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## **Cultural Obversity**

by Judy Grahn, Ph.D.

The category “culture” is in question today, as so many diasporas, migrations, and invasions occur, and as we watch globalization of education and economies, and other ways of mixing, matching and relocating shred relatively stationary ways of life that were formerly understood as intact cultures. Even leaving aside the extremes of warfare, cultural differences remain real, contentious and dangerous both in the international domain and in families, workplaces, schools and other institutions in which people sometimes fail violently and distressingly to get along with or understand each other. Perhaps we could begin with relatively simple, everyday conflicts of difference, before approaching the more daunting ones.

I want to put forward the subject of “Cultural Obversity,” an idea and a method that comes from my Metaformic Philosophy, a result of a longtime study of women’s traditions, women’s and men’s blood rituals, and the Sacred Feminine, and bringing forward voices and points of view that have not been heard for centuries or longer. Metaformic Philosophy posits that menstrual ritual is the root of human culture. Also, that women’s traditions as a whole are a river under all traditions, with capacity to cross some of the boundaries and borders constructed in various well-known patriarchal viewpoints. Rather than “culture,” I find it useful to work with the idea of “lineage.” By lineage, I mean whatever line of behaviors and beliefs taught any given person by, most usually though by no means universally, parents and immediate kin.

To describe the totality of gestures, attitudes, ways of keeping, dressing and holding the body, ways of expressing, eating and so on, I use the term *cosmetikos*. Cosmetikos is a Greek word, related to both cosmos and cosmetics, and I use it as a

metaformic term, meaning “ordering the world through body arts”. In my 1993 book, [\*Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World\*](#)<sup>1</sup>, I included many examples of cosmetikos that contain crucial cultural knowledge, and that literally tell us who and where we are, what we value, and what we don’t.

My assumption is that we humans are metaformic, stemming from that most contested subject, *menstrual rituals*, and that we are constructed of sets of learned repeated everyday habits that I call metaforms. These structures are behaviors that are intricately tied to both emotion and values, and are also varieties of linguistic knowledge and expression. They constitute both our internal psychologies and our cultural forms. We live simultaneously surrounded by them and permeated by them in our psyches. Metaforms stem from ancient ancestral rituals that were both the religion and the science of our ancestors, and we inherit them through our lineages. We learn them as children and they infuse our very beings.

However, to some extent we can change or at least perceive metaformic structures as adults, wherein lies the hope for our flexibility. We can change undesirable patterns in ourselves as we become conscious of them. We can relinquish quite a bit of the suspicion we feel toward those who differ from us. We can set aside practices others find obnoxious for the greater value of engaging in “the commons” of relationships, at work, in neighborhood groups, at school, and in marriage and friendship.

The concept of cultural obversity is intended to help us stand in a place of contemplation within our deeply embedded metaformic structures long enough to see and evaluate each other’s common humanity - expressed through Metaforms of cosmetikos - rather than simply reacting to it. A language of empathy is one that allows us to step around our cosmetikos, which contains polarizing judgments, in order to gain fresh and compassionate understanding, and without losing either our integrity or our capacity for choice.

My idea of cultural obversity differs from the idea of cultural relativity, in that the individual observer/participant is not asked to surrender judgment about any particular practice. He/she is asked to recognize, mentally and emotionally, the parameters of

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<sup>1</sup> Grahn, Judy. *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

his/her own cosmetikos and then to step outside of it--figuratively speaking--long enough to recognize the cosmetikos practice (and therefore the good intentions) of another. What is temporarily set aside is the moral social judgment, usually expressed non-cognitively as strongly felt emotion.

In multicultural settings we need to know as many of the languages of empathy and compassion as possible, to teach them to our peers, our students and ourselves.

### **Diversity/Obversity: Terms and Examples Describing Interactions**

Diversity is the term used currently to describe multicultural tolerance and cooperation. Diversity literally means “variations,” with the implication that human groups simply “differ” the way kittens in a litter may differ in color and temperament. But human groups differ in very antagonistic ways; we differ not only in variations, but more contentiously in oppositions. Behavior that one group values as good and pure another finds evil and filthy. Behavior one group finds respectful another reads as insulting or rejecting. And violent interactions sometimes erupt, periodically, among the same peoples who most invite and apparently value, variety. Somehow, variety of practices contains within itself recipes for contention, violence and human rights abuses - especially under pressure, such as limited resources.

I think one reason for this potential for contention lies in the character of cosmetikos. Cosmetikos, in its function of holding the world in an orderly way for each individual, is not only diverse, it is also oppositional, between groups. Groups do not simply differ in their practices, the practices themselves clash and create tensions; the practices are frequently oppositional to each other. This tendency to oppositionality requires a new term: I call it *obversity*; to differentiate and extend the idea of diversity. Our attempts to live with the value of diversity all too frequently crash into the reality of our obversities, our oppositional behaviors.

### ***Definition of Obverse***

Obverse literally means “the opposite side of a coin;” each side has the same value as the other, but they are obverse from each other. Caught by the idea of equal

value that is stated differently, and is on “the opposite side,” I am taking the term obverse from that meaning. There is also another example of obverse, in its use in a logic equation. “All A is B; therefore no A is not B.” These are equal, but not identical statements, as the first part is stated in the positive, “all A is B,” while the second part is stated in the negative, “no A is not B”. The two statements are in obverse relation to each other. Stated differently, yet the same. Because they are “logic” and about abstractions (A and B) we do not place emotional values on them; we can read and appreciate the equation without becoming enraged, insulted or fearful.

