

1992

## Remarks Delivered at the Faculty Forum, November 15, 1991

Jacqueline Johnson  
*Grand Valley State University*

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Jacqueline (1992) "Remarks Delivered at the Faculty Forum, November 15, 1991," *Grand Valley Review*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol7/iss1/12>

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# Remarks Delivered at the Faculty Forum, November 15, 1991

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JACQUELINE JOHNSON

I would like to provide some personal context for the report of the Multicultural Curriculum Development Seminar which you received several weeks ago. I would also like to highlight some aspects of this document. My remarks begin with a narrative, that is, with a story which I hope might provide some insight into the meaning of the concepts “multicultural” and “race” as they are used and as I think they are intended in this report. My story derives from my personal, social, and, actually, geographic location. I suppose each of us could say the same for our own stories.

I live in Grand Rapids, on its Southeast side, on a street named Aurora, and on the side of the street where the backyards open up onto and into a park— Garfield Park. For me, Garfield Park represents a smaller version of the multicultural society in which I live. While it might not be the world in which you presently live, it is certainly, by all demographic predictions, the world of the American future. For whatever reasons of choice or chance, some of us live closer to the centers of change than others. All of us here at Grand Valley work within one of those centers of change.

If you came to visit my park in the summer, this is what you would see—a bounded space inhabited by Blacks and Whites, Latinos and Asians. You would observe Blacks, Whites, Latinos and Asians in the swimming pool on the hottest days. You would see Blacks, mostly, and some Whites, on the basketball courts. You would notice Whites, mostly, on the frisbee golf course that comprises the park’s perimeter. You would see Latinos, mostly, playing soccer. You would see Whites and Blacks and Asians on the tennis courts. And you would see the children of all of these groups on the playground—on the swings, the slides, and the urban horses. You would see a space inhabited by people of different backgrounds—different cultures; different colors; and you would hear different languages. You would see these people interacting with those who are like them and with those who are apparently different. If you stayed around long enough, you would notice that the park is sometimes quiet, sometimes not, sometimes tense, sometimes not; that sometimes the inhabitants get along and sometimes they don’t.

For me, multicultural in reference to society means just that—simply that— many “cultures.” However, I know just enough anthropology to use the term culture care-

fully, even cautiously. If I could choose, and I cannot, I would use a different term—many groups, perhaps, or many peoples.

I have chosen to designate and describe the people who inhabit my park on the basis of their race—or, perhaps, more accurately, their color. That choice is neither random, nor haphazard, nor intended to ignore other important designators of difference, nor is it an entirely self-conscious one. I think it is the same choice that each of you would make if you came to visit my park and stayed around long enough to observe.

Race or color is a designator that is a cultural given in the United States. It is a designator or distinguisher that has extraordinary significance as a constructor and as an inhibitor of our particular and our shared pasts, of our particular and our shared presents, and I expect, of our particular and our shared futures. I'm not sure if that's good or bad; I *am* sure that it is. You would see the park in the same way that I do, as a confined space inhabited by a multiplicity of individuals who share *altogether* the actual and symbolic dimensions of that space and who share *in particular* things in common with those who are most like them. Of course it is likely that you would also notice other important distinguishers—age and gender, certainly.

To foreground race is not to deny the existence of these other things, but, rather, is to make a statement about the significance of this variable as a constructor of the lives of all of us, Whites as well as Blacks, Latinos, Asian, and Native Americans. The proposal which the development seminar presented to you is intended to provide us—faculty and students, both inhabitants of the park—with a forum to consider the common and uncommon elements and concerns of our shared existence; the nature of our particular and collective pasts and presents, and the dynamic way in which these “particulars” have and do intersect with one another; and the promise of our continued ability to live and play together as occupants of the same space.

The Multicultural Curriculum Development Seminar has proposed the continuation of the multicultural inquiry. The proposal, if accepted in this or some modified form, would allow those of us who have expertise or who are interested in developing it in these areas to enter a second phase of curriculum development—a phase in which those faculty willing to teach an introductory level course in multicultural issues within the context of the United States would come together to develop that course and our own abilities to teach it. We propose that all sections of this course would have some things in common—readings, perhaps films, and some co-curricular activities—but that each individual instructor would approach the content from her own discipline, and from her particular expertise within that discipline.

Certainly there are other ways to approach and address the issue of a multicultural curriculum. One way is to leave things as they are: to our credit, I think, the faculty in 1985 included a “Foreign and Multicultural Perspectives” category in the general education program. But with only a few exceptions, the courses in this category focus on the international and comparative dimension of multiculturalism. I think it

is important to include issues associated with multiculturalism within the context of the United States as well. Another approach would require the infusion of multicultural issues into existing courses. That seems to me to be a necessary, but insufficient, way to address the importance of this issue. Moreover, infusion as a strategy by itself does not promote the principles of collegiality on which the seminar report is founded. This proposal asks a lot of us as faculty—it asks that we not only develop courses that deal with the experience of many cultures in the United States, but that we do this in a way that de-privatizes our teaching. Aside from the content, the approach calls on us to engage in dialogue and conversation as colleagues, and as resources for one another.

The Multicultural Curriculum Development Seminar was formed with the authorization of the President, the Provost, and the Faculty Senate at the request of the Multicultural Curriculum Task Force. The charge to the development seminar was to work to develop a three-hour course which considers multicultural issues within the context of the United States. We have also provided a working bibliography as a resource. As it stands, it is obviously missing important pieces, and it is not organized in such a way that it speaks directly to the proposal itself—but it could be and it should be in the next phase of development. We invite additional submissions to it. The development of the proposed course is not intended to substitute for the courses that exist in category “B” or to substitute for other courses that deal with race or multiculturalism in the curriculum. Because the course proposal is a joint and an interdisciplinary product, it proposes something that would really be quite different from any course that we now teach. That was our intention. The proposal to “give credit” for the pilot course in category “B” is intended as a temporary measure. If the pilot course is successful—in its development and in its delivery—it would lead us to consider the place of the course in relation to general education. One approach would be to create a category separate from “B” which focuses on multicultural issues in the United States. As a second alternative, a number of course-selections in the general education curriculum could be designated as courses which fulfill this requirement.

I would like to say, in closing, how much I appreciate the work, perseverance, and presence of the members of this faculty development seminar. All of us in this room are academics, given by vocation to criticism and cynicism. It is, I think, especially difficult to distribute something in writing to the people with whom we work and interact on a daily basis. It is particularly difficult to do this when the materials under consideration generate strong emotional responses. I think we have all benefited from the exchange which this report and the earlier one distributed by the Multicultural Curriculum Task Force has generated—I certainly have and I appreciate the serious conversations I have had with many of you, including those of you who are fundamentally opposed to what we have attempted. I expect this conversation to continue in just this same, serious and beneficial manner.