetic group: unemployed working-age adults. (12)

Once again, I will have students keep daily logs, this time to include evidence of minority under-/ over-representation in advertisements, commercials, TV shows, and news publications. These logs will be shared daily for one week at the beginning of each period, and will contribute to a master log, which I will keep on the blackboard. This master log will be readily accessible to encourage inspection and discussion.

OBJECTIVE FOUR: TO DEMONSTRATE HOW PREVALING BELIEF SYSTEMS—INCLUDING SCIENCE—HAVE BEEN USED HISTORICALLY TO JUSTIFY SOCIAL CONCEPTS OF *SPECIALNESS*.

I will present several examples of this tendency to the class, each time allowing the students ample opportunity to challenge, rebut, elaborate, or just discuss the issue.

The Bible. The version of creation that is commonly cited has Adam created first, Eve second. The complaining Eve, who is literally taken from Adam (to assuage his loneliness), repays this favor by disobeying God and causing, in Milton’s phrase, “all our woes.” Male-oriented society ignored the first version of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are created together. (Jewish legend has it that this first woman, Lilith, was too smart for her own good. After she learned the secret name of God she was conveniently removed from the scene and demoted to the status of an annoying succubus.)

Fast forward to Abraham and his two sons: Sarah, his Jewish “real” wife is barren, so she urges Abraham to continue his line through her handmaiden. The result is Ishmael, founder of the Arab nation. But then Sarah

herself, through divine intervention, bears him her own son, Isaac. Now of course Ishmael and his mother are banished and this saga of the favored, “legitimate” son continues, in Israel, to the present day. The class will discuss, as well, the flipside of *specialness*—how the “chosen people” were chosen by the Nazis for the purposes of another historical removal. Is specialness inevitably a double-edged sword?

The caste system of India. I will first explain the system and then ask students to (1) decide if such a system presently exists, in modified form, and/or (2) create their own caste system—for the school, for the city, and the country at large. I will discuss particularly the beginnings of such a system, when heredity is not a factor. What is it, I will ask, that assigns a person to a particular caste in the first place?

Dick Tracy’s “science of physiognomy.” I will share with the class this pamphlet from 1939, distributed by the Quaker Oats Company as a prize in breakfast cereal. This pamphlet, widely distributed to children, alleged to contain such “scientific points of view” (13) as

The Latin group . . . are known for their lively natures and sometimes quick tempers. . . . They are generally of a dark complexion with black hair, dark brown eyes, short of stature and frequently love jewelry and bright clothing. (14)

The Teutonic group . . . are known for their intelligence and strong convictions. They are generally deliberate and slow to anger. . . . They are usually plain and cleanly in dress. They are not naturally criminally minded. (15)

. . . most negroes are a simple, happy folk. (16)

. . . a flat head, outstanding and protruding jaw and a low forehead and [are] outward indications of a dangerous criminal, such as a degenerate and all-around low character. (17)

Since previous use of this pamphlet with students has revealed a surprising amount of agreement with the general contention that you can tell what someone is like by looking at his face, I will spend at least one entire class on this topic, using, as my focus, edited tapes of soap operas. I will select ones hopefully little known to the class and play them without sound. I will challenge the class to pick the good guys from the bad guys. Next I will show them pictures of unfamiliar historical figures and ask them to repeat the same procedure. I will poll them on the importance of “looking presidential” to a would-be candidate. I will have them act as casting director for a movie. Finally, I will discuss the stereotypes suggested by the pamphlet. Which ones, if any, are still considered accurate by a sizeable number of people in our culture? Which of them are now routinely dismissed? Acknowledging that the teaching of stereotypes occurs very early in our society, and that the primary market for the Dick Tracy pamphlet was children, I will ask: Which stereotypes are being continued today in children’s shows, cartoons, and comic books?

Earthcentricity. First Europe (or China, or Egypt, or Babylon, or Troy—depending of when and where you were) was the center of the universe. Then the earth, then the solar system, then the Milky Way. Now we don’t even have a center of the universe anymore. And even our origins, scientifically, look pretty random.

I will ask the class: First look at what we take for fact today. Now: which of these “facts” will, in the future, be as quaint as these old ideas.

