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< < < < < ACROSS BORDERS > > > > >



THE MAKING OF  
*OUR BODIES, OURSELVES*

< < < < < KATHY DAVIS > > > > >

The Making of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

**NEXT WAVE**

New Directions in Women's Studies

*A series edited by Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan,  
and Robyn Wiegman*



THE MAKING OF

*Our Bodies, Ourselves*

HOW FEMINISM TRAVELS ACROSS BORDERS

Kathy Davis

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For my mother, Jan Davis,  
who taught me the value of a good book



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This is the book I have always wanted to write. Writing it, however, has taken considerably longer than any of my earlier books. The idea to write about *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS) and the group that wrote it began to form during a casual conversation with a colleague in 1997 and has gone on to span more than eight years, involving three prolonged sojourns in the United States. The book has been a long time coming in part because I had to finish other projects (the usual problem for busy academics) and squeeze in time to get back to the United States to do the fieldwork for the book. However, the main reason for this long genesis was not the usual problem of time and distance but rather a fateful eureka moment midway through my investigation that convinced me I had gotten it all wrong and needed to go back to the drawing board. What had started out as a history of one of U.S. feminism's most popular and successful projects had been transformed into a transcultural inquiry into how OBOS had "traveled" and the implications of its travels for how we think about feminist knowledge and health politics in a globalizing world. This shift in perspective added years to the project, making it more complicated (though also more interesting). It required excursions into several fields (translation studies, feminist activism in Latin America and postsocialist Europe, and postcolonial theory) that were relatively new for me. The result is, I hope, a better book—more timely, more forward looking, and more relevant for contemporary feminist scholarship.

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## INTRODUCTION \*

This is a book about a book: the feminist classic on women's health, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS), and how it "traveled." The story begins in 1969. The country was in turmoil over the Vietnam War. Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon had just been elected president after the riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Radical activism was everywhere: the civil rights movement and its offshoots—Black Power, La Raza, and the American Indian movement; antiwar demonstrations and draft resistance; radical student activism of the Marxist, socialist, or anarchist persuasion; hippies, yippies, and the "sexual revolution"; and, last but not least, a burgeoning women's movement. It was in this context that a small group of young women met at a workshop called Women and Their Bodies, held at one of the first feminist conferences in the United States, which took place in Boston. Some of the women had already been active in the civil rights movement or had helped draft resisters during the Vietnam War, but this was for many of them their first encounter with feminism. They talked about their sexuality (which was still, despite the sexual revolution, very much taboo), abortion (which was illegal—*Roe v. Wade* wasn't decided until 1973), their experiences with pregnancy and childbirth (several were young mothers), and their frustrations with physicians and health care. The group, which later evolved into the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC), began to meet regularly. Its members collected information about health issues (which was, unlike today, scarce and hard to find) and wrote papers, which they discussed in meetings attended by increasing numbers of local women. These meetings were electrifying, leaving many of the participants irrevocably changed.

A year later the group assembled the discussion papers, and the first version of OBOS was born. Originally printed on newsprint by an underground publisher and selling for seventy-five cents, OBOS was a lively and accessible manual on women's bodies and health. It was full of personal experiences and contained useful information

on issues ranging from masturbation (how to do it) to birth control (which methods were available and how to use them) to vaginal infections, pregnancy, and nursing. It combined a scathing critique of patriarchal medicine and the medicalization of women's bodies with an analysis of the political economics of the health and pharmaceutical industries. But, above all, *OBOS* validated women's embodied experiences as a resource for challenging medical dogmas about women's bodies and, consequently, as a strategy for personal and collective empowerment.

The book was an overnight success, and the group—to its surprise—found itself being wooed by commercial publishers. Since the first commercial edition was published in 1973, *OBOS* has sold over four million copies and gone through six major updates. The latest edition appeared in 2005. It occupied the *New York Times* best seller list for several years, was voted the best young adult book of 1976 by the American Library Association, and has received worldwide critical acclaim for its candid and accessible approach to women's health.