Still another source of the idea of obversity comes from indigenous Africa, especially West African Yoruba teachings, and also an East African Dogon story. The Ibeji twins are like the north and south poles, a creation principle of equal opposites in indigenous philosophy. The Ibeji are sacred twins of Yemonja, creation goddess manifesting as the Ocean in Yoruba religion, as Luisah Teish recounts in her book *Carnival of the Spirit*.<sup>2</sup>

According to Teish, who is a Yoruba Chief, Yemonja is associated with La Virgen de Regla in Cuba, the *virgen* who regulates women's menstrual cycles. Menstruation also figures in a Dogon story of Twins who are seated on a sacred ant mound, constructed as the menstruation of the earth, a primal engendering of human ideas.<sup>3</sup> While they are seated, they exchange two kinds of “words,” one of cloth and one of cowrie shells. Their being seated in this way teaches the principle of equal exchange, trade. The story also indicates that trade is linguistic, an interchange of values.

Twins representing oppositional yet equal polarities of culture are present in other mythologies as well. Hopi and other Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest, for example, have stories of twin boys born to Spider Grandmother: Flint and Sapling, quite different in their actions, yet equally cherished. These twin stories convey the meaning to me that the collective Mother (Earth as well as human) loves them equally while at the same time recognizing that they are different from each other in oppositional ways.

Obversity is like those twins - equally valued, oppositionally different, *held in*

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<sup>2</sup> Teish, Luisah. *Carnival of the Spirit: Seasonal Celebrations and Rites of Passage*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Griaule, Marcel. *Conversations with Ogotemmêli; An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*. London: Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1965.

*continual tension in relation to each other.*

The tension present in obversity is what makes diversity so contentious at times.

### ***Example of Obversity: Snakes and Dogs***

In unconscious interchanges involving cultural obversity, emotional responses rule over other judgments, even in the seemingly most mundane and supposedly benign of interactions. One simple and obvious example of an obversity on a world wide scale of human behavior is that the relationship people have to snakes and dogs varies enormously - and oppositionally. People can, and do, become insulted, and incensed over oppositional relationships to both snakes and dogs.

Snakes and dogs may be treated in one of the following completely different ways:

1. cherished as important to the welfare of the people, earth, etc.
2. hated, sought out to be killed, driven away, demonized
3. adopted into human family and treated as a member, even an heir
4. shunned, avoided, feared
5. worshipped as deity or creation principle and given offerings
6. eaten, hunted and raised as food
7. used occupationally, as guards, entertainments or enticements
8. used emotionally, as pets

Some of us may check off more than one of the above, or even claim no relation to any of the eight relationships I have listed. But I doubt that anyone would check off all eight relationships to dogs and snakes, taken up in one lifetime. The stretch of “diversity” into oppositionality is simply too great for most of us to encompass. And the vast majority of people react extremely negatively to each other’s relationship to these two creatures.

### **How Obversity Works**

Cosmetikos, as I said, means “ordering the cosmos through body arts.” By cosmos I mean the worldview of members of the group performing a particular

cosmetikos practice. Worldview can include anything from cosmology of the earth in relation to sun and stars, to the powerfully held moral understanding of what constitutes the individual's own "right behavior" in relation to others.

Metaformic theory postulates that all distinctly human behavior - such as building round or square houses, smoking tobacco, dressing a tree to look like a person, embedding plugs in the ear lobe, developing all games, telling a long story out loud in rhymed speech, or cooking - was initially *ritual sacred behavior*, developing within carefully controlled processes that included meaningful world-forming components recognizable as both 'religion' and 'science.' Human knowledge needed (and needs) to be held in place, and culture in the form of metaforms is what has accomplished that for us. That such metaforms as tattooing or eating an apple pie are directly experienced physically does not make them any less epistemological (capable of conveying meaning) than this page you are reading.

Cosmetikos is completely engrained in our being, from our earliest learned habits - we learn how as well as what to eat, how as well as what to speak, how as well as what to wear on our bodies. We learn the gestures that both predate and expand verbal speech. As cultural creatures, all these behaviors constitute language as much as biological survival. While these habits seem merely physical they are also foundational to our identities and our senses of moral good. We speak volumes with every move we make, and we interpret - and judge, evaluate - every move made by the people around us. Deeply embedded in family and religious customs, the simplest of physical expressions are conflated with moral goodness, right behavior, trustable intentions, and the very fundamental architecture of how we construct and apply our categories of what constitutes appropriate behavior, propriety, civility, moral acceptability and even that heaviest of judgments, the pariah status of "non-humanity."

Though recognizing that some peoples use "nonhuman" as a category of judgment, metaformic philosophy holds that we are all equally human, because we are all equally metaformic. Metaformic philosophy and the theory that supports it, draws its ideas to large extent from the practices of women's and men's rituals surrounding the subject of blood, primarily the seclusion rites surrounding menstruation, the blood of creation and consciousness. My idea is that an event of such crucial survival importance

for humans, the protection, using proscribed behaviors, of the potential mothers of the group, is one reason cosmetikos is so powerful a human attribute. Another reason is that cosmetikos is linguistic, and is how we “read” each other.

From my research applying metaformic ideas as theory in South India, where menarche rites continue to be celebrated in some communities despite modernization’s change of emphasis, I have drawn up a list of obversities that are at play in the menarchal rites of different communities.<sup>4</sup> I am extremely grateful to have gained this information from indigenous practices. This is a list of behavior proscribed for the initiated maiden, during her ritual. In some communities and families she *must* do something, which in another community is *forbidden* to her.

