

Feminist Body/Politics as World Traveller

Translating *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

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ABSTRACT Global feminism has been criticized as a form of cultural imperialism, whereby a white, western model of feminism is imposed upon women in non-western contexts under the banner of universal sisterhood. In order to provide this theoretical critique with some empirical grounding, this article focuses on the worldwide impact of one of the most influential books ever to be published in the US, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. This book not only had a decisive impact on how generations of American women felt about their bodies, their sexuality and their health, but it was translated and adapted in 20 languages, both within and outside Europe. The dissemination of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, particularly in the so-called 'third world', makes it a perfect site for exploring the possibilities and the pitfalls of the globalization of feminist knowledge. After showing how *Our Bodies, Ourselves* travelled and was adapted to meet the needs of women in specific contexts, conclusions are drawn about the viability of the 'feminism-as-cultural-imperialism' critique as well as about the empowering potential of transnational feminist alliances in the field of body/politics.

KEY WORDS body politics ♦ cultural imperialism ♦ feminist knowledge ♦ global feminism ♦ globalization ♦ translation ♦ women's health movement

INTRODUCTION

In 1969, at one of the first conferences organized by second-wave feminists in the US, a group of Boston women met in a workshop on 'Women and their Bodies'. Most of the participants were young, white, middle-class, college-educated women who had been active in the Civil Rights Movement or had helped draft resisters during the Vietnam War. For many of them, it was their first encounter with feminism and it was electrifying. They talked openly about their sexuality (a burning issue for

young feminists at that time), about their experiences with pregnancy and childbirth, and they shared their frustrations with physicians. The group, which later became known as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC), began to meet regularly. They collected information about their bodies and health and wrote discussion papers. A year later, this collection of papers was assembled and the first version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was born. Originally printed on newsprint by an underground publisher and selling for 75¢, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (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 access them), to vaginal infections, pregnancy and nursing. It combined a scathing critique of patriarchal medicine and the medicalization of women's bodies as well as 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. Since this first edition in 1970, OBOS has sold over 4 million copies and gone through 12 major updates (and some minor revisions). The last US edition, *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century*, was published in 1998. The book has been called a feminist 'Bible of women's health'. Named one of the most influential books of the past 25 years, OBOS has been compared to Dr Spock's childraising 'bible' in terms of its enormous impact in the US (Gordon and Thorne, 1996). It has received critical acclaim all over the US, winning many awards, including being voted one of the best young adult books by the American Library Association – paradoxically soon after the religious right launched a censorship attack, attempting to have OBOS banned from school libraries (Sanford and Doress, 1981).¹ OBOS managed, however, to weather these and other storms, including the Reagan years, the rise of the Moral Majority, and an increasingly anti-feminist backlash.

OBOS has had an enormous effect on how generations of North American women feel about their bodies and their health. For many women, the book was like a companion, kept in easy reach next to their beds or packed away in the bottom of suitcases for emergencies while travelling abroad. Dog-eared copies were passed from mother to daughter, shared with friends, or given to partners in need of some instruction about sexuality or childbirth. OBOS appears on reading lists for women's studies courses across the country. Although the book was written almost entirely by laywomen, it has had considerable impact on the provision of health care in the US. No family practice is complete without a copy of OBOS in the waiting room. Gynaecological examinations have become considerably more responsive to the patient's needs and hospital births have been

humanized with the addition of birthing rooms. *OBOS* was a catalyst for the international women's health movement as well as for various consumer and patient organizations in the US. It played a germinal role in campaigns against sterilization abuse, helped initiate hearings on the safety of silicone breast implants, and was instrumental in rehabilitating midwifery as a respectable profession in the US.

The success of *OBOS* in the US can be attributed, in part, to its ability to speak to a broad spectrum of women. While the original members of the BWHBC were feminist socialists, the book itself – with the possible exception of the first edition with its New Left-inspired, anti-capitalism rhetoric – has been refreshingly non-ideological. In an attempt to reach as many readers as possible, the authors shied away from political jargon. Although they emphasized the universal importance of feminism, their respect for individual women's experiences made them popular among women who did not necessarily consider themselves feminists. The common denominator was the female body, presumably a concern for all women, however diverse their experiences and social location. The focus on women's experiential knowledge as final arbiter allowed *OBOS* to be responsive to a diversity of women rather than limiting it to the experiences of the relatively homogeneous collective of original authors. This formula was expanded as the collective actively drew in different groups of women (lesbians, disabled women, young women, women of colour and low-income women) to help revise and update later versions of the book.

OBOS is a distinctively North American product in both content and format. It draws upon a long populist tradition of self-help with its emphasis on self-improvement and empowerment through knowledge (Schragar, 1993). Its matter-of-fact treatment of sexuality is a radical response to the Puritan legacy of the US and a popular culture, which make sex both repressed and omnipresent. The book's emphasis on issues involving informed and reproductive rights is unsurprising, given the current explosion of medical technologies and the rampant abuse of women's rights in the US health care sector (sterilization abuse, enforced Caesarean sections), not to mention the ongoing and often violent struggle for access to legal abortions. The critique of medicine found in *OBOS* is informed by the specific problems which women face in a highly medicalized culture where health is a consumer good and the health care system puts profit above the equitable distribution of care. In a context where the government cannot be counted on to meet the basic health care needs of all its citizens, the combination of self-help and consumer activism advocated by *OBOS* made perfect sense, providing a needed corrective to the US health care system and the ubiquitous commercialization of the female body. In short, *OBOS* is – as the old saying goes – 'as American as Mom and apple pie'.

Despite being a North American artefact, *OBOS* has, by no means, remained within the borders of the US. From the beginning, it has crossed borders to become an international bestseller. As of 2002, *OBOS* has been translated into 20 languages, including five other-language versions which have been openly inspired by and/or acknowledge *OBOS*, and an additional five groups or individuals are actively working on a translation/adaptation.²

The worldwide success of the book raises several sets of questions.

First, how could such a distinctively North American book become so popular in so many different contexts? What was its appeal for women in such different parts of the world?

Second, how was the book translated and adapted to address the specific concerns of women in different contexts? What did the translations leave out, what was added, and, more generally, what does the process of translation say about how feminist knowledge circulates?