Often called the “bible of women's health,” *OBOS* shaped how generations of women have felt about their bodies, their sexuality and relationships, and their reproduction and health. It has not only enjoyed a widespread popularity, unique for a feminist book, but has also transformed the provision of health care, helped shape health care policies, and stimulated research on women's health in the United States.<sup>1</sup> No family practice is complete without a copy of *OBOS* in the waiting room. Gynecological examinations have become more responsive to the patient's needs (e.g., by abandoning cold metal speculums in favor of more comfortable plastic ones), and hospitals have allowed women more control over the process of giving birth. As a result of *OBOS*, many women have been encouraged to enter medicine and midwives and nurse practitioners have been rehabilitated as respectable professionals in the U.S. health care system. The book has been a catalyst for myriad consumer and patient advocate organizations and campaigns for women's reproductive rights. It was instrumental in getting patient information inserts packaged with medications and has played an advocacy role in congressional hearings and scientific conferences on the safety of medications, medical devices, and procedures ranging from silicone breast implants to the injectable contraceptive Depo-Provera and the new genetic

technologies. It has inspired research on women's health within the health sciences and medicine. Research protocols on—for example—heart disease no longer leave women out, and diseases that specifically effect women (such as breast cancer) have been given considerably more attention since the publication of *OBOS*. The recent study on the dangers of hormone replacement therapy (HRT), which exposed the negligence of the pharmaceutical industry and medical profession in indiscriminately promoting estrogen supplements for menopausal women, owes a debt to the pioneering work of *OBOS*.<sup>2</sup>

### Personal Involvement

When *OBOS* was first published in the early 1970s, I was a college student in the United States and becoming active in the women's liberation movement (as it was then called). Like all of my friends, I had a copy of *OBOS*. I kept it on the floor next to my bed. When I look at it now, well underlined and full of notes, coffee stains, and other signs of wear and tear, it is clear that I pretty much read it from cover to cover. The exceptions were the chapters on pregnancy and menopause, which remained fairly pristine, holding less interest for me in those days than the chapters on sexuality, menstruation, and birth control. I remember discussing the book with friends and using it as a resource in self-help groups, where we experimented with many of the remedies it suggested for vaginal infections or menstrual cramps. I referred to *OBOS* before every visit to a gynecologist, and it was standard reading in many of the women's groups in which I participated throughout the seventies. As health activist, I used it in group discussions with women in my community and for advocacy work around women's health issues. For me, *OBOS* was like a wise friend, comforting and authoritative, a source of reliable health information and a stimulus for feminist activism.

By the 1980s, I had moved to Europe, had become a women's studies teacher, and was conducting research on women's bodies and health care issues. My copy of *OBOS* had moved from its place of honor at my bedside to one of the farthest corners of my bookshelves, where it remained unopened and collecting dust. While I invariably gave credit to *OBOS* in my writings, noting its centrality to any feminist critique of the health care system, it seemed far removed from the



theoretical issues I was grappling with as a feminist scholar: debates about essentialism versus constructivism; how power and the cultural discourses of femininity are played out on women's bodies; or the political and moral dilemmas arising from women's active involvement in dangerous and ideologically problematic bodily practices such as dieting and eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, and reproductive technologies.<sup>3</sup> It did not occur to me to turn to *OBOS* for help in developing critical positions in what was increasingly being called the "body revival" by feminist and other cultural theorists in the academy. While I did continue to use *OBOS* in my classes on body politics, it was usually as a text to be contrasted with medical texts. I expected my students, who were well schooled in feminist theory and the methods of deconstruction, to look critically at the discourse, metaphors, and rhetoric of both texts. Interestingly, while my students had no trouble deconstructing medical texts, they were much less able to take an analytic stance toward *OBOS*, tending to either accept it at face value ("I love this text, it makes me feel good") or dismiss it out of hand as a relic of sixties feminism ("something for my mother"). In short, their responses replayed the same tension that I had been experiencing between contemporary feminist theory and feminist health activism—a tension that made a serious, analytic engagement with *OBOS* as a text difficult.