***Examples of Obversity in Menarche Rites: (How the maiden must or must not act)***

must drink alcohol/must not drink alcohol

must eat meat or fish/must not eat meat or fish

must drink sesame oil/must not drink sesame oil

must lie down

must sit

must stand

must comb hair/must not comb hair

must sit under a tree with sap/must not go near a tree with sap

must look into a mirror/must not look into a mirror

Next follows a list of examples of obversity between some cultures that have continued celebrating and marking menarche rites compared to some cultures that have prohibited and replaced menarche rites with patriarchal rites:

must not stare at another person/must stare at another person

must cover head in sacred precinct/must uncover head in sacred precinct

must not touch lips to cup/must touch lips to cup

must use menstrual blood ritually/must not acknowledge or go near menstrual

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<sup>4</sup> Grahn, Judith Rae. “*Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs? An Application of Metaformic Theory to Menarche Celebrations and Goddess Rituals of Kerala and Contiguous States in South India*” (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 1999).

blood

must not kill insects or creatures/must kill insects or creatures

must shed creature's blood ritually/must not shed creature's blood ritually

must approach sacred with humor and sexual feelings/must not approach sacred  
with humor or sexual feelings

must use magic/must not use magic

must not lie (in order to use magic)/lies are expected, okay, forgiven

must not "own" nature/must "own" nature

must not stress individual over communal/must stress individual over communal

### ***We React Emotionally to Breaches of Our Learned Cosmetikos***

When our own cosmetikos, inherited from our lineage of appropriate cosmetikos, is transgressed, we react emotionally, and this is intensified if we were punished or humiliated for the oppositional behavior as children. To give a personal example, as children my siblings and I were struck in the face at the table for making noise while eating, and as an adult I become irrationally angry when someone chews loudly in my presence. No amount of rational comprehension has diminished my emotional reaction, but comprehending the source enables me to control my response by leaving the room rather than projecting rage onto the other person, who is doing nothing more harmful than innocently enjoying her or his food.

The subject of the effects of parental striking and humiliating children is huge, and beyond the scope of this article. I do want to point out that even in the most liberal of childrearing methods, the children become well aware of what is acceptable behavior and what is not, what behaviors are "us, the way we do it" and what are not. Later, as adults, they will be unconscious of exactly what it is that makes them so uncomfortable, even furious, when they encounter the obverse of what they were taught was good and proper behavior. Extreme teasing in schools and antisocial behavior such as beating and killing of gay and transgendered people by teenagers is one example of what can happen when values of "proper manhood" are transmitted punitively within families, and can easily go out of control, especially for teenagers and young adults, when sexual roles are in a sensitive state.

Obversities can lock into place because they are reinforced strongly when we are children by physical and emotional rewards and punishment, and as I have said, because they are oppositional to each other. Obversities, buried within each person, exacerbate as members of each party of an interaction accelerate their own behavior in an attempt to establish their own inner sense of “the good” in the interaction, and also to calm their own powerful feelings of disorder in the face of opposition.

### **Speech Cosmetikos**

An example I now want to give is much less dramatic (seemingly) than, say, the animal obversities, or any of the must/must not cosmetikos listed above. This obversity exemplifies a “clash of two goods” in differing ways people have learned to use speech.

Speech, not only what is said but equally importantly, how it is said, how often, to whom and in what contexts, orders the world for each of us. This internal “order” operates in vitally important ways impacting how we go about deciding to trust other people. Speech cosmetikos and the contentious disputes that arise around it are particularly important in classroom settings, and institutionally among faculty, staff and administration.

### ***Oppositional Forms of Discourse:***

#### ***How Silence and Interruption Insult Our Sensibilities***

Discourse is a form of what I call cosmetikos, ordering of the universe through body languages. Spoken language is a fairly recent method of communication; we were human before we developed speech. According to paleontologists our ability to mouth vowels and consonants into lyrical sentences may be only about sixty thousand years old. Their comparative analysis of skull and jaw fragments led them to speculate that the laryngeal physiology necessary for speech did not exist among Neanderthal folk who survived into the era of 35,000 years ago, coexisting with Cro-Magnon speakers. African and other origin myths describe human culture existing long before speech, and biblical origin myths confirm this view.

Like other cosmetikos, spoken language was regulated in women’s rituals,

especially those of menarche. Times of silence and times of speech were regulated by women in menstrual rites, which I have categorized elsewhere as germinal to establishing human behavior.<sup>5</sup> Not infrequently the menstruant kept silent for days or weeks on end, or could only whisper, or her name could not be spoken by others. At emergence from seclusion and during the ceremony celebrating her return to social life, excited speech might be used, particular loud sounds such as ululation or noisy speech might be encouraged, to draw or keep away certain “spirits” or for other reasons. From these widespread contemporary examples, I am postulating that far in the past of our earliest evolutionary processes, such regulations of silence and speech extended into society at large through timings with the moon, especially - if we go back far enough in evolutionary time - dark and full moon being used for the timing of appropriate speech behavior.

Silence, seclusion, darkness, inner thought, dark moon and menstruation were related. Emergence from seclusion, light, socializing, the period waxing to full moon, and excited, loquacious or noisy speech were related. These two groupings of silence and speech are oppositional (mutually exclusive) in the binary lunar system of social organization that I call “menstrual logic.” By menstrual logic I mean the application of menstrual ritual regulations to society in general.

It seems obvious that peoples differed in how they went about applying taboos of silence and noisy speech in everyday as well as ceremonial life. This is one vital contributing aspect of how it came about that some people honor Uncle’s death by never saying his name or speaking of him again; while others stay up for several nights telling stories about him and bring his name up frequently throughout their lives; while still others worship Uncle as a venerable ancestor and place his image upon the altar with their gods.

Because of the cosmetikos that stretches back perhaps into the farthest distances of ancestral history, appropriate silence and appropriate speech are vested with great social power. Last century, certain peoples made lots of noise during an eclipse, while others fell silent. In both cases they quite probably acted to influence the event of the eclipse, acknowledging the darkness and bringing back the light using the same language

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<sup>5</sup> Grahn, 1993.

forms that were used in menstrual rituals with regard to dark and light. Possibly silence and speech were also related to controlling the weather - another sphere of influence under the care of the behavior of menstruating women.