Third, to what extent does the dissemination of *OBOS* around the world, but particularly in the so-called 'third world', make it just another western product (not unlike Nestlé's milk or Coca Cola) which has inundated less affluent nations, undermining indigenous women's struggles to improve their circumstances?

The history of *OBOS* raises questions about the possibilities (and pitfalls) of global feminism. Although the ideal of global feminism – as epitomized by Robin Morgan's (1984) feminist opus *Sisterhood is Global* – is shared by most US feminists as well as many feminists around the world, it is an ideal, which has also generated considerable critique. Feminist scholars like Cynthia Enloe, Chandra Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Sara Ahmed and others have criticized the notion of 'global feminism' as a kind of cultural imperialism. In their view, 'global feminism' is a euphemism for what is essentially a western – and, in most cases, a North American – version of feminism with its belief in universal sisterhood, its celebration of individuality, and its embeddedness in modernist paradigms of social action. It is imposed upon women in non-western contexts who have different problems, different struggles and different allegiances. It does not acknowledge the unequal global relations which shape women's lives in different settings. As a model, 'global feminism', like much of western imperialism, is little more than feminist missionary work, involving maternalistic intervention and salvation of less fortunate 'sisters' (Enloe, 1989).

The feminism-as-cultural-imperialism critique has three main arguments. First, US feminists are accused of creating a 'common world of women' scenario, in which women are treated as 'an already constituted, coherent group identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions' (Mohanty, 1997: 258). This assumption of unity provides the possibility of a global feminist subject – a 'we' uniting

different women living under highly disparate circumstances into the same feminist family. At the same time, however, it denies the historical specificity of women as sometimes subordinate or marginal, but sometimes powerful or central, depending upon their social location and local power networks. Women are not a unified powerless group, nor are they powerless in the same way. The assumption that 'we' are victims of the same kinds of oppression and that patriarchy operates in similar ways across national borders neglects historical and material differences in women's situations, which give rise to different concerns and require different political struggles. As Kaplan (1996) has noted, this move has allowed some US (and European) feminists to avoid confronting painful class or racialized differences among women in their own cultures, while obscuring the dominance of middle-class women around the globe. The relative ease and perhaps preference with which middle-class feminists around the world forge alliances with other women across borders rather than with their less affluent or marginalized 'sisters' at home attests to this.

Second, 'global feminism' has been criticized as a North American model of feminism, which homogenizes indigenous struggles of 'US and Third World feminists' (Mohanty, 1997). In their attempt to stake out the world, white, middle-class, or western feminists have conveniently 'forgotten' that they are just one group among many (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997). Under the 'universal' banner of global feminism, a western model of feminism is propagated, whereby primacy is given to the individual woman and her struggles to realize her potential. Feminist interventions are centred upon women gaining entrance in the public domain. Drawing upon modernist ideals of liberal individualism and equal opportunity, women's advancement is linked to access to economic resources, vocational training and scientific knowledge. Within this modernist narrative, women from 'developing' countries appear to be underprivileged and mired in tradition. They need to be 'brought into' modernity with the help of global feminism (Ahmed, 2000). For women both within and outside the US who are struggling with the effects of racism and imperialism, such a model of feminism is often viewed with suspicion – as just another imperialist move from the West. It does not take into consideration the importance of family, community and alliances with other anti-imperialist social movements, which many women regard as integral to their own struggle for empowerment.

Third, 'global feminism' – at least in its US variant – has been criticized for creating an untenable division between centre and periphery, whereby US feminists are the 'movers and shakers' in the centre and women of the so-called third world are relegated to the 'periphery'. Women in non-western contexts are represented as oppressed victims of a despotic patriarchy in need of support and salvation by their more emancipated sisters in the West.

Feminist analyses that perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the west produce a corresponding set of universal images of the third world woman, images such as the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife and so on. These images exist in universal, ahistorical splendour, setting in motion a colonialist discourse that exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing first/third world connections. (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997: 272–3)

This kind of dualistic thinking not only obscures the disempowering conditions under which many women in the 'centre' live, but it fails to do justice to the struggles of women in other parts of the world who grapple continuously and with considerable creative agency with the oppressive contingencies of their lives. It ignores long-standing traditions of feminist opposition outside the US; indigenous women's groups contest, but also adopt and transform 'western' feminist ideas and practices to meet the demands of their local circumstances (Narayan, 1997).

In view of this critique, it is difficult to imagine how alliances between US feminists and feminists in non-western countries could be mutually empowering. However, on a more hopeful note, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) have proposed a model for what they call 'transnational feminist practices', which is based on difference rather than global sisterhood, a critique of modernity and oppositional practices rather than identity politics. In their book *Scattered Hegemonies*, they call for an analysis of the specific conditions ('scattered hegemonies') which structure women's lives in different locations rather than an assumption of a common condition of oppression. As a precondition for transnational feminist alliances, western notions of modernity need to be deconstructed and along with them, the collusion of western feminisms in their nation's histories of imperialism, genocide, slavery or colonialism. They provide examples of a 'politics of solidarity' between women which neither collaborate with Eurocentric feminism, nor work for the patriarchal power groups within local communities, but rather 'create affiliations between women from different communities who are interested in examining and working against the links that support and connect very diverse patriarchal practices' (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994: 26). As Sara Ahmed (2000), arguing in a similar vein, puts it, transnational feminist alliances are best regarded as a 'strange encounter' between women who are *both* radically different *and* already linked through the ubiquitous and contradictory processes of globalization. The differences between us as well as the possibility of meeting one another necessitate a dialogue – a dialogue which 'must take place, precisely *because* we don't speak the same language' (Ahmed, 2000: 180).