It wasn't until the end of the 1990s that I encountered *OBOS* once again, this time as a potential research object. I attended a conference in my hometown of Amsterdam on historical and sociological approaches to biographical research, where I met the woman who is now director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, Mary Marshall Clarke. She mentioned that the program had recently been awarded a large Rockefeller grant to subsidize fellowships for oral history research on community organizations. She explained that she and her colleagues almost never got "something on the body" and even fewer proposals from sociologists. "Isn't there something you could do?" she asked. The prospect of spending six months at the Oral History Research Office in New York, not to mention returning to my country of origin after years spent living abroad, was, I must admit, the first thing that caught my attention. However, after thinking about ways to link my interest in feminism and "the body" to biographical research on community activists, the idea of doing a group history based on biographical interviews with

members of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective seemed an obvious choice. After all, this was the group that had literally put women's bodies on the feminist agenda. Thus, I proceeded to write the proposal, was eventually awarded a fellowship, and packed my bags for a six-month sojourn in the United States, where I planned to interview the "founding mothers" of one of U.S. feminism's most famous (and favorite) projects.

At this point, I had every intention of writing a history of *OBOS* based on the collective memories of the women who wrote it. Situating myself in the tradition of oral history, I expected to use the interviews as a basis for explaining the success and longevity of the book, as well as its significance as a feminist icon. However, in the course of doing this research I made a rather momentous discovery—a discovery that completely changed the present inquiry, transforming it into something that is not quite a history.<sup>4</sup>

### Not Quite a History

I discovered that the impact of *OBOS* was not limited to the United States but had extended beyond the country as well. From its inception, *OBOS* had been taken up, translated, and adapted by local groups of feminist activists, scholars, health providers, and health activists in different parts of the globe. By the late 1970s, it had already appeared in most Western European countries, as well as Japan and Taiwan. By the 1980s, it had moved south and east, with versions appearing in Hebrew and Arabic (the latter for Egypt). By the 1990s, it had been translated into Telegu (for India) and Russian and adapted in English for South Africa. In 2000, a Spanish adaptation for all Latin American countries, *Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas*, was published, and since 2005 the list has been expanded to include a French *Notre Corps, Notre Sante* for francophone Africa, a Tibetan translation, and translations for Eastern Europe (Poland, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Moldova), Armenia, China, Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia. Moreover, the end is nowhere in sight; many more translation projects are waiting for start-up funding (in Brazil, Turkey, Nigeria, and Vietnam).

This impressive list indicates that *OBOS* has become one of the most frequently translated feminist books. It has sold more than four

times as many copies as the international feminist best seller *The Second Sex*, written by Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>5</sup> And, while Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) may prove to have a similar global appeal,<sup>6</sup> *OBOS* remains U.S. feminism's most popular "export" to date.

The international trajectory of *OBOS* convinced me that a history of the book within the United States could not begin to do justice to its impact and significance. More important, however, the book's "travels" raise several questions that are irresistibly intriguing. How could such a distinctively U.S. book resonate with women in such diverse social, cultural, and geographic locations? What happened to the book when it traveled? How did it change in order to address the concerns of women in such different contexts? And, finally, what can the travels of *OBOS* tell us about how feminist knowledge and politics circulate transnationally? In what ways have these border crossings been shaped by, but also subverted, globally structured relations of power between what has critically been referred to as the "West and the rest" (Hall 1992)?

These questions are the focus of the present inquiry. Rather than writing a history of *OBOS* as a U.S. feminist project, I will be connecting the book's history within the United States to its travels outside the United States. I will use these travels to think about the book's impact, its changing content, and its significance for transnational feminist knowledge and body politics.