Because people have quite literally ordered their worlds and their sense of power in relation to the powers of the universe, through regulating their behavior, the *cosmetikos* of appropriate speech and appropriate silence continues to carry enormous social weight, even among peoples who have not ceremonialized menstruations for millennia, and for whom taboos were long ago replaced with seemingly less urgent injunctions of manners.

In the following modern examples I am not designating ethnicity or place of origin in these examples, partly because the patterns are widespread beyond geographical areas, and partly because we already know how to put ethnicities into preconceived boxes. Instead, I am attempting to describe and emphasize the *cosmetikos*, which is taught by parents and other relatives, and carried along lineages that may be far flung through migrations, and can be quite varied among neighbors and even friends.

### ***Some Havoc in Speech Obversities***

In my experience cultural differences in uses of appropriate silence and speech can cause serious disruption in relationships. At best they are puzzling, at worst they wreak havoc - in marriages, in friendships, in workplaces, in classrooms, in multicultural settings of all kinds.

Cosmetikos differences, as I have said, tend to be oppositional in character and therefore to trigger strong emotion. Having been raised in a family that uses a formal “talking stick” method of regulating speech and then spending nineteen years of my adulthood in various family settings requiring very different styles of interchange, I can speak to the problem of oppositional forms of discourse from personal experience. In America two broad and oppositional uses of silence and speech exist between families whose speech cannot be interrupted, and those whose speech must be interrupted.

In my family of origin, speech was carefully regulated with regard to timing and to ensure the singular voice of the individual speaker. Lengthy speech was engaged in while seated. Great respect was held for silence, and much communication was done in

silence, using only facial expressions and slight hand gestures.

When family members were sitting in the living room, special time was created for the designated speaker. While most frequently this person was my father, when the conversation included others an invisible “talking stick” was handed around through gestures that indicated, “I want to talk now” and “it is now your turn.” These gestures might be as overt as a sharp intake of breath or as subtle as the slight movement of a single finger or shift of weight in the chair. The gestures were “read” by the person holding the floor, who passed attention by falling silent and extending some kind of invitation, such as turning the head toward the solicitation, or asking an invitational question: “What do you have to say about this, Judy?” But mostly, the invitation was subtle. The exact timing of these gestures was crucial to the successful passing of the invisible “talking stick.”

Interruption was not tolerated except for one or two practicalities such as these: “dinner is getting cold” or “the back of the house is now on fire.” Even then, these interruptions needed to be prefaced, as in: “Excuse me for interrupting, but the back of the house is now on fire.” (I am exaggerating only slightly). The injunction against interruption created a discrete time/space around the designated speaker, who then was expected to speak in fully formed narrative stories or at least anecdotes, whose details were closely attended and appreciated by the listeners. Telling a story whose details were vague or incorrect would lead to paternalist interruption, correction, and disapproval.

This extended narrative form created a need for long attentive silences from listeners, attentive silences needed to enhance the speaker’s own concentration in the telling of the anecdote or story. Listening was expected to be actively attentive to the necessity for such expected timings as when to give the speaker gestural responses that meant, “I’m hanging on to every word,” or “Is it my turn now?” Unfinished sentences were considered symptomatic of a disordered mind.

On rare occasions when more than one person talked at once in the excitement of the moment, this fact was commented on by my mother, for whom only great extremity of emotion excused such a breach of manners. Speech of females was more closely regulated than that of males; I was taught that “little girls should be seen and not heard” and that women talk too much. In actual practice my father’s chronic inebriation

confounded his intent to win respect through erudite or at least entertaining speech - at which he excelled when sober- binding him into a loop of narration that repeated itself mindlessly for hours. Caught between his narcotized cultural speaking form and the formal listening regulation, my adolescent inner state frequently whirled around a fierce, hysterical desire to explode from the thorax, splattering the walls and my father's eyeglasses with my own expressive blood of protest. Yet I only interrupted him once in my life, a teenaged outburst that lasted less than four seconds and that still clangs in my ears as a terrible break in the familial order, an unfinished sentence with the word "damn" painted hugely in its ugly center. He did not outwardly respond, and never mentioned this incident.

With this training I set out into the world of American Babylon with its multitude of forms of speech, to bump up against and try to understand the maze of formations created by our differing ancestral cultural heritages. In the one family I belonged to for fourteen years, and who use speech in part for confrontation, I learned to engage in discourse of disagreement and argumentative persuasion that uses interruption as a tactic of effective discourse for the purpose of winning arguments.

In the enthusiastic nonstop talking family that welcomed me into its nest for five years, speech was used differently still. In family gatherings everyone talked at once, not necessarily addressing anyone in particular. At home in our twosome, my partner exhausted my listening attention by talking in run-on sentences for hours at a time, since I had no mechanism with which either to interrupt or join in with her. I was furious with her much of the time for her "rudeness" of interrupting me (and also for the blunt directness of her speech) while my chronic silences led her to call me "The Ice Queen." Subconsciously, I suspect, we interpreted our linguistic differences, in part, as moral choices indicating character, if not as deliberate mischief. And they aroused powerful emotions in us, for which we had no explanation.

Fortunately one of her siblings was astute about differences. After the first few weeks of my shocked silence at high-pitched, verbally intense family gatherings, my partner's sister leaned over to my stiff upright body in the middle of a noisy get-together to explain: "We all talk at once in order to raise the spirits in the room- to get the energy up - it doesn't matter what you say - just jump in." Girding myself for the insult of saying

something without expectation of any response, and feeling exceedingly foolish, I called out a sentence into the general uproar. “That’s it,” she encouraged. And so I learned to do the unthinkable, I learned to interrupt without being angry. I learned to join in with enthusiastic cheering - on remarks while someone else was speaking; and almost, I learned to keep track of what I was saying while others joined in with their remarks.

