

BOOK REVIEW

OUR BODIES, OURSELVES FOR OURSELVES AND OUR CLASSROOMS

by Nancy Worcester

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *OUR BODIES, OURSELVES, 9th edition*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011. 928p. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$26.00, ISBN 978-1439190661. Website: www.ourbodiesourselves.org.

Loretta Ross, founder and national coordinator of SisterSong (Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective), describes it as “one of the most subversive books out there.”¹ Historian Linda Gordon provocatively proclaims it “[t]he American left’s most valuable written contribution to the world.”² *Time* magazine names it one of the hundred most important nonfiction books of the twentieth century.³ And the *Las Vegas Weekly* tells men, “If you know where the clitoris is and importantly how to find it, you have books like [this] to thank for helping put women’s sexual anatomy on the map.”⁴ With press like this, wouldn’t everyone want to see what “it” is about?

“It” is *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (*OBOS* for short), which came out last year in a 928-page ninth edition that coincides with the fortieth anniversary of its beginnings as a collaborative, countercultural, typed and hand-calligraphed booklet for a workshop about women’s bodies. Of course, many *Feminist Collections* readers probably have an older edition somewhere and at least vaguely remember the excitement from the old days. This review, then, will encourage readers to look at the latest edition of this classic through new eyes, especially about how to introduce a new generation of students to the book’s powerful representation of the struggles, achievements, and long-lasting impacts of women’s movements. I can think of no other book that can

reach today’s students so well and stretch them to learn more about both the movements that got us here and today’s global women’s movements.

Today’s *OBOS*

The ninth edition is not your mother’s *OBOS*. It does, however, feel like a comfortable old friend, showing up with a somewhat new image but the same supportive and inspiring way of handling complex issues and encouraging critical thinking. Many “new” editions of books simply replace their introductions and update a few crucial sections. In contrast, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective puts enormous work into re-evaluating every aspect of *OBOS* when it prepares a new edition. The Collective engages with a diversity of readers, as well as non-readers, about what does and doesn’t work, and makes it a priority to provide the latest evidence-based women’s health information on cutting-edge and controversial topics, as well as a feminist analysis (or two!) of emerging issues. More than 300 contributors were involved in updating and revamping this 2011 edition.

I have used every previous edition of *OBOS* in my teaching. Often I have plunged into a section at the last minute to find the perfect wording to explain a complicated issue, or a table or diagram to use in lectures. I know the book so well that I didn’t expect to be particularly surprised by its newest

version. From the hype around it, I knew I’d find ever-more-diverse voices of women and transpeople, as well as material and presentation that would appeal to a new generation of readers, yet also reflect the now-urgent issues of aging for longtime readers. I also knew there would be much demystification of how and when health care reform (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) will affect women. There would also be an experimental chapter on relationships (no longer separating issues for women who love women from those for women who love men) developed from online conversations between thoughtfully selected participants, as well as expanded sections on the health ramifications of, and increased activism around, environmental health, women and violence, and reproductive justice issues.

What I *didn’t* expect was that, following my own assignment to look at the ninth edition with new eyes, I would be newly fascinated with the dialectic of women’s health issues, the production and questioning of information and knowledge, and *OBOS*’s impressive presentation of that knowledge to its readers, all while it symbolizes decades of feminist movements. I found myself agreeing with a Collective member who informally commented that **the ninth edition just might be the best-ever version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.**⁵

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective deserves recognition for its thought and creativity in making such an enormous amount of dense, often very scientific, almost always political, complex, and controversial information available in such an accessible and empowering way. With my new eyes of appreciation, I can see why I took it for granted that with *OBOS* on my bookshelf, I could answer almost any question a student could ask! It was precisely because the book is so carefully designed as a reference work in which information is easily found.

Over the years, the Collective heard from many who begged for *OBOS* to be more accessible to women who don't read at the college level. They also heard from others (including me) who asked for more science. In response, they have pleased us all, by making the page-by-page content of the book more accessible, while providing more detailed supplemental materials on the *OBOS* website, highlighting additional resources throughout the book, and supplying ten pages of recommended resources (websites, books) and thirty-two of endnotes (instead of footnotes throughout the text, which put off some readers). Easily understood graphics and charts that

illustrate or summarize complicated material, highlighted boxes containing some of the most thought-provoking material, and *OBOS's* continued use of photographs of "real" women all work together to make the material alive and appealing. What a feat, to have made evidence-based scientific information and political material so accessible and enticing!

