

Review of *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Crosses Borders*

In *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Crosses Borders*, Kathy Davis insists that the widely read *Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)*, now available in over thirty translations, is more than “just” a popular book on women’s health and a fondly remembered feminist success. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, she posits, is a feminist epistemological project that is uniquely attuned to the politics of location, as it has enabled feminist alliances across borders and offers ways of rethinking global feminist politics in both theory and practice.

In a similar way, Davis has provided more than a well-researched, multi-layered history of the creation of *OBOS*. Davis explicitly situates *OBOS* in a transnational history, emphasizing its significance as a project that generates feminist knowledge and knowledge practices through its appropriation and rearticulation in disparate geographical, historical and cultural contexts. By focusing on the extensive “traveling” and thus transformation of *OBOS*, Davis uses the text as both a lens through which to engage with the trajectory of feminist thought and as a case study of a truly effective transnational feminism.

Davis lays the foundation for her more extensive examination of *OBOS* in Chapter One by telling the familiar story of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. A group of women sitting in living rooms, discussing their bodies and their lives, they compiled a short, hand-written document (sold for just seventy cents!) that would ultimately become the “bible of women’s health.” Detailing the impact of *OBOS* on society, from the medical community and popular discourse to individual women’s lives, Davis emphasizes the numerous revised editions over the next thirty years. Through her examination of the changes in content and tone of *OBOS*, Davis effectively traces the trajectory of feminist thought through the latter half of the 20th century. Both the text and the movement responded to various criticisms contesting an unexamined and exclusionary notion of “woman.” By highlighting the criticisms of feminism and *OBOS* and their parallel responses, Davis reveals the most important characteristics of both their uniquely flexible nature, openness to internal critique and subsequent ability to maintain relevance in a rapidly changing world.

In a chapter entitled “*OBOS* Abroad: From ‘Center’ to ‘Periphery’ and Back,” Davis describes the process of *OBOS* becoming a transnational phenomenon. Translation projects appeared in diverse locations, from Japan, India and Greece, to Egypt, the Netherlands, Italy and Israel. However, the term translation is somewhat misleading as Davis explains that very few were “true” translations; more often *OBOS* was adapted, reworked and re-contextualized to serve the needs of the women for whom it was intended. In addition, a variety of “inspired” versions sprang up around the globe: the result of women gathering and discussing their own bodily experiences and struggles and creating a book that responded to their unique concerns, locations, and worldviews. Thus, the international “traveling,” Davis argues, cannot be categorized as Western cultural imperialism, because it was never simply consumed by passive women in new contexts – it was constantly being interrogated and re-articulated, stripped of its “Americanness” in an effort to make it culturally relevant, politically oppositional and empowering to women in distinct contexts. Indeed, it is the elasticity of *OBOS*, Davis insists, that makes it less useful to view it as a U.S. book with multiple translations, but as “an ongoing transnational feminist knowledge project” (201). As a tangible example of transnational feminist knowledge circulation, *OBOS* is an imagined feminist community in which points of connection, coalition, and struggle along with “common differences” are sought out and alliances are productively developed.

As a feminist text, Davis posits that *OBOS* is intentionally structured to create embodied, critical, situated readers prepared to participate in the politics of knowledge production and ultimately feminist

health activism. Conducting a discourse analysis of the structure of the text as well as hundreds of letters written by readers of *OBOS* from around the world, Davis convincingly argues that the overt “intentions” of *OBOS* produces a certain kind of reader who actively engages with the text (regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the ideology of *OBOS*). The text, she argues, encourages embodied, resistant and disjunctured readings that open up spaces, in the text and in the production of knowledge, into which the reader steps.

In addition to the detailed exploration of *OBOS* as an internationally useful project, Davis crafts a sophisticated theoretical argument in which she offers *OBOS* as a theoretical work that may bridge the gap between feminist theorizing of the body and feminist health activism. Davis succinctly explains the ongoing debate within feminist thought that questions the relevance and utility of postmodern theorizing of the body, arguing that increasingly abstract theorizing not only neglects the materiality of the body and thus obscures women’s lived experiences but also prevents feminist health activists from utilizing and incorporating insights from feminist theorists (121). Davis insists that her conceptualization of *OBOS* as an epistemological project may provide answers to questions integral to feminists, particularly the issues of understanding the biological female body (without falling back on essentialism), women’s embodied experience (as a starting point rather than a “Truth”), and women’s epistemic agency. Her conclusion that *OBOS* can be viewed as a “traveling theory,” may provide feminist theorists the opportunity to de-center Western hegemony by engaging with a theoretical work that has been shaped by the knowledge production of women around the globe and has thus demonstrated that it is “capable of movement and transformation” (141).

Ultimately, Kathy Davis succeeds in providing a transnational history of *OBOS* that also convincingly positions the revolutionary text as an exemplary case of building transnational feminist alliance, as well as an epistemological project that may prove influential regarding global feminist politics in both theory and practice. This text provides excellent and accessible definitions of important concepts and debates in feminist thought, and encourages internal critique and theoretical innovation. It will be useful for both undergraduate and graduate courses on gender and feminist theory as well as those interested in building transnational feminist coalition.

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