

"The Making of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves'": Founders' Corrections

A note from the founders of Our Bodies Ourselves (formerly the Boston Women's Health Book Collective)

October 2009

Kathy Davis's excellent and prize-winning book "[The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders](#)" (Duke University Press, 2007) contains the main historical record of Our Bodies Ourselves (formerly the Boston Women's Health Book Collective) written to date. Perhaps inevitably with a project of such scope, the book contains some errors related to key aspects of the group's history.

We wanted to use the website to share our corrections and suggested changes. To do so, we've created a priority list of the changes (posted below) that we feel are the most significant to understanding what our group has done and cared about over the past four decades. Below those, you'll find a secondary list of corrections that are, although important to us, less critical. Kathy Davis's response is also published here. Thank you for reading!

Response from Kathy Davis

April 2014

I would, first of all, like to thank the founders of the BWHBC for their careful reading of my book. Their response reflects the kind of serious attention that they have invariably given to "Our Bodies, Ourselves" and which has made it a book that is not only informative, reassuring, and inspiring, but also clearly and beautifully written.

Their suggestions for corrections also show that no matter how many times a text is read and edited, a few errors will inevitably remain. My book was not only read, edited, and corrected by myself more times than I care to remember, but also by several members of the BWHBC who were given chapters for a final fact checking before it went to the publisher, and, of course, by the able editors and copy-editors at Duke University Press.

Despite all of this, the book still has a few errors, most of them straightforward, like dates that are incorrect or names that were misspelled. In some cases, information is missing that I did not have at the time I wrote the book -- for example, that the original contract with Simon & Schuster did not provide for the Spanish translation of "Our Bodies, Ourselves," but rather offered \$3,000 toward the translation.

And, of course, there are sentences in the book which seem to be confusing to some readers and should have been written more clearly. An occasional suggested correction is also based on a misreading of my text, as, for example, that I have argued that the founders "tried to export

OBOS.” In fact, my entire book is based on the premise that this is precisely NOT how OBOS travelled!

More complicated are the suggestions for corrections involving not so much the “facts,” but rather how they should be interpreted. One of the issues facing anyone who tries to write a history of a collective based on oral histories with its