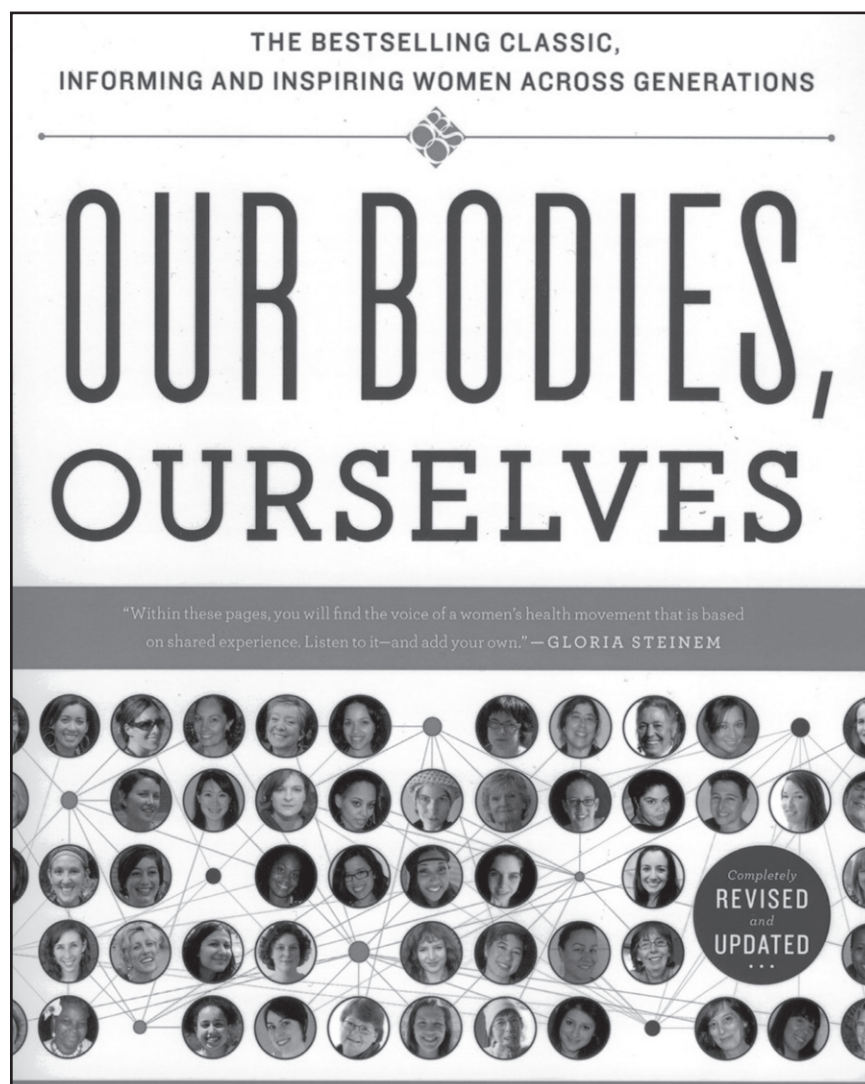
health movements. It is impossible to think of any other specific "product" that better represents the processes, issues, and achievements of feminist movements. *OBOS* has a unique role to play in teaching about movement history.