Through strange encounters, transnational feminist communities may be formed by working with what fails to be made into a collective identity

(such as 'global woman'), that is, by remaking *what it is that we may yet have in common*. (Ahmed, 2000: 181; emphasis in the original)

In this article, I use *OBOS* as a case for assessing the pitfalls, but also the possibilities of 'global feminism'. The feminism-as-cultural-imperialism critique has been important in deconstructing the notion of universal sisterhood and replacing it with a diversity of local feminisms. It has made western feminists more conscious of their tendency to engage in what Donna Haraway (1991) calls the 'god trick' – taking on a disembodied, transcendent, unmediated position, ostensibly unmarked by sexuality, class, 'race' or nation. It has also paved the way for thinking about transnational feminist alliances, which are based on mutual understanding and empowerment. While I share this critique, it is my contention that it tends to leave the unpredictability and messy realities of feminist practices across national borders unaddressed. It is unclear how concrete US-based feminist projects actually cross borders, how encounters between western and non-western women's groups take shape, and how these projects might be assessed in terms of their imperialistic tendencies. To the end of providing the feminism-as-cultural-imperialism critique with some empirical grounding, I, therefore, propose taking *OBOS* as a 'test case'.³ As 'world traveller', it provides a unique opportunity to assess the pitfalls of global feminism or, alternatively, as I argue, the unexpected possibilities of transnational alliances for the circulations of feminist knowledge and body/politics.

OBOS ABROAD

Initially, the BWHBC did not anticipate that *OBOS* would be such an international success – or all the work that this success would entail. Norma Swenson, one of the founders, remembers only too well how surprised they all were at the book's popularity in the US. 'It took us by surprise.' But she also recalls thinking how 'utterly absurd' when one of the members of the collective joked that someday *OBOS* would sell a million copies and be translated into Chinese. 'We all had this romantic attachment to Chinese women back then.' None of the original members of the collective took the prediction seriously. However, by the mid-1970s, *OBOS* had already sold well over a million copies (nearly 2 million) and, by the late 1990s, it had been translated into 18 languages, including Chinese.

The travels of *OBOS* fall into three stages: from the US to publisher-based translations in Western Europe in the 1970s to 'inspired' adaptations in Asia, Africa and the Middle East to the more recent collaborative projects sponsored by foundations, particularly in so-called 'third world' countries and Eastern Europe.

FROM THE US TO WESTERN EUROPE

The *first* translations of *OBOS* began to appear in Western Europe throughout the 1970s with 'pirate' editions published in Japan in 1975 and Taiwan in 1976.⁴ By the early 1980s, the book had already been translated, adapted or had inspired similar books in Italy (1974), Denmark (1975), France (1977), Britain (1978), Germany (1980), Sweden (1980), Greece (1981), the Netherlands (1981) and Spain (1982). By this time, the US women's movement was in full swing and there was a growing demand for translations of US feminist work in Europe. European women's groups and individual feminists interested in translating the book sought contact with the collective, and European publishing houses were increasingly interested in taking on what had already proved to be a successful bestseller in the US. Members of the collective remember being overwhelmed by the correspondence from abroad. Information began to reach them about the exploitative conditions under which the translations were undertaken. In France, the translators not only adapted the book on an unpaid basis, but also were not even paid for their photographs. Anxious that feminists translating *OBOS* should be reimbursed for their work, two members of the BWHBC undertook a trip to Europe in 1976, establishing contacts with the translators and talking to publishers. In addition to their concerns about the welfare of the translators, the BWHBC was not always happy about what happened to their book. In Italy, the publisher put a beautiful, leggy model on the cover of *Noi e il Nostro Corpo* and the Dutch version, *Je lichaam je leven*, had a 'lurid cartoon' ('We made them tear it off, cover by cover, and replace it with a plain red cover with black lettering.'). In the Taiwan 'pirate' edition, the collective discovered after-the-fact that the publisher had deleted entire sections on sexuality ('Had we known, we would never have let it happen.').

Based on these encounters, the BWHBC began to negotiate contracts for foreign editions, which stipulated that only local feminist groups could translate *OBOS*. All foreign-earned book royalties would return to these groups for use in women's health projects. They developed a policy of working through country-based women's groups when signing a contract with foreign publishers. The BWHBC's main concern was to ensure that feminists would have editorial control over the translation and could adapt the book to fit their own social, political and cultural context. Mindful of their own experiences with censorship in the US, they were also concerned that the 'problem' chapters on controversial subjects like abortion, lesbian relationships, or masturbation would not be deleted by conservative, male-dominated publishing houses. To this end, they began to establish guidelines, which stated that no foreign adaptation could use their title if it did not include at least some part of every chapter from the original book.

Many of the translators corresponded with the BWHBC, informing them of difficulties or asking for help. Some sent a detailed account of the proposed changes or came to Boston themselves to visit with the collective. Advice came in the form of practical suggestions: how to organize a translation collective, how to include as many women's voices as possible, or how to promote the book once it was finished ('Always go to interviews in twos and never engage in a debate where your opponent is a physician!'). While the BWHBC was supportive of the groups working on the book, they respected their autonomy. A position paper written by Norma Swenson following her trip to Europe in 1976 warns other collective members to be prepared for differences in the French edition of *OBOS*, given the 'strange picture' she had received of the 'dominance of psychoanalysis over current French feminism'.⁵ She goes on to argue for carefully distinguishing between what 'might really represent a disagreement with our basic philosophy' and decisions by the translators, which should be supported and even defended by the BWHBC.

ESCAPING TO THE EAST AND SOUTH

By the mid-1980s, *OBOS* had gone into its *second* stage of border crossing, 'escaping to the East and the South', as one founder put it, 'often in someone's backpack'.⁶ Stories abound about how dog-eared copies of *OBOS* were taken along on trips to South America, Africa, or Asia and left behind for local women to use. Many collective members recalled how the book turned up in strange places: a small village in Mexico or a French translation in rural Senegal. Translations or adaptations began to be published outside Europe: a Hebrew version for Israel appeared in 1982 and a Russian translation in 1995. Several books on women's health were published which were inspired by *OBOS* without being direct translations: Arabic (1991); Telugu (1991); and South African (1996).

From the outset, *OBOS* was translated for a Spanish-speaking audience in the US. A group of Latina women (Amigas Latinas en Accion Pro-Salud, or ALAS), working under the auspices of the BWHBC produced the first edition of *Nuestros cuerpos, nuestras vidas* in 1977. Although initially intended for Hispanic communities in the US, *NCNV* gradually flowed into Latin American countries where the demand for adaptations quickly grew. By 1987, the BWHBC had distributed more than 50,000 copies of *NCNV* throughout the hemisphere.