Now I am again immersed in a “talking stick” requiring family. And I drive my partner crazy, because I interrupt her while she is talking. She loses her concentration and feels I am taking over her mind, finishing her sentences for her. This made her so mad at first she stopped talking to me for an hour at a time. She left the room in irritation, so I became constantly apologetic for my “mistake” of interrupting. I have explained myself repeatedly, and attempted to control my habit, and we have reached an uneasy truce of discourse. Sometimes our conversation burps along like this:

Kris: Oh I wanted to tell you about this guy--

Judy: O you mean--

Kris: -----

Judy: Oh, I’m sorry-----

Kris: -----

Judy: I was trying to cheer you on.

Kris: I know.

Judy: -----

Kris: -----

Judy: Well, what were you, I mean go on with, I wish you would tell your story to me, I’d like to know what you--

Kris: -----

Judy: What you were going to tell me.

Kris: Now I can’t remember.

Judy: Oh.

Kris: -----

Judy: -----

In the above example the interruption destroys speech coherence.

Now I am as likely to interrupt inappropriately as I am to forget how to interrupt when it is appropriate. Sometimes even, “Excuse me, but the back of the house is on fire,” escapes me.

One afternoon I invited two poet friends for a taping session at my home. Their speech cosmetikos is nonstop talking until interrupted and diverted. To get the energy up for their performance, they were both talking over each other and me, nonstop. Mesmerized by the chatter, I forgot everything I have learned from my multicultural families, and went into a stone freeze. I was unable to remember how to interrupt them, to “just jump in.” Literally hours went by while their eyes rolled in agony, waiting for me to steer them to the task of taping, and my eyes rolled in agony, waiting for them to invite me into the dialogue. Finally around four o’clock they fell into an exhausted lull and I jumped into the blessed void with, “Let’s go record,” seeing at once the relief in their eyes.

In the tape room they started their energetic babble once again, while I struggled in vain to concentrate enough to work the equipment. I tried three tape machines and finally accidentally taped over something valuable of my own. All because I could not find the inner mechanism with the attached words to interrupt, “Please pipe down for five minutes and let me concentrate. I’m a ‘talking stick’ person. I’m an Ice Queen. I need designated time/space.”

Fortunately most of the time now, especially in the classroom, I can jump back and forth between the two forms of speech cosmetikos that I have described.

### ***More Havoc in Speech Obversities***

Interruption is no slight gesture; in some circumstances it can trigger nearly violent reactions. In a cohort style graduate program, I witnessed a clash that had serious repercussions. A teacher with an interrupting and confrontational style of discourse interrupted another teacher with a second line of thought. “Oh good,” I thought at the time, “she is modeling for us how to disagree.” I have longed for methods of disagreement among women writers and scholars, as we tend either to stay silent or to go for the thorax with long fingernails of critique. Later however, I was astonished to hear a third teacher describe how appalled she was by the incident. “I felt that (the interrupted

teacher) was being battered,” she said. Battered by being interrupted!

And of course, she had a point brought up by feminists. Interruption is one of the speech patterns feminists have determined is part of dominator speech used by males to keep women quiet, for example. However, in the circumstance I am describing, the confronting and interrupting teacher, attempting to exert authority in an institution dominated by “talking stick” manners, was ultimately demonized as “crazy” and excluded from meetings on the grounds that she “interrupts” and “speaks out of turn” and “brings subjects up out of turn and inappropriately” and “can’t keep boundaries.” She is also disarmingly direct, and does not follow “proper lines of authority.”

On closer questioning of the initial complainant, she confirmed that it wasn’t only the interrupting that had upset her, it was also the breach of lines of authority: one teacher was criticizing another *in front of the students*.

This reminded me of the line of authority in my family; parents were not to be criticized in front of the children, nor was the family to be criticized in front of strangers. This reached the absurdity that no matter how crashingly my drunken father broke the rules of behavior, I was not to criticize or in any way show my displeasure, nor did my mother criticize him to me, directly. Consequently I sat listening to his parroted round of truly stupefying anecdotes and jokes for hour upon hour nearly every evening of my young life, as though listening to a lucid discussion that closely held my interest, rather than to a drunken man with a memory dysfunction. In such ways do our most dearly held rules of *cosmetikos* sometimes make fools of us. (But it did teach me how to repeat myself.)

In taking into account difference, and obversity, in cohort and classroom (or any group) interacting, what constitutes inappropriate criticism or interruption? How does energy get raised in groups if, as I have seen repeatedly, *only* “talking stick” regulation prevails? Conversely, in groups using confrontational and argumentative speech, can room ever be made for meditative space allowing a third idea to emerge? Must groups adopt only one approach to speech mannerisms, and what happens to those people raised with the oppositional approaches? Are they usually or completely left out of the conversation? Is plurality possible? Can we become flexible and conscious with the oppositional gatekeepers in our psyches?

### **Other Examples of Speech Obversity**

I want now to present more information on oppositional forms of discourse and other obversities, from interviews and observations. My life experience, which I have used as an example, is not unique; it is a measure of the cosmetikos that guides our tongues along somewhat different patterns in the social fabric of our humanity.

What do the patterns of silence and interruption mean to those observe from ourselves? Is silence frightening and ominous, if one is raised to speak more interactively? Conversely, is continual speech suffocating and exhausting, if one is raised to speak in turns and to allow spaces? My observations say that both of these are true. What are the speech points at which we each may feel excluded, overlooked, dismissed, insulted? Could we understand each other better, if we knew more about these patterns, and were more conscious of their usages? Can we learn to speak in an interactive dance with each other's patterns? Once we comprehend cosmetikos as a factor in social relations, does it become useful to apply it to difficult interactions?