My approach to the history of *OBOS* will also deviate from recent feminist historiographies of what has been called—somewhat problematically—second-wave feminism.<sup>7</sup> Although *OBOS* emerged at this particular point in time and its history could be told as an example of this particular moment in U.S. feminism, I have opted for a different approach. Given the remarkable life of the book outside the United States, it is my contention that its history as a feminist project and cultural icon needs to be more forward looking. It must include how *OBOS* has been—and continues to be—taken up by women across the globe. Writing a history from the vantage point of its origins in the United States, as told from the perspective of its founders—as was my initial intention—would fail to do justice to what is arguably the book's most unique and remarkable feature, namely, its ability to speak to a wide variety of women at different times and in disparate circumstances and social, cultural, and political contexts. Thus, in line with Susan Sanford Friedman's (2001)

warning that too much attention to history can submerge one's "geographical imagination" (16), I will be broadening my account of the history of *OBOS* to encompass its myriad and diverse border crossings, both inside and outside the United States.<sup>8</sup>

In order to analyze the production and reception of *OBOS* as traveling theory in a global context, I have drawn on and engage with recent debates within feminist scholarship on the "politics of location." I shall now turn briefly to these debates as they provide the theoretical and normative context in which the present inquiry is situated.

### Feminism and the Politics of Location

Born of an engagement between feminist theory and multiculturalism, cultural studies and postcolonial theory, the politics of location recognizes the importance of location as the ground from which one speaks and as shaping one's identity, knowledge of the world, and possibilities for political action. Initially coined by Adrienne Rich (1986),<sup>9</sup> the politics of location has variously been referred to as "locational feminism" (Friedman 1998), "feminist conjuncturalism" (Frankenberg and Mani 1993), "postmodern geographies" (Kaplan 1996), "diaspora space" (Brah 1996), and "theory from the borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987). In the context of the present inquiry, it is impossible to do justice to the complexities involved in all these debates about location and what the linkages between the "global" and the "local" might mean for critical feminist inquiry (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Kaplan 1996; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Mohanty 2003). I will limit myself to how a concern for the politics of location has generated fundamentally different views about feminist history, feminist knowledge and knowledge practices, and the possibilities and limitations in political alliances among women both within and outside the United States.

The politics of location introduces spatiality or geography as essential for understanding women's *history* as well as histories of feminist struggle. While U.S. feminism had tended to valorize history, emphasizing the retrieval of the "lost" voices of women and making women's accomplishments visible, a politics of location recognizes that "the social production of history takes place in a certain geographical

location” (Friedman 2001, 17). Symptomatic of the centrality given to history was the preoccupation of U.S. feminism with its “origins” and its ubiquitous temporal rhetoric of “awakening, revelation, and rebirth” (18) as epitomized in the notorious “click experience,” which represented a collective moment when women saw the light and became political subjects. The emphasis on the historical and temporal led many U.S. feminist historians to overlook the fact that feminism emerges in different forms in different places. Feminist ideas have a long and uneven history of being taken up and rearticulated in different locations across the globe throughout history, producing hybrid cultural formations that may bear only a passing resemblance to U.S. feminism in late modernity.<sup>10</sup> The assumption that feminism “began” (and “ended”) in the United States separated women into the initiated and the uninitiated, a dualism that justified the view that U.S. feminists had achieved liberation while “traditional” or non-Western women were more severely oppressed and in need of salvation. The new emphasis on location involved a moving away from linear modernist histories of feminism to an exploration of how feminism “emerges, takes root, changes, travels, translates, and transplants in different spacio/temporal contexts” (15).

The politics of location has consequences for theorizing feminism as an *epistemological project*—that is, as a project that can generate knowledge and knowledge practices aimed at enhancing women’s individual and collective empowerment. Initially, feminist epistemology employed a notion of location that referred to how an individual’s (or group’s) material position shaped her experiences, perceptions, and interactions with others. This particular conception of location provided the basis for feminist standpoint epistemology, which assumed that women use their material location not only as a resource for knowing what it means to be embodied as a woman in a particular social and cultural context but also as a place from which to construct a critical feminist subjectivity and perspective for social change.<sup>11</sup> Feminist standpoint epistemology has since generated considerable critical debate, most notably about the problems involved in privileging one aspect of women’s experience—gender—while ignoring the ways in which race, class, and other categories of difference intersect in multiple and contradictory ways in women’s everyday lives.<sup>12</sup> The issue of how to theorize intersecting identities, along with the implications this has for feminist epistemology, has been