The history of the Spanish translation is a complicated one. Elisabeth McMahon, one of the founders of ALAS, remembers being tremendously bothered by the early Spanish translation, which was not only poorly translated ('insulting to Latin American women') but also written in ways which 'were very much a white woman's dominant world view'. It

became the 'mission' of McMahon and the other members of ALAS to adapt the book in such a way that it would be appropriate for the diversity of women living in Latin America, South America and the Caribbean.

By the 1980s, women's health had become an international issue and the international feminist movement was in full swing. International feminist conferences were held in Mexico City (1975), Rome (1977), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), San Jose in Costa Rica (1987) and Cairo (1994), to name just a few. Workshops devoted to health were invariably part of the programme and the BWHBC's global network grew in leaps and bounds. In the interests of building networks and supporting new translation projects, collective members continued to visit women's groups and health centres in New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh, China and India.

For years, the collective had distributed copies of *OBOS* as well as 'health packets' with the latest information on birth control, drug experimentation in third world countries, or controversies about Nestlé's milk to women's groups all over the world. For the rapidly expanding international women's health movement, these health packets were their introduction to *OBOS* and kindled the desire of feminists in Africa, Asia and the Middle East to translate the book.

It was clear by now that *OBOS* was speaking to a much larger audience than just the US and Western Europe. By 1984, the book had nearly doubled in size (from 376 pages in 1976 to 625 pages in 1984). Foreign publishers were increasingly reluctant to take on the translation of such an opus and fewer Western European feminist groups were willing to embark on revising a book, which was regarded as a relic of 1970s feminism. Subsequently, most of the early Western European editions went out of print.⁷ In contrast to the waning interest for *OBOS* in Western Europe, translations of the book in postcolonial and post-Communist countries were in great demand. Confronted with requests for foreign editions in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe and unable to finance such projects within their regular budget, the BWHBC began looking for outside funding to help these new translation/adaptation projects.

OBOS IN THE POST-COMMUNIST WORLD

By the *third* phase of *OBOS*, translations or adaptations were being undertaken exclusively in the so-called third world with very little involvement of publishing houses. By the late 1990s, translations were completed or underway in Senegal, Thailand, People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Armenia and Nepal as well as Russia and Eastern Europe (Serbia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania). The process of translating *OBOS* involved a collaboration between local women's groups or health workers and foundations

(Ford, Noyes, Soros Open Society Institute, Global Fund for Women, for example) who at least partially sponsored or funded the publication.

In the wake of the demise of Communist regimes, US-based philanthropic foundations began to support projects aimed at promoting feminism in Asian and Eastern European countries. Soros, for example, contacted women's groups in the US, asking them to recommend feminist literature for translation in Eastern European countries.⁸ Feminist groups in Eastern European countries were then asked to make lists of books they would like to see translated. *OBOS* was invariably on the top of the list. Once Soros agreed to fund the translations, local women's groups (like a network working against male sexual violence in Belgrade or a gender studies centre in Gdansk) undertook the translation.

The Ford Foundation provided funds for a direct translation of *OBOS* in Mandarin Chinese. The official version, from which government censors had deleted chapters on lesbian sexuality, masturbation and pornography, was published in 1998 with considerable official fanfare. The first 15,000 copies were sold out before the book left Beijing. However, this was only the beginning. The Women's Health Network began the arduous process of producing an unofficial version, which would include the officially deleted sections and be adapted to address the specific concerns of Chinese women.

Similar processes whereby an 'official' (i.e. censored) translation was made and subsequently adapted by women's groups occurred in Thailand and Indonesia.

In some cases, individual women or women's groups approached the collective and, together, they looked for ways to translate the book (in Armenia, Kuwait, Iran, Latvia and Vietnam, for instance). These projects often faced nearly insurmountable obstacles in producing the translation, ranging from cutbacks in electricity (Senegal) to publishing houses going bankrupt (Russia) to general economic crises (Indonesia, South Korea) to conflict situations (Iran, Eastern Europe). They were invariably dependent on foundations for providing necessary funds for computers, travel and even paper as well as on the voluntary labour of women with little time and fewer resources. The support of the BWHBC was crucial in setting up and maintaining contacts among the translators, providing information and practical advice, getting funding and organizing meetings at international women's health conferences where translators from all over the world could meet and compare notes (see Yanco, 1996).

In conclusion, three decades after its inception in the US, *OBOS* had become a feminist export product. After taking Western Europe by storm, it crossed over into Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America, where it continues to gain in popularity. While the ultimate success of the more recent projects depends on a combination of local feminists' ability to organize and sustain the difficult and time-consuming process of

adapting the book as well as being able to get sufficient funding from foundations, their very existence indicates that *OBOS* continues to spark interest among feminists around the world.

ADAPTING *OBOS*: CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

I now turn to the second question which I raised at the outset of this article: namely, how *OBOS* – a ‘typically North American book’ – was translated to address the specific concerns of women living outside the US. From the beginning, it was clear that *OBOS* could not simply be ‘translated’, but would need to be ‘adapted’ in order to address the needs and experiences of women in different parts of the world. The BWHBC advocated that local feminist groups rather than publishers take on the necessary task of adapting the book. As the various translation/adaptations of the book piled up, the collective divided them into several categories, based on the degree to which the translation resembled the original book.⁹

Direct Translations

Strictly speaking, very few of the foreign editions could even be considered a direct translation – that is, a verbatim rendition of the original in another language. Even the early books initiated by foreign publishing houses tended to delete or ‘sanitize’ parts of the original book (usually the controversial chapters on lesbian sexuality, masturbation and abortion). For example, the Taiwan edition (1973) not only omitted the lesbian chapter, but also toned down all references to homosexuality in other chapters.¹⁰ In Japan, as late as 1990, customs officials seized copies of the book as ‘pornography’ (representations of genitalia and pubic hair were cited as particularly offensive), sparking a lively debate in the local newspapers against ‘western-style feminism’.¹¹ Chinese publishers were concerned about topics like prostitution and safe sex, which they considered obscene under Chinese law. Moreover, they found it difficult to square China’s ‘one child policy’ with the women’s rights orientation of *OBOS* – a critique which the translators strategically countered with the argument that the book was not *against* family planning, but rather *for* a more ‘patient-centred’ policy which was ‘compatible with women’s needs’.¹²

Direct translations were produced in some cases simply because resources were too limited to do a full-fledged adaptation. This was the fate of the Spanish version of *OBOS*, which for many years had to be content with a little ‘window dressing’ (e.g. including photographs of Hispanic women). Given the enormous demand for the book in Latin

America, however, a translation – even a bad one – was considered better than nothing. For several projects, a direct translation was a matter of expedience; it was the only way to get funding from foundations which were reluctant to subsidize the more intensive process of adapting the book. The translation became a ‘dummy copy’, which was subsequently passed on to local women’s groups who proceeded to rework it, often without funding and at great personal hardship (Thailand, Indonesia, China).