### ***An African-American Speech Example: Gumbo YaYa***

After co-teaching a course using my cultural obversity model with Luisah Teish, I here paraphrase one of our conversations. We tell stories from our backgrounds, mine as a product of North European lineage, and as a lesbian, Teish as a person of African and Native American descent, raised in New Orleans. She is a long time organizer, ritual theater teacher, and priestess of Oshun who has reached the level of Chief in the Yoruba tradition, and like me she is thoroughly acquainted with the many twists and turns of diversity. She described a speech pattern, called "Gumbo YaYa," that is common to African American communities. "In a roomful of African American people, everyone will be talking at once. This is a particular type of talking; no one is speaking to another person directly, it is as though we are each speaking past the others, and overhearing each other. This is likely to be vehement speech, vigorous and frequently a critique of some kind. If I am in a room where this is happening, and I happen to fall silent, heads will turn in my direction, and the question in the air is, 'What's wrong with her?' The many

conversations do not falter, but now the subject becomes me, and what might be wrong with me, that I am not speaking.”

We continue with a few comments, and she continues. “It sounds like it would be good if we could do an exchange, a little of the silence of your people exchanged for a little of the community talking of mine.”

I nod in agreement. “Well,” I say, “I am remembering how puzzling it is for some teachers when African-American students suddenly all burst into simultaneous speech. I am also trying to imagine what it must be like in a classroom or other social situation, for African-American students raised with the Gumbo YaYa tradition, to encounter all the silence that Euro-Americans, especially, use as our normal speech pattern. I’m thinking that they must struggle with an inner sense of constant social disapproval, whose expression is then withheld.”

“Ohhhhh—,” Teish turns her eyes up in painful memory, “ooohhhh yes, you only begin to know....”

And I am thinking of the well-meaning teachers, myself included, who attempt to make diverse classrooms feel comfortable and safe for everyone...how frustrating this can be, when our efforts fail for reasons that are buried so deeply in the ways we are all raised, that we cannot yet name them. Let the naming begin. Let us explain ourselves to ourselves, and then to each other, and let us listen and ask questions. “What is it like for you whenever I....” and testify, “Here is what it is like for me, whenever you

### ***Examples of Obverse Uses of Speech and Silence:***

#### *Examples of Silence:*

1. silence treated as ‘gap’ or ‘dead space’ in conversation, needing to be filled
2. silence treated as deep listening, allowing space for feeling or sensing
3. silence treated as allowing the entry of spirit, deep intuitive knowing
4. silence treated as disapproval, negative judgment or ostracism
5. silence treated as expression of something wrong, alarm
6. silence treated as exertion of dominance
7. silence treated as invitation to engage
8. silence treated as indifference to engaging

*Examples of Overlapping speech: (more than one person speaking at once)*

1. overlapping speech treated as 'raising spirit'
2. overlapping speech treated as energizing the space
3. overlapping speech treated as engaging a group dynamic of interaction, including critique and emotional release
4. overlapping speech treated as chaos, symptomatic of hysteria or rage
5. overlapping speech treated as interruption, and desire to dominate and control, desire to force the first speaker to shut up
6. interrupting treated as enthusiasm, engagement, approval, paying attention
7. interrupting treated as rudeness, aggressive, hostile or crazed behavior

*Private and Public Speech*

1. Public speech treated as breaking confidences, experienced emotionally as 'back-stabbing,' gossiping, untrustworthy behavior, lacking boundaries, disorderly, grand-standing, and similar to breaking confidences, letting others 'get in your business' and therefore considered disloyal.
2. Public speech treated as 'pouring out my heart,' inviting group process and participation in community mind, community participation in conflict and resolution
3. Private speech treated as over-controlling, manipulative, secretive, power grabbing, refusal to share, withholding
4. Private speech treated as orderly, contained, honorable, appropriate, responsible, upholding the status quo

The two distinctly oppositional speech forms can be broadly characterized as overlapping (interrupting, communal) and invitational (talking-stick, singular).

The two forms are so oppositional a person raised in one form cannot usually recognize when the second form is present. A person raised in a 'talking-stick' form will wait to be invited to speak, and will make subtle gestures signaling desire to engage.

A person raised with group speech, interrupting and freely interactive probably

will not see or hear the subtle signals, will not 'read' the facial expressions, intake of breath and restless hands and feet that signal, "It is time for you to be quiet and invite me to speak."

A person raised with invitational, non-interruptible speech will not know how to engage in free-for-all communal conversation, (such as "Gumbo YaYa") and is likely to be uncomfortable, frightened or enraged at needing to interrupt, and to be unable to interrupt. Constantly needing to interrupt may be exhausting and extremely stressful.

A person raised with overlapping speech may experience silence as frightening and feel judged, or as signaling that he/she has not yet spoken with enough conviction or enthusiasm to engage the other party, triggering disappointment. Needing to stop and invite others to speak may be irritating and evoke feelings of condescension toward what appears to be immature and dependent behavior.

The obversity takes hold when the fearful emotions of both sides keep one person increasingly talking and the other increasingly silent and waiting, frustrating both. Attempting, by oneself, to change to the opposite form may arouse the unconscious memories of punishments, humiliations, and other methods used within our families from early childhood, indeed, infancy, to socialize us - not as generic human beings, but as human beings with a particular, very exacting, cosmetikos.

These two seemingly simple obversities, enthusiastic speech and measured speech, arouse deep frustration and volatile emotion, in my experience. They can easily distort and destroy working relationships even between the most well-intentioned of friends and colleagues. In one example of this pattern of interaction, a teacher confided in me that two of his students "hated" him. "Why do you think this?" I asked, and he explained that they never spoke in class, no matter how enthusiastically he lectured to them. I went to the students and asked what their experience in class had been, and they reported they felt exhausted from listening to him, and completely overlooked and erased by him because he never invited them to speak. This was a solvable situation.