one of the most productive and highly developed areas of contemporary feminist scholarship.<sup>13</sup> An important outcome has been a shift from viewing location in terms of identity to viewing it as a context in which complex and shifting relationships are constituted within a dynamic field of historical and geopolitical forces (Mani 1989). Under the influence of postcolonial theory, this contextual understanding of location has been used to understand international exchanges of knowledge in a global-local nexus. Feminists have become increasingly concerned not only with the—often selective—reception of feminist texts in the United States (King 1994) but also with how feminist knowledge circulates through translation and dissemination of feminist texts across the globe (Spivak 1988b, 1985; Kaplan 1996). Feminism—both as theory and practice—is now viewable as a kind of “traveling theory” (Said 1983) that circulates globally and is rearticulated and transformed in the course of its relocation from place to place.

The politics of location makes it essential to imagine and implement *feminist political alliances* across lines of difference rather than through a shared identity as women. U.S. feminism has often had an international vision of a unitary world of women, bringing together women from different parts of the globe by virtue of their assumed shared experience of oppression and their common struggles as women (Morgan 1984). The danger of this version of “global feminism,” however, was the centrality it tended to give to white women within what was a decidedly Euro-American version of feminism. In addition to being ethnocentric, global feminism often celebrated “cultural differences,” whereby global power relations were mystified and a stance of cultural relativism was adopted that precluded the necessary discussions about feminist accountability and a more serious engagement with practices and politics in other parts of the globe (Lugones and Spelman 1983; Kaplan 1996; Narayan 1997, 1998). The problems inherent in global feminism were countered by integrating the feminist desire for transnational feminist alliances with a feminist, anti-imperialist culture critique (Mohanty et al. 1991; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Mohanty 2003). This version of the politics of location entailed recognition of the myriad ways in which women across the globe are already linked in diverse and unequal relations through historical, global processes of domination produced by global capitalism, colonialism, imperi-

alism, or slavery. These transnational and historically contingent relations of power—or “scattered hegemonies” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994)—provide, paradoxically, a location from which feminists can recognize the inequalities that separate them yet can also join forces, forming alliances around common concerns. This notion of international feminist politics is not based on women’s biological identity or shared cultural identities. It takes as its starting point the tensions and divisions between women across divides of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and national borders (Mani 1989; Lugones 2003). It provides a vision of feminism that encompasses “imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic” (Mohanty 2003, 46–47).<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, a politics of location identifies the grounds of historically specific differences and similarities among women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, knowledge practices, and possibilities for alliance. It opens up space for a new kind of critical feminist practice. Instead of being preoccupied with feminist history as a single story, multiple and diverse accounts of feminism in different places and at different points in time can be generated. It becomes possible to think about how feminism travels—that is, how feminist knowledge and knowledge practices move from place to place and are “translated” in different cultural locations. And, finally, we can consider how transnational feminist encounters emerge within a context of globally structured hierarchies of power and what this means for feminist encounters across lines of difference.

In the present inquiry, I will engage with these discussions about the politics of location in three different ways: in writing the *history* of *OBOS*, in analyzing it as a feminist *epistemological project*, and in understanding its significance for *feminist politics* in a global context.

First, the history of *OBOS* will encompass its trajectory inside as well as outside the United States. This means that the book’s life outside the United States will not be treated as an afterthought to its “real” history or as an exotic footnote to the main story. On the contrary, the present inquiry will use the travels of *OBOS* as a lens through which the historical significance of the book can become

visible. Its history will be presented as a transnational history situated in the context of a rapidly globalizing world.

Second, *OBOS* will be analyzed as a kind of feminist traveling theory. This will mean adopting the somewhat unorthodox approach of elevating what is commonly seen as “just” a popular book on women’s health to the lofty-sounding status of a feminist epistemological project—that is, a project that generates feminist knowledge and knowledge practices. By analyzing the politics of knowledge that *OBOS* represents, I will be able to show how the book could be taken up in contexts very different from those in which it was originally produced. In other words, I will use the travels of *OBOS* to think about the production and reception of feminist theory in transnational cultures of exchange (Kaplan 1996).