Translation/Adaptations

In contrast to direct translations, the majority of the foreign editions fell under the category translation/adaptation. The original *OBOS* was reworked and contextualized in accordance with the translators’ notions of what was appropriate, useful, or necessary in their particular situation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, changes in *OBOS* were fairly minimal, thus reflecting a similarity in feminist issues between the US and Western Europe. For example, the Swedish translators felt that *OBOS* placed too much emphasis on sexuality. ‘We had a ten-year advantage over the US where the sexuality debate only began in the late sixties.’¹³ The Dutch translators rejected the division between lesbian and heterosexual relationships as too ‘strict’. It did not fit the Dutch context, nor did it correspond with their own feeling that homosexuality and heterosexuality are a ‘continuum with lots of feelings in between’.¹⁴ The Dutch edition also includes lengthy passages on feminist therapy – a subject, which was considered of particular relevance in the Netherlands.¹⁵ The German adaptation, *Unser Körper, Unser Leben*, was the subject of considerable dispute among feminist groups, who felt the book was not ‘radical’ enough. It was much too ‘fixated’ on childbearing and breast-feeding. As one translator notes in a letter to the BWHBC, ‘we prefer to influence debates in the direction of HOW we have our children and IF we choose to have any. But this is not the only destiny for us. Don’t you agree?’¹⁶

The foreign versions invariably had to take differences in abortion laws and histories of feminist struggle around reproductive health issues into account. In some countries, abortion was still illegal or controversial for religious reasons. The context not only affected how information was presented, but which issues needed to be emphasized. For example, the Japanese translators were especially concerned with unnecessary gynaecological surgery, given a recent spate of Caesarean sections in hospitals or a long tradition of pronatalist policies made infertility an important concern for the Romanian adaptation.

The original chapter on the health care system always had to be rewritten or substantially reworked. While most translators adopted the *OBOS*

anti-medicalization approach and agreed that medical expertise needed to be debunked, differences in European welfare systems shaped the critique provided in the foreign editions. In countries with national health systems and guaranteed medical insurance, criticisms tended to be more muted and directed at improving existing facilities rather than mobilizing consumer networks. The translators of the UK version noted that British physicians were less likely to prescribe hormone replacement therapy for menopausal women or perform radical procedures for breast cancer than their North American counterparts. In general, they seemed less concerned about how to force doctors to be more responsive to women's needs than in how to preserve a NHS constantly threatened with extinction.¹⁷

Thus, for most of the translation/adaptations, the structure, content and 'spirit' of the original *OBOS* was maintained. Changes entailed deleting an occasional paragraph, adding an explanatory footnote, substituting photographs and experiences of local women, and providing practical information on health care services. An exception is the Spanish edition, which underwent a much more radical and comprehensive transformation in its adaptation for Latin America. The 'we women' of the original *OBOS* was problematized, while the experience of colonialism and US imperialism shared by Latina women was emphasized. The focus of the new *NCNV* shifted from the individual woman and her ability to take care of herself to the importance of family and community for women's health and well-being. The term 'self-help', so prevalent in the original *OBOS*, was banished in favour of a more community-oriented term, 'mutual help'. As Ester Shapiro, the visionary coordinator of the Latin American adaptation put it: 'People need to understand that it's your relationships that keep you well . . . energy for collective action is part of becoming healthy.'¹⁸ For this reason, the translators proposed a much more comprehensive vision of health – not just reproductive issues, but education, sanitation, work conditions, adequate food and shelter, social support and quality of life were treated as primary ingredients of women's health. They reasoned that in countries where medical care can help only about 10 percent of people's health concerns, it made no sense to devote a whole chapter to the medical system and opted instead for a chapter on how to make connections with community groups and feminist organizations.

Thus, the Spanish adaptation of *OBOS* for Latin America involved a general overhaul and restructuring of the original book, with 30 percent of the text being rewritten and the rest translated. The 'political' chapters were moved to the front ('You don't begin a book for Latin American women with a chapter on body image.'). Particular attention was paid to subjects, which had been neglected in *OBOS*, like religion ('How can you have a Spanish book without mentioning the Catholic Church?'),

traditional healing and political movements. The result is a more politically self-conscious and participatory book – ‘nothing like the encyclopedia on women’s health, which *OBOS* has become’.¹⁹

‘Inspired’ Versions

In some cases, the decision was made not to translate or adapt *OBOS*, but rather to use it as a source of inspiration and write a new book, using the same process as the original. For example, in Denmark, a group of feminists were so enthusiastic about the original book that they could not resist writing their own. They set up a collective along the same lines as the BWHBC and proceeded to talk about their bodily experiences and put together position papers on various health issues to be discussed in the group. The book was published in 1975 under the title *Kvinde Kend din Krop* and went through four revisions, all under the auspices of the original Danish collective.²⁰

With the rapid expansion of the feminist movement in India throughout the 1980s, the Hyderabad Women’s Health Group decided to produce a handbook on women’s health in Telegu (the second most widely spoken language in India). It was to be similar to *OBOS*, but ‘grounded in Indian women’s experiences and concerns’. Under the title *A Hundred Thousand Doubts About Women’s Health* (1991), the book became widely used among feminist groups and NGOs in India.