The first edition (then called *Women and Their Bodies*, a stapled

newsprint booklet that came out in 1970) was collectively written by a small group of women who worked together to prepare a women's health workshop and a course. In the consciousness-raising process so crucial in that stage of the women's movement, each piece was shared, discussed, strongly debated, re-researched, rewritten, and re-discussed. From its beginning, the book was meant as an organizing tool for getting women together to find their own voices and actions for social change. The 1970 introduction explains:

So after a year and much enthusiasm and

hard individual and collective thinking and working, we're publishing these papers. They are not final. They are not static. They are meant to be used by our sisters to increase



***OBOS* and USA Women's Health Movements**

The history of *OBOS* is simultaneously a history of women's liberation movements and of modern women's

consciousness about ourselves as women, to build our movement, to begin to struggle collectively for adequate health care, and in many ways they can be useful to you. One suggestion to those of you who will use these papers to teach others: the papers in and of themselves are not very important. They should be used as a tool which stimulates discussion and action, which allows for new ideas and for change.⁶

Most students today will find *OBOS* fascinating and relevant to their own lives. But it takes a good teacher to help them “discover” how revolutionary it was for a group of non-medical women to develop their own expertise about the body and the medical system, to raise crucial issues about sexuality and reproduction and who controls women’s bodies, to totally question doctor-patient relationships, and — most of all — to produce women-centered, empowering information in the context of the sexism and medicalization of the early 1970s.

Students have always enjoyed the assignment that asks them to interview their mothers about their childbirth experiences and the many social, economic, and political factors that influenced their mothers’ choices about the process. In the same way, students will be able to interview their mothers, grandmothers, and other older women about *OBOS* (or women’s health movements more generally) about how this book and women’s movements influ-

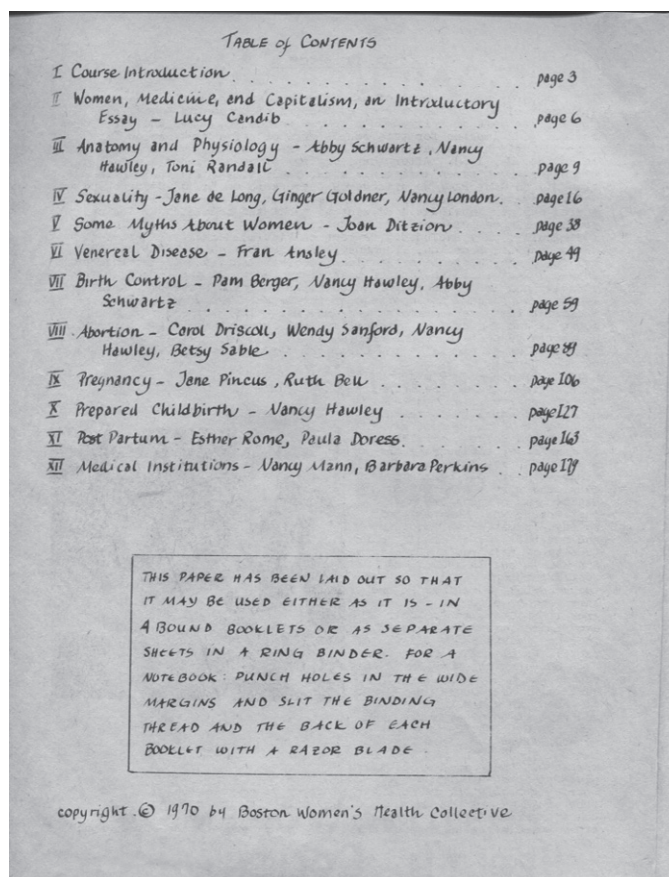
enced both women’s relationships to the health system and the politics of information.

OBOS itself grew out of women’s liberation; it then influenced and became a voice of the movement. Each new edition reflects the intersections of women’s movements with wider social, political, and cultural factors. An ambitious, exciting assignment for a group

ways different editions of *OBOS* did or did not cover menstruation activism issues with wider political issues that had or had not changed between editions. In early editions, commercial menstruation products were welcomed, and associated with freedom and liberation. The Collective would later become a leader in the fight for safer commercial menstruation products and in campaigns to standardize tampon absorbency ratings and require Toxic Shock Syndrome warnings on tampons, but there were years when its most radical critique of the menstruation industry was discussed in a separate *Menstruation* brochure but did not yet appear in the book. Bobel’s tracing of *OBOS*’s coverage of menstruation product controversies reflects the complex ways the book and the Collective have carefully managed both “leading” the movement and “reflecting” it:

The 1979 revised and expanded *OBOS* included new information drawn from the brochure created just two years earlier, but the depth and nascent skepticism were missing. This inconsistency is curious. It is possible that the brochure,

distributed on request singly and in packets, was deemed a more appropriate medium through which to attack the FemCare industry. *OBOS*, heralded as evidence based and level headed, had quickly grown into a resource on which women could rely, a compendium of trusted information. Perhaps the brochure, with its limited circulation, was seen as a more appropri-



or classroom could be to investigate how any one topic was covered differently in different editions of *OBOS*. In keeping with *OBOS*’s goal of always addressing topics within the context of wider social, economic, and political factors, one goal of such an assignment (and of class discussion about it) would be to untangle the wider social changes that were occurring in the time between *OBOS* editions. Chris Bobel has provided an extremely useful model for how to do this.⁷ Bobel ties in the

ate place to do more confrontational activism.⁸

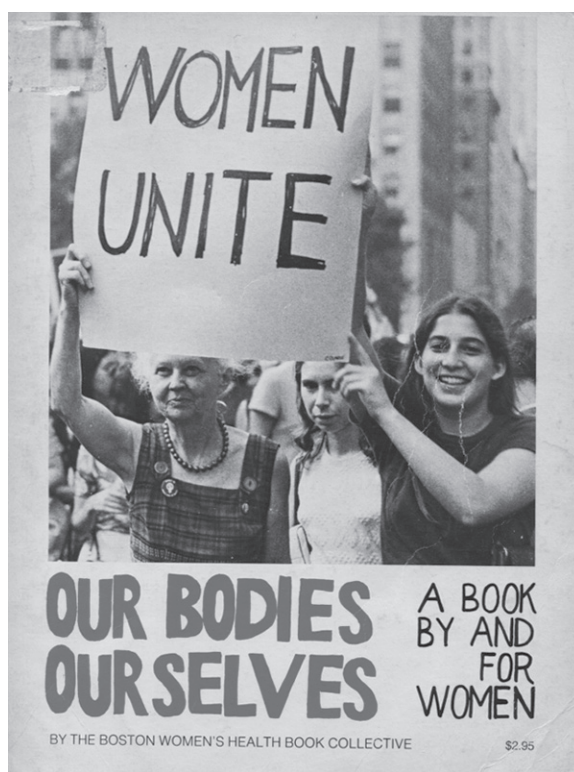
By the 1984 edition, *OBOS* criticized both the FDA and the FemCare industry in much stronger language and explored alternatives (especially the sponge, at that stage) to commercial products.

***OBOS* and Global Women's Health**

Often called the bible of women's health, *OBOS* has had a huge impact around the world in ways that few Americans have known.⁹ *OBOS's* global readership is estimated at twenty million, and different forms of the book are available in more than twenty-five languages. *OBOS's* "movement" across borders and cultures has intentionally been about women — wherever they are — using the production of women's health knowledge to empower themselves and to organize for social change.

The politics of knowledge represented by *OBOS* not only allowed it to cross the borders of class, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and generation within the United States, but it also enabled what was otherwise a local product — a typically U.S. book — to travel. One of the unique features of *OBOS* was that its content, form, and politics did not remain intact in the course of border crossings. It invited women across the globe to rewrite the book and, ultimately, transform it in ways that would make it accessible and relevant in their own social, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. This required something other than

a straightforward translation; it required a feminist translation strategy... The translators of *OBOS* invariably participated in a collective process of contextualizing and critically reworking the U.S. text, whereby they creatively used difference between their own and the U.S. context to open up controversial topics, celebrate local accomplishments



or suggest points for political coalitions. The same process of reading against the grain that had been instrumental to the widespread popularity of *OBOS* within the United States proved to be its most translatable feature outside the United States. In the course of translating *OBOS*, women from widely divergent locations were able to appropriate this collective, critical process

of knowledge production, using *OBOS* as an occasion for developing their own brand of oppositional feminist politics of knowledge.¹⁰

In the ninth edition, *OBOS* for the first time features information about its global partners and their work to produce culturally appropriate versions of the books in different countries. Videotaped fortieth-anniversary celebrations, with global partners speaking about their work, are available on the *OBOS* website, and the site itself gives increasing visibility to international work. Thus, it is now possible to explore *OBOS* and its use as an organizing tool in different countries in teaching about global health issues in our courses. Precisely because many students find women's health issues so personally engaging, global health issues work well as a topic for exploring how issues of the body, sexuality, reproduction, relationships with health systems, and the production of women's health knowledge are profoundly shaped by political and cultural issues. In addition to *OBOS's* own resources, I also highly recommend Kathy Davis's *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels across Borders*¹¹ as an accessible, theoretical way to approach this work.