Third, *OBOS* will be explored as a catalyst for feminist body/politics both within and outside the United States. Since the circulation of any U.S. or “First World” feminist text to postcolonial or “Third World” contexts raises potentially thorny questions concerning feminism as “cultural imperialism,” I will engage with the “strange encounters” (Ahmed 2000) engendered by the revision of *OBOS* in the United States, as well as its translation and adaptation outside the United States among women in different social, cultural, and political locations.<sup>15</sup> In the present inquiry, I will use *OBOS* as a test case for addressing whether these encounters provide the conditions for a truly transnational feminism—that is, a feminism that joins a respect for difference with critical reflexivity and mutual empowerment (Grewal and Kaplan 1994).<sup>16</sup>

## About the Book

The present inquiry spanned a period of several years, moving from a straightforward oral history to an analysis of the book as a transnational feminist epistemological project. It went through three phases. The first was concerned with mapping the history of *OBOS*. Initially, I conducted oral history interviews with the founders of the original collective.<sup>17</sup> From the fall of 1998 through the spring of 1999, I used my fellowship at the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University to travel back and forth between New York and Boston. With one exception, all of the interviews were face-to-face and



lasted from one to three hours.<sup>18</sup> Since the BWHBC encompassed more than the founders, I also spoke with members of the then current staff, as well as with some who had left the organization under less than pleasant circumstances. I interviewed several members of the Board of Directors and talked to many women who had co-authored chapters of *OBOS* or been involved with editing or critically reading the book during its many revisions. In the course of my inquiry, I corresponded with many of my informants and, in some cases, conducted additional interviews in order to fill in gaps in my understanding of the history or—more significantly—to keep myself abreast of the ongoing transformations in the organization, further editions of *OBOS* in the United States, and the steady stream of new translation projects. Finally, I organized several group discussions with members of the collective concerning the history of the book's transformation within and outside the United States.<sup>19</sup>

The second phase of the inquiry involved an in-depth analysis of *OBOS* as a feminist epistemological project—that is, a project that is involved in generating feminist knowledge and knowledge practices. It began with a confrontation between the epistemological assumptions of *OBOS* and postmodern feminist body theory (in particular, the work of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Joan Scott, and Susan Bordo), as well as alternative biological, phenomenological, and materialist critiques of this theory.<sup>20</sup> I show how *OBOS* can contribute to some of the most central discussions in feminist body theory by providing an embodied, situated, critical feminist politics of knowledge. This having been done, the stage was set for a close reading of the text itself. To this end, I drew upon the work the feminist text sociology (in particular, Dorothy Smith's work) in order to show how *OBOS* as a text could produce a specific kind of reading and a specific kind of (feminist) reader. I further developed my analysis of the production and reception of *OBOS* as a feminist text through archival research, which allowed me to show how actual readers had become feminist subjects through reading *OBOS*. At the time I did this part of my research, the BWHBC had just donated three decades' worth of papers to the Schlesinger Library—a library dedicated to women's history.<sup>21</sup> As I sorted through more than nine linear feet of unprocessed boxes, I discovered a wealth of minutes from meetings of the collective, describing in exquisite detail how

decisions were made about what to include in the book and what to leave out, negotiations with publishers, trips abroad, and participation in various health initiatives. There were personal letters, position statements, discussion papers, newspaper clippings, and countless versions of chapters from various editions of *OBOS* in various stages of editing, along with memos from contributors and editors.<sup>22</sup> But perhaps the most momentous discovery of all was the hundreds of letters from readers from all over the world who wrote to the authors of *OBOS* to express appreciation, contribute their own experiences, or articulate their criticisms of the book. These letters proved to be a gold mine as they allowed me to analyze the relationship between the book and its readers through the words of the readers themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The third phase of this inquiry was devoted to the translations of *OBOS*. Given the diversity of languages, I was not able to read every translation. I pieced together my research on the translation projects from several sources. I went through the archives, examining the correspondence with translators and publishers, internal papers, and proposals for foundation grants for translation projects. I arranged several discussions (and many more informal conversations) with members of the BWHBC, which focused specifically on translation projects.<sup>24</sup> In addition to this material, I was able to interview several translators involved with the foreign editions of *OBOS* and, in other cases, was able to read what the translators had written about the translation process—often in the prefaces of the foreign editions.<sup>25</sup> Finally, I helped set up a dialogue among the translators in 2001. Together with the BWHBC, I organized a four-day encounter in the Netherlands where translators from different countries could compare notes and discuss the strategies they used to transform *OBOS* into a text that would be useful and oppositional within their local contexts. I used this meeting to think about the politics of translation, as well as the possibilities of transnational feminist alliances in the field of feminist health politics.<sup>26</sup>