Several years later, another ‘inspired’ book appeared on another continent – *The South African Women’s Health Book* (1996). The coordinator, a US expatriate living in Johannesburg, knew about *OBOS* and wanted to create a similar health book ‘by and for South African women’. She helped set up the Women’s Health Project with other feminist activists and health workers. The process of making the book resembled the North American counterpart, with chapters written by different women, read by special interest groups for accuracy or ‘tone’, and tested in focus groups, organized throughout South Africa. The result was a fairly weighty tome, which was criticized for being ‘such a thick book’ that many South African women would never be able to read it. However, the authors countered this reproach with a reminder that the book was meant to be read aloud and discussed (‘We carry the Bible all the time. So it doesn’t matter if it’s a thick book, if it’s helpful.’).²¹

While the aforementioned books were fairly similar to *OBOS* in terms of structure and content, the Egyptian ‘inspired’ book, published by the Cairo Women’s Health Book Collective in 1991, was not. While the group acknowledged that they had ‘borrowed’ much of the philosophy of *OBOS* for their book and made frequent references to their ‘Boston sisters’ (Hill, 1994: 18), they also insisted that *OBOS* was ‘couched in a cultural context alien to most Egyptian and Arab women’ and reflected the ‘priorities of

American women' (Farah, 1991: 16). They wanted to produce their own book, which would take the Egyptian and Arab cultural context into account and emphasize the problems facing women in the Arab world. It is worth looking at their book in more detail, in part because they have written eloquently about what makes their book different from the North American *OBOS* (Farah, 1991; Ibrahim and Farah, 1992; see also Hill, 1994), and also because it provides a good example of some of the possibilities and limitations of global feminism.

THE EGYPTIAN CASE

Hayāt al-mar'a wa'sihatuhā (translated as 'The Life of a Woman and Her Health') was explicitly written for a non-western audience. The authors assumed not only that Egyptian women, in particular, and Arab women, in general, have their own health problems, but also that feminist movements have their own histories of struggle and battles to fight, making both the issues and the rhetoric in which they are framed different from one context to another.

Many Egyptian women see themselves as fighting not so much against patriarchy or local oppressors, but against the Egyptian government, western cultural and economic domination and global forces, which impose harsh economic policies and alien lifestyles (El Dawla et al., 1998: 103). While the Cairo Women's Health Book Collective clearly wanted to borrow from US feminism, they were also shaped by the prevailing sentiment of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism of contemporary political movements in Egypt (Al-Ali, 2000). Secular in orientation, they were also part of a culture where the Islamist movement enjoys considerable popularity and where most women, whether Muslim or Copt, were religious and where tradition is the locus of the most salient norms by which women are judged (El Dawla et al., 1998: 75).

In this context, the book was bound to be controversial and it required considerable juggling to make a book which would be culturally sensitive, not offend religious feelings, but would still sustain a strong commitment to women's rights (Ibrahim and Farah, 1992: 7). The result was a delicate balancing act whereby contradictory messages were presented, often side by side. The flexible strategy adopted by the Cairo group in deciding whether or not to include issues and how to address them is illustrated by the following three examples.

The first concerns the Cairo group's stance towards medicine. Like the original *OBOS*, the Egyptian book was critical of medical knowledge and practice. However, they described medicine explicitly as 'western'. While the authors support women's right to have access to all medical knowledge about their bodies and health (the cover of the book shows a young

woman with bare arms, western attire and flowing hair peering intently through a microscope), they are also critical of western medicine, which is often authoritarian and disrespectful of women's needs. Underprivileged women often experience demeaning treatment when they enter a 'modern' clinic in Egypt. Physicians trained in western medicine are often contemptuous of Islamic codes of modesty which make women reluctant to be examined by male doctors, or discount the importance of virginity for many unmarried women, who fear that their hymen will break during a gynaecological examination (Hill, 1994: 4–5).

The second example concerned the authors' treatment of sexuality. While the explicit mention of sexuality and sexual enjoyment was a revolutionary eye-opener for the US readers of *OBOs*, sexuality was not a particularly controversial subject in Egypt, where women's sexual pleasure is taken for granted and where women's networks have always allowed extensive talk about the details of sex. However, sexuality outside marriage is entirely off limits, let alone between women. Although the Cairo group took up the issue of lesbianism because it is 'regarded as a path toward liberation by many women in the west', they ultimately decided not to include it in their book, as it would have invoked certain censure from religious authorities for something which was not a 'viable life style' in Egypt (Farah, 1991: 17). Another 'hot item' – masturbation – was treated in a similarly ambivalent way. On the one hand, Egyptian readers were reassured that it was 'natural' for their children to masturbate. On the other hand, mothers were encouraged to tell their children to go out and play ('do something worthwhile') rather than masturbate. Rape was also controversial. Some group members felt that women brought rape upon themselves through immodest clothing, while others did not like the idea of attributing violence against women only to men (what about daughter-in-law abuse or female genital mutilation?). Ultimately, rape was included, but in a comprehensive chapter on violence against women perpetrated by both sexes.

The third example was female genital excision and, more generally, the issue of how to deal with 'cultural traditions'. The issue of female genital excision has, not surprisingly, stirred considerable debate both within and outside Egypt. As the issue which western feminists invariably focus on in connection with Muslim women, the Cairo group agonized about how to take a stand against it without alienating their readers who had an understandable aversion to the attitude of western feminists. After much discussion, they took a stand against the practice, providing information on the psychological and social damage which it entails. However, they also explained the cultural context, which allows for the continuation of the practice among Egyptian women, particularly in rural settings.²² As the book was being tested on different groups of Egyptian women, the authors routinely took along an imam who, in the course of the

discussion, would stand up and announce that there was nothing in the Q'uran which required female genital excision, thereby lending the book legitimacy among religious women.

REARTICULATING FEMINIST BODY/POLITICS

At the outset of this article, I raised the question of how the globalization of *OBOS* should be viewed against the backdrop of the critique that 'global feminism' is little more than an imperialistic move by primarily white, middle-class US feminists to establish their brand of feminism as universal, while ignoring the experiences, circumstances and struggles of women in other parts of the world. Having explored how *OBOS* travelled and was adapted by different women in different locations, a picture emerges which shows that feminist knowledge circulates in surprising ways. Moreover, it is a picture, which is considerably less diabolical and more optimistic than the feminism-as-cultural-imperialism critique would suggest.