Next I will ask the class to determine the radius of their own circle of concerned relativity. The further away anything on the circle lies, the less likely we are to identify with, relate to, or have compassion for it. For example, were I to travel abroad, particularly to a very different culture, I am more likely to befriend a fellow

countryman who, back home, I might readily dismiss. Similarly, in the Grade B movies from the 1950's, how easily earthlings forget their national allegiances and work together to repel the invading spacemen / monsters / deadly clouds of extraterrestrial poison.

Art Linkletter, a game show host and minor celebrity from the same era, wrote in his book of cute children's anecdotes "Don't Get Personal with a Chicken" about a boy who befriends a chicken on the family farm. All is well until (you guessed it!) the chicken winds up on the dinner table. Hence the title of the book. (Sound familiar? Remember that Charlotte the Spider is able to save Wilbur from the oven only by endowing him with seemingly human-like traits.) But these stories are more than cute. The point I will make is: *You don't eat your pets and you don't denigrate your friends* .

Intelligence in animals. Indeed, intelligence in animals is awarded in directed proportion to their similarity to humans. Thus, apes are smarter than dogs which are smarter than ants or cockroaches. Nevertheless I will ask this class to consider this example:

A colony of ants is on the move. At one point in its journey it needs to cross a large river. (Now, humans are "smart" and will construct a bridge. The cost will be time, money, and the use of resources.) What do the ants do? They roll themselves into a moving ball, half at any time submerged and so—with exquisite cooperation and without the use of any outside resources—the ants emerge, safely and consistently, onto the other side. So, I will ask my class: Are ants smart, or what? And the "stupid" cockroach? All it can do is survive a thermonuclear explosion.

*And in humans* . Finally I will ask the class to guess how bright a certain teacher of theirs is who did well on IQ tests but can *never* remember which way to twist the top off a jar. Again, I will propose, and open to discussion, the idea that intelligence—in animals and in humans—is defined as *similarity to, or doing well at a task considered important to the intelligence testers* .

I will ask the students to create their own hierarchy of intelligence, based on usefulness in their own lives. After collecting and discussing these lists I will ask them to compare their choices now with what they might have selected at various stages in their lives, or stages yet to come.

We will discuss whether the notion of intellectual superiority—or, indeed, superiority *per se* —is based on any absolute. Or does it, like the center of the universe, shift again and again and will, perhaps someday, disappear entirely?

In conclusion, then, students will see that their notions of superiority are based on *specialness* , which are themselves not absolutes but cultural fashions. Yesterday's tailfins are today's spoilers.

I will have the students to consider, *given time* , what happens to notions of superiority and specialness, on the level of the individual, the group, and the culture. I will ask them to read, to consider, and to discuss *Ozymandias* , written by Shelley in 1817, only thirteen years before President Andrew Jackson, coveting their land for his cotton-growing backers, and in defiance of Chief Justice John Marshall, rammed the Indian Removal Act through Congress and forced the Cherokee Nation into the "Trail of Tears":

I met a traveller from an antique land

Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

## **MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE**

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Jeremy Isaacs, executive producer, (video) "The World at War" (1975).

Robert McNeil, producer, (video) "The Story of English Part IX: Black on White" (1981).

Kathe Sandler, producer, (video) "A Question of Color" (1993).

## **Notes**

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1. Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," in *New Left Review* (June 1990, no. 181), p. 117.
2. "A Course in Miracles," Text [2nd edition], p. 500.
3. Philip Kostler, "Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, Implementation, and Control," Seventh Edition, (1991), p. 289.
4. Niccolo Machiavelli (trans. by Luigi Ricci), "Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius," p. 131.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
6. Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," *Critical Inquiry* 18, Spring 1992, pp. 417-453.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 420.

8. Jeremy Isaacs, executive producer, (video) "The World at War" (1975).
9. New Haven "Register", June 26, 1994, p. A16.
10. Kathe Sandler, producer, (video) "A Question of Color" (1993).
11. Howard M. Spiro, M.D., in his talk to the New Haven Teachers Institute Fellows, Hall of Graduate Studies, Yale University, New Haven, CT, April 19, 1994.
12. Martin Gilens, "Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media" (1994), p. 1.
13. Quaker Oats Company. "Dick Tracy's Secret Detective Methods: Human Types" (1939), p. 3.
14. Ibid., p. 3.
15. Ibid., pp. 3-4.
16. Ibid., p. 5.
17. Ibid., p. 7.

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"A Course in Miracles" (1975).

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