The three phases of the inquiry are reflected in the organization of this book. It is divided into three parts. The first part maps the history of *OBOS* in the United States and its travels outside the United States. The second part explores *OBOS* as an epistemological project and how its knowledge practices and knowledge politics were transformed through its translations. Finally, the third part explores the

implications of *OBOS* and its travels for transnational feminism in theory and practice.

The first chapter traces the history of *OBOS* within the United States from the first edition in 1970 to the latest version in 2005. Set against the shifting cultural and political landscape in the United States, it shows how the content, form, and ideology of the book changed. An explanation is provided for how a book on women's health, written by laywomen, could become a feminist "success story."

In the second chapter, the history of *OBOS* is transported beyond the borders of the United States. Beginning with the translation of *OBOS* throughout Western Europe during the 1970s, I explore how the book moved steadily farther afield, changing from a publisher-based translation to a project supported by international foundations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I address the ways in which local women's groups took up *OBOS* and how they reworked and transformed it to meet their own needs. The changing relationship between the U.S. *OBOS* and its translations is examined against the backdrop of contemporary feminist debates about the dangers of U.S. feminism as cultural imperialism. I show how the international trajectory of *OBOS* provides an example of how Western feminism can become "decentered."

The third chapter takes up the history of the group that wrote *OBOS*, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Drawing on the stories of the founding members, I show how their collective history takes on a mythical cast, allowing the participants not only to remember their past in a particular way but to make sense of the realities of the present. I explore the ambivalences of this myth, showing how it worked in ways that were empowering but also prevented them from coming to terms with some of the tensions and conflicts within their organization.

The fourth chapter takes up the feminist epistemological project that was represented by *OBOS*. I explore how it might contribute to several central debates within feminist body theory—conceptualizing women's bodies without falling into the trap of biological determinism, mobilizing women's experience as a critical knowledge resource without treating it as an unmediated source of the "truth," and reinstating women as epistemic agents without ignoring the structural and discursive conditions that limit their agency. By showing how *OBOS* tackles these problems, I make a case for bridging the gap

that has developed between contemporary feminist body theory and feminist health activism.

The fifth chapter explores how *OBOS* accomplishes its epistemological project at the discursive level of the text. I explore the textual strategies that allow *OBOS* as a text to construct a particular kind of reading. I also draw on letters from the readers of *OBOS* in order to show how the text produces a particular kind of reader—readers who are embodied, critically reflexive, and actively engaged in taking control of their bodies. In short, *OBOS* creates feminist subjects ready to embark on a critical, collective, feminist politics of health.

The sixth chapter returns to the question of how this specific politics of knowledge could travel. Against the backdrop of critical feminist and postcolonial translation theory, I analyze two specific translation projects in more detail: the Spanish edition for Latin America and the Bulgarian translation of *OBOS*. These cases allow me to explore the issues involved in translating across cultural, regional, and national differences and to show how the politics of knowledge embodied by the U.S. *OBOS* can be transformed—and transformed in very different ways—so that it can be oppositional in specific social, cultural, and geopolitical circumstances.

The seventh chapter assesses the implications of *OBOS* and its travels. I will argue that the scope and variety of its border crossings, the diversity of its transformations, and the ways in which it has shaped encounters between feminists globally have consequences for how we think about history, the politics of knowledge, and transnational politics. On a note of measured optimism, I conclude that contemporary feminist theory may have at least as much to learn from the analysis of *OBOS* as *OBOS* has to learn from feminist theory.



# Part I ✱ THE BOOK AND ITS TRAVELS