When I was a much younger American women's health activist in London, marginally involved in the first British version of *OBOS*,¹² I was powerfully struck and politicized by recognizing my own narrow, "very American" perspective, as I thought through the challenges of writing a less individualistic, less personal-responsibility-oriented text that put the empha-

sis on social policies and on activism *within* the National Health Service, rather than on creating private feminist alternatives *outside* the health system. Similarly, using “translating *OBOS*” as the discussion topic, I have found students eager to discuss why the Latina/ Spanish version of *OBOS*, *Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas*¹³ (a collaboration of nineteen women’s organizations in the Americas and Caribbean, easily available in the USA) puts more emphasis on mutual help than on self-help, addresses feminism much more from within a social justice perspective, and puts more emphasis on the importance of religion and spirituality.

Recently, attention has been paid to the September 2011 simultaneous publication, for the first time, of *OBOS* in both Hebrew and Arabic,¹⁴ uniquely bringing together Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women for this project. I marvel at the stories told by these many *OBOS* global partnerships about how the political processes of creating empowering women’s health information have brought unlikely women together; and I contrast that to what the current Republican presidential campaign in this country has done. With an abundance of *OBOS* resources at hand, I now know that the question “When does the politics of women’s health bring people together, and when does it divide them?” will always be a good discussion starter.

OBOS for the Classroom

The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective is committed to making its resources available for women’s studies and other classrooms. If you have questions or ideas about using *OBOS* materials, you are encouraged to communicate directly with the Collective at office@bwhbc.org. A project is under way to provide incoming first-year college students with free copies of *OBOS*, and there is a special 70 percent dis-

count when books are ordered through health clinics (<http://www.ourbodies-ourselves.org/publications/clinics.asp>). And, as the back cover of *OBOS* reminds readers, “For a daily dose of health news, activism, and events, visit *Our Bodies, Our Blog* (www.ourbodiesourblog.org).”

Notes

1. Amy Allina, “The Spiral of Women’s Health Activism: A Report from the Global Symposium Celebrating 40 Years of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (*OBOS*),” *The Women’s Health Activist*, January/February 2012, pp. 4, 10. Videos of Loretta Ross and other speakers can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ourbodiesourselves#p/c/21193CA7E013C735>.

2. Linda Gordon, “Translating *Our Bodies, Ourselves*,” *The Nation*, May 29, 2008.

3. Lynn Comella, “The Women’s Body Bible ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’ Marks 40 Years,” *Las Vegas Weekly*, December 28, 2011.

4. Comella.

5. Judy Norsigian, informal conversation at NWSA Conference, Atlanta, November, 2011.

6. Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Women and Their Bodies (Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Course By and For Women)* (Boston: New England Free Press, 1971), p. 1.

7. Chris Bobel, “The Emergence of Menstrual Activism,” in *New Blood, Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp.42–64.

8. Bobel, p. 52.

9. An obvious exception was Linda Gordon’s excellent 2008 “Translating *Our Bodies, Ourselves*” article, referred to in the introductory paragraph and note 2.

10. Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 200–201.

11. Davis.

12. Boston Women’s Health Book Collective – British edition by Angela Phillips and Jill Rakusen, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Health Book By and For Women* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1978).

13. Por la Colectiva del Libro de Salud de las Mujeres de Boston, *Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2000).

14. Beth Schwartzapfel, “Together, and Apart: New Versions of *Our Bodies Ourselves* Are Connecting Israeli and Palestinian Women,” *Forward*, (October 28, 2011) p. 18.

[Nancy Worcester, Professor Emerita, Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, is a long-time women’s health writer, teacher, and organizer. She has been active in women’s health movements in the United States and England and studied them in China, Cuba, Grenada, and Nicaragua as well.]