So far I have described silence and speech as oppositional forms of discourse which in turn may be used "oppositionally" - in a kind of positive/negative magnetism that exacerbates the problem. That is to say, in the example of my disastrous taping session, the more silent I was, the more inspired to speak were my friends; and the more

they chattered, the less I felt invited to speak. Hence we were all trapped in place by our own cosmetikos - ordering our inner and outer “world” through body arts learned so early in life they constitute a language of feeling as well as speech; and we were all trapped by the emotions, especially fear, brought on by the oppositional behavior of the “other.” The fact that particular groups of people have developed and continue oppositional forms of discourse, in uses of silence and uses of continuous speech, depending on what each defines as appropriate, can cause conflict, mistrust and misunderstandings in cross-cultural relationships.

I have further suggested that the intense depth of feeling, including anger, fear, shame and outrage, that are attached to breeches of terms of silence and speaking are a result of the hidden historic connection between discourse and life-forming rites developed by all our ancestors.

### **Obversity and More Serious Differences**

Menstrual seclusion rites, I have argued earlier in this paper and elsewhere<sup>6</sup> developed or at the very least contained, the fundamental forms of human culture, including those of various forms of speech, and silence. To give one example of the connection between menstruation and our sense of order, the word for mind in Latin is “mens,” “men” is think and “mea” is measure; while “mensis” is the word for both month and monthly period; and “menses” is the word for menstrual periods. My theory postulates that female ancestors bled in time with the lunar cycle, establishing a powerful method for developing the uniqueness of human minds and behaviors, with which males also synchronized.

My studies indicate that the celebration of menarche characteristic in many indigenous cultures is suppressed when the group or lineage converts to a patriarchal religion. In my own North European Protestant family, menstruation was hedged around with silence and shame, and hence the central place I believe it once would have held has long been forgotten. In indigenous cultures which have retained the rites we can see that appropriate and world-ordering behaviors of all kinds are built into the ritual. Because of

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<sup>6</sup> Grahn, 1993; 1999.

these powerful and germinal connections, even in cultures such as my own which has forgotten the ritual source, we nevertheless guard our uses and interpretations of speech and silence forms with intense feelings and moral judgments. These range from mild irritation to high moral outrage, insult and sense of being “battered” or otherwise transgressed. We experience these feelings and accompanying judgments despite our best intentions of wanting to “get along.”

I have used “form” to describe silence and speech, both of which fit into the larger “form” of discourse itself. The original “form” I recognize is *metaform*, in this case defined as the regulation of speech and silence in formational menstrual rites. The root of the word “regulate” remains identical with words for “menstrual period” in some European languages. And, the subject of menstruation itself is one of the world’s greatest obscurities: those who treasure it and those who abhor it, and a continuum between.

While the cosmetikos of obverse speech differences can make us angry and add to our clashes with and misunderstandings of each other, some obscurities are more immediately dangerous as they can lead to groups excluding each other from the human race. In such extremes one group may assault, exclude, enslave, oppress, torture and murder another group, justifying such actions almost entirely with cosmetikos obscurities.

Several obscurities directly contribute to exclusionary, violent and oppressive behavior. These include: *Sexual*, especially from biblical prohibitions of sexual behavior that does not lead to “legitimate” babies (with socially recognized fathers). Even different birthing practices have led to extreme obscurities, as an example from Kimberly Wallace-Sanders’ *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*<sup>7</sup>, makes clear: sixteenth century Europeans upon witnessing African women giving birth without pain were convinced the mothers could not be human, because the Genesis story in the Bible proscribes that women (in the form of Eve, the Mother) “must” give birth in pain.

Another category is money, and related access to resources. Associated with God’s reward for living a moral life in some culture/eras (USA today) but with filth and worldly degradation by others, for example medieval Europeans, who in a Christian turn

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

toward heaven, maneuvered the handling of money onto (some) Jews, and then later turned on Jews with a stereotype of them as money mongering, greedy, etc.. In the Full Moon/Dark Moon construct of Metaformic Philosophy, money is associated with light and orderly goodness, and is at the opposite end of the creativity, chaos and artful expression of “dark moon” positioning. In the US/WTO today, artists and many other categories of worker have been left out of the money stock market rise. People caught in the “underworld” economy of what is categorized as illegitimate drug or “blood” money, have been incarcerated in unprecedented numbers, in prisons which replicate the older categories of racism and group identification by skin color. Money’s capacity to overprotect and isolate privileged groups creates a virtual caste system with “unknowable,” even “untouchable,” and dehumanized homeless and otherwise disenfranchised people, who in turn imagine privileged people as inhuman, unfeeling, and so on.

Likewise, in India and other places an oppressive caste system arose around strict regulation of categories of obversity especially related to the cosmetikos of eating, one group being prohibited from even handling or being near foods which another group values as good to eat or a proper way to eat, and groups being unable to cook for each other. Categories of occupation also connect to both caste and class hierarchies. In mainstream US and other cultures, occupations related to lower body-functions are considered oppositional to those aiming toward the head, abstraction, light, the sky and so on, creating class distinctions. These as well as eating obversities have led some groups to categorize others’ behavior as “animal” and to reward some occupations while ostracizing others. Sexual categories also are often defined along occupational lines, or used to demark human versus nonhuman. People must constantly struggle not to be caught in these polarizations, which are pervasive, as we see from news stories of Abu Ghraib prison scandal of US service people’s (or mendicant soldiers’) torture of Iraqi and Afghan prisoners by desecrating the Koran, and also by acting out their internal anti-homosexual and other sexual fears and fantasies on the helpless bodies of shackled men whose humanity is negated by the label “terrorist.” Likewise, the sexual expressions conveyed by Western media cause many people in more restricted societies to objectify, stereotype and demonize Westerners with fanatical hatred. Similarly, within the U.S.

sexual openness or freedom displayed by women especially is cause for public criticism from some groups.