The cultural imperialism critique assumes that western feminists are claiming a shared identity and common oppression among all women, that a western model of feminism is imposed which erases the specificities ('scattered hegemonies') of indigenous women's circumstances, and that an untenable divide is created between 'emancipated' feminists in the West and their downtrodden sisters in the rest of the world.

Although early versions of *OBOS* were written in the spirit of universal sisterhood which belonged to the US second-wave feminist discourse of the time, the universalism inherent in this model was also undercut by the book's claim that each woman was the ultimate authority over her own bodily experiences. The authors of *OBOS* were, to be sure, all white, middle-class feminists who, in their own words, could not pretend to 'speak for' all women. Their intention was rather to 'inspire' other women to write their own books. The translations which emerged in the three decades following the first edition of *OBOS* indicate that it was not the notion of 'global sisterhood' which travelled (although some of the translation projects, as for example, the Egyptian collective, did refer to the BWHBC as their 'US sisters'). On the contrary, what travelled was *how* the original collective wrote the book. The image of a group of (lay)women collectively sharing knowledge about their embodied experiences seems to be what fired the imagination of women in different parts of the world and served as an invitation to do the same. While the notion of 'global sisterhood' creates a spurious universality, which denies differences among women, the process by which the original collective wrote their book could be taken up fairly easily by a diversity of women and adapted to their specific circumstances. It was the method of knowledge sharing

and not a shared identity as women which appeared to have a global appeal, making *OBOS* a case in point for a transnational feminist body/politics based on oppositional practices rather than identity politics (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994). (We feel that giving the rights to the book also shows a form of global sisterhood, a material form.)

While the original *OBOS* was a decidedly North American book, firmly wedded to modernist notions of individualism and equal rights feminism, in the process of travelling it underwent continuous and often dramatic revisions. *OBOS* was not simply 'consumed' by non-western feminists as a US export product. Despite limited finances and difficult working conditions, translators reframed and adapted *OBOS* to make it culturally and politically appropriate to their local circumstances. They were critical of the content and did not hesitate to make the book less individualistic or more explicitly political (as in the adaptation for Latin America). If the cultural discrepancies were too great – as was the case with the Egyptian version – the translation collective simply made their own book. This resulted in what Ahmed (2000) would call a 'strange encounter': the 'American-ness' of the book was explicitly drawn upon to promote women's rights locally, while the pervasive anti-American sentiment in the Arab world was acknowledged as a valid response to oppressive or paternalist foreign intervention. Each project, in fact, attested to the creative agency of translators in developing flexible and effective strategies for making their version of *OBOS* sensitive to the local political and cultural climate as well as to differences and schisms within their own feminist movements. The diversity in the translation projects show that feminist knowledge is not simply transferred from one context to another. It invariably requires reworking and contextualization. What is empowering or disempowering in one context is not necessarily so in another.

Although *OBOS* travelled from the 'West to the rest' and, in this sense, fits the trajectory described in the cultural imperialism critique, its dissemination does not fit neatly into the paradigm of US feminists at the 'centre' helping their 'sisters on the periphery'. The relations between the BWHBC and the translation projects were a complicated and ambivalent mixture of non-interventionism and interventionism, with both parties actively involved in the process. The BWHBC initially took a hands-off approach towards translations, jumping in only when necessary to do battle against exploitative publishers (France) or to save contentious topics like lesbianism or abortion from state censorship. However, as *OBOS* moved farther afield, they became even more flexible about changes in the content of the book as it became clear that ideologically charged issues presented often insurmountable problems for local women's groups, who had to worry about censorship of the entire book if controversial passages were included.²³ As translators struggled to

develop a book, which would address the needs of women in their local contexts, the BWHBC felt that it was necessary to become even *less* interventionist concerning the content and form of the translations. Paradoxically, however, they had to become *more* interventionist in helping women's groups from less affluent nations find resources and funding to get the book adapted and distributed. As Sally Whelan, who coordinated most of the later adaptations, put it: 'We were just glad when the book could get out at all and we did what we could to help.'²⁴ As the impact of *OBOS* dwindled within the US, the translation projects increasingly became the *raison d'être* of the book's continued existence. At this point in time, the translation projects might be viewed as the 'movers' and 'shakers' of *OBOS*, while the BWHBC has taken a backseat position as facilitator.

But – and this is my final argument – even if the BWHBC had wanted to impose their – admittedly North American – view of women's health on indigenous women's groups in other localities, one look at the actual process by which *OBOS* travelled should convince even the most committed critic of cultural imperialism that this would have been a 'mission impossible'. Perhaps the most salient feature of the globalization – or, more accurately – the global localization of *OBOS*²⁵ is the unpredictability by which the book moved, appearing unexpectedly and often inexplicably in strange places and, subsequently, taking on a 'life of its own'. Many contemporary scholars have been critical of how globalization has been theorized because a uniformity is implied which belies the uneven, contradictory and incomplete processes by which objects reappear in new contexts carrying some of their original values while acquiring new meanings (see, for example, Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; King, 1997). Stuart Hall (1997) advocates treating globalization as a set of open-ended processes in which, somewhat paradoxically, forms of local appropriation, opposition and resistance are going on at the same moment as cultural homogenization and absorption.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the most recent translation project: an *OBOS* for Tibetan nuns. This unlikely project emerged through a serendipitous encounter between a group of young nuns interested in knowing more about their bodies and improving their health and a Dutch self-help activist who gave a workshop on women's health at a conference for Buddhist women in Nepal. Two expatriate women – one from Spain and the other from Chile – had been staying with the nuns for several years and owned one of the proverbial dog-eared copies of the Spanish version of *OBOS*, *Nuestros cuerpos, nuestras vidas*, which became the basis for further workshops. A collaboration grew between these very different women from very different parts of the world, which ultimately resulted in another translation of *OBOS* – this time, in Nepali and Ladakhi.²⁶