Elaborate oppressive structures are held in place by extensions of the obversities described above, which warrant much more complex analysis than I can render in this article. More simply, as I have attempted to show, even everyday behaviors such as speech or habits of eating, and dozens of other gestures we use commonly, can cause serious, relationship-destroying misunderstandings between well meaning people. To circumvent the internalized structures of obversity as an impediment to successful diversity in human experiences, what antidotes suggest themselves that could be helpful?

### **Cultural Obversity Practices: Transposition**

Obversity, by definition, will have more than one practice toward solution. The one I describe below is right out of my “talking stick” cosmetikos. Someone else may find an interactive, dialogic approach much more effective. Students in the “Uncommon Kinship” course I co-teach with Luisah Teish have devised ingenious rituals for their own communities and families. One of them contributed a “dance it out” exercise between two people, featuring gestures describing what is enraging about the other person, and which ends in laughter. The exercise ends in laughter, I suspect, because at base our cosmetikos is so humanly serious, so important to us, and - in the scheme of things so, well - silly...

I have devised a simple setting of “internal calm and evaluation,” a way of opening a peaceful line of inquiry within myself, that I find effective as a first step. When experiencing an emotionally uncomfortable obversity:

1. Move to “the eye of the storm” in the center of your mind, a kind of “ritual inner space” and:
  - a. temporarily still emotional reactions
  - b. assume obversity might be present
  - c. recall one’s own training in a behavior
  - d. use other examples of obversities to try to understand this one
  - e. ask questions of the person: “--did you mean?--”

The “eye of the storm” is a metaphor based in the shape of a hurricane, and refers to a place of peace within an emotional turmoil. This is more than passive stillness, however; this space requires active inquiry and engagement. Bring your consciousness to bear on your emotional reactions.

2. Once you determine the conflict is an obversity:
  - a. decide whether to retain (moral, behavioral) judgment or to let go of that and instead use empathy
  - b. adopt a more neutral vocabulary of explanation (empathic)
  - c. make sure the parties know you think this is the clash of two goods
  - d. attempt to explain your own cosmetikos (give them your information - “in my family this is how we....”)
  - e. contextualize the pattern before proceeding with judgment or empathy

In using this method I find that the place of calmness is a place of transposition, in which I have traded, or exchanged, negative judgments for neutral ones, and negative emotions of irritation, rage, anxiety, and fear for empathy, which is an active calm place. To return to my earlier definition of obversity and the examples of twins, I have allowed myself to imagine the possibility that both are cherished, both their “words” are equally valued. My way is “the good” and so is the way of the other person - we are “twins” - and negotiations can begin from there.

One student of metaformic theory reports that her use of cultural obversity allowed to her to let go of chronic states of anger that she had found harmful to her own inner being; now she finds that in social situations she is able to move her perspective more fluidly from reactive to observant. She describes this change as one from coming from a place of the center chakra, the will, to a raising of perspective to the upper chakras of evaluation, bringing about an energetic shift that enables her life to be calmer and less defensive, yet to maintain her strong sense of self in her everyday social engagements. And she is not giving up her will or her feelings.

Destructive patterns emerge when constructive patterns are taken out of original context but even in context, patterns can elaborate into harmful and cruel conditions. Social change practices can reach levels of stagnation. Most obversities, as I have said

several times and want to emphasize, are the clash of two goods. Yet they have the power to destroy marriages and friendships, and can lead to extreme states of negative feeling.

Because negative feelings based in reactions to a particular group's oversights can accumulate and serve as justification for humanity's most serious oppressions - genocide, slavery, war crimes, race/class/sex/caste oppressions, construction of sub-humanizing categories, and mechanistic or exploitative approach to "other" beings, as well as for more everyday crises of social interaction, it is crucial we solve for these problems. While I have used a couple of ethnic examples to make some of my points, it is in general not useful to dwell on ethnicities or areas, as everyone has moved around so much - more useful to think of lineage of origin, meaning the lineage from which an individual learned the metaformic behavior. At the same time we *must* think in terms of ethnicity, gender, race and so forth when evaluating oppressive behaviors based on use of those categories by others, especially whenever we are addressing oppressions that have become institutionalized.

Oppression in part stems from and is promoted by inability to understand, acknowledge, empathize with and be willing to accommodate for, the *kosmetikos* of another group. When opportunity and happenstance allow oppressive power relations, the already-in-place dehumanizing construct is justification for what then become self-fulfilling stereotypes. Blood rituals of history, especially war crimes and feuds, frequently set wounded and traumatized feelings and reactions into place as though set in stone for generations. But we can, and do, create new rituals, that allow us to free ourselves from the past and to maintain our differences while living in peace with each other.

Spiritual traditions attempt to mitigate contentious differences, using the washing/bathing/baptism metaform of rebirth and forgiveness, or the empathic exercise of walking in another's shoes/moccasins, or "let go and let God" and other inner releases of the moral judgment of *kosmetikos* to place vengeance and justice in the hands of divinity, fate or nature. These practices, though frequently highly effective at local levels, have not been successful at preventing recent major wars and other contemporary problems of violence, or in the deconstruction of severe class, gender, religious and other oppressive stratifications. Many times, including present times, the virulently held

cosmetikos structures within religions are part of the cause of oppression, though for much of the world, much of the time, religions serve or attempt to serve the cause of peace.

Living in the commons, outside the insularity of one's family with its specific group cosmetikos, requires skill and adaptation, and is well within our human capacity to achieve. Using cultural obversity concepts from metaformic theory, I have suggested developing the practice of recognizing one's own moral outrage, and then going inward to a place of inquiry and ritual transposition, to gain an overview of the impact of our own behaviors on others, and to gain an underview of the impact of others' behavior on us. We are not the same, yet we are adaptable. We cannot have too many methods with which to understand each other and ourselves.

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