In conclusion, during the past three decades *OBOS* has crossed many

borders and taken on many different shapes and forms. The history of its translations shows that the book has travelled in both predictable and surprising ways. It resembles what Stuart Hall (1996; cited in Chen, 1996) has called the continuous process of rearticulation and recontextualization, which is what the global circulation of cultural texts is all about. Translation is not and can never be a matter of taking a project from the west and transporting it fully formed to a new cultural space where it lives on in its originary state. Invariably some elements remain the same and certain concepts will be retained. However, the text is always rearticulated and in the process, meanings change and a new configuration of the original text emerges. This is precisely what has happened with *OBOS*. Or, as one collective member put it: you have the *book* and then there is the *life* of the book.²⁷

NOTES

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1. In a fundraising letter to his constituency, Reverend Jerry Falwell warned Moral Majority members to check their children's school libraries for *OBOS*, referring to it as 'obscene trash' and 'humanistic garbage'.
2. Much of the information on the translation/adaptations projects is taken from *Our Bodies, Ourselves in Many Languages: A Global History and Status Report*, which was compiled by the BWHBC in July 1998, the BWHBC website and updates from various staff members.
3. My analysis is based on oral history interviews with the BWHBC as well as several conversations focused specifically on translation/adaptation projects with Judy Norsigian, Ester Shapiro, Norma Swenson, Sally Whelan and Jennifer Yanco. I also spent the summer of 2000 in the archives of the Schlesinger Library and the BWHBC library going through minutes from meetings, correspondence with translators and publishers, internal papers, publications and proposals for foundation grants. I have been able to talk with some of the women involved with adapting the foreign editions and have, in some instances, been able to make use of what the translators have written about the adaptation process themselves.
4. One of the members of the collective remembers the first foreign women to contact them – two Japanese women suddenly appeared at 'one of our meetings in someone's living room'. They could hardly speak English, but had seen a copy of the book and wanted to translate it. It was very 'fluid' in the beginning – 'no contracts', one collective member remembers (interview with Pam Berger, 19 January 1999).
5. For those readers unfamiliar with this episode in feminist history, the term

Mouvement de Libération des Femmes was legally registered with a small splinter group calling itself *Psych et Po* (short for *Psychoanalyse et Politique*). This action was hotly contested by other feminist groups in France, who mobilized media support and enlisted Simone de Beauvoir to help them win their case. Ultimately, *Psych et Po* won the right to represent the women's movement.

6. Interview with Norma Swenson, 19 March 1999.
7. At present the only Western European versions of *OBOS* in print are in France, Germany and the UK.
8. Soros is an independent, non-profit organization which was founded by the philanthropist George Soros to promote the development of an open society, particularly in countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.
9. Although each foreign edition has its own translation story, I did not have access to all of them. However, for many of the adaptations, correspondence between the translators and the BWHBC was available. Translators usually kept the collective posted – at least in a cursory way – about how they adapted the book. They invariably sent copies of the finished version, which the collective sometimes gave to a critical reader. Translations often provide a preface with an explanation by the translators on how the book was adapted to fit their own contexts (German, Dutch, UK). The translators frequently gave interviews – in local newspapers or on visits in the US – in which they explained some of the difficulties they had encountered in doing the translation (China, Japan). And, finally, some of the translation projects wrote accounts themselves in which they reflected on the process of adapting *OBOS* (see, for example, Farah (1991) on the Egyptian version; Shapiro (1999) on the Latin American adaptation; Ogino with Nakanishi and Honda (2001) on the Japanese adaptation; Kotzeva (2001) and Slavova (2001) on the Bulgarian adaptation; and Yanco (1996)).
10. A sentence such as 'we don't all want to sleep together, but we don't want to limit our friendships because of fear of homosexuality' in the original became 'We don't say we agree with homosexuality.' Or, an anecdote of a woman in the bath stroking her clitoris (in the section 'Lovemaking') was cut, along with other references to touching – apparently a taboo subject.
11. Critics of censorship argued that the controversy should be seen as a symptom of Japan's history of isolationism and a denial of women's rights to communicate internationally (*Japan Times*, 3 September 1990).
12. Interview with Liu Bohong, coordinator and major translator of the Chinese translation, in the *Boston Globe*, 12 December 1998.
13. BWHBC minutes, September–December 1978.
14. In the preface of *Je lichaam je leven* (1975: 12).
15. Interestingly, therapy was a bone of contention in the BWHBC. Many of the members of the collective did not want to include information on psychotherapy at all as they felt it depoliticized women's problems and, therefore, had no place in a book aimed at empowering women.
16. BWHBC correspondence, 5 August 1977.
17. See Preface to the UK edition *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by Angela Phillips and Jill Rakusen (London: Penguin Books, 1978: 9–10).
18. Interview with Ester Shapiro, 24 February 1999.
19. Interview with Ester Shapiro, 24 February 1999.
20. When asked how the Danish book differed from the original *OBOS*, Gerd Winther, one of the members of the Danish collective, explained that it had

- become more and more experiential and grassroots. 'We were all professional women at the time – journalists, therapists, academics – so it had a much more scientific slant. Just imagine – we even had some Masters and Johnson in it at first!'
21. From the Preface of *The South African Women's Health Book* (Goosen and Klugman, 1996: ix).
 22. Female circumcision was officially banned in Egypt in 1959, but continues to be performed, particularly in rural settings, where it is estimated that 90 percent of women are circumcised, whether they are Christian or Muslim. The reasons women give for engaging in the practice range from wanting to be 'pure' to the belief that it is more 'aesthetic' to not wanting to become dependent on a man through sexual desire.
 23. Remembering conversations with the Cairo Women's Health Book Collective about how there were no lesbians in Egypt, Norma Swenson notes 'Oh sure! We knew some. But they were right that they had to take the context into account' (interview with Norma Swenson, 19 March 1999). The collective gradually relaxed their position that every translation should contain at least all the chapters in some form.
 24. Interview with Sally Whelan, 25 July 2000.
 25. Robertson's (1995) term 'glocalisation' has been taken up by many contemporary globalization theorists to express the interconnections between the local and the global.
 26. I am indebted to Marlies Bosch, who helped initiate this project, for sharing her experiences with me about this latest project (interview with Marlies Bosch, 2 December 2000).
 27. Interview with Norma Swenson, 19 March 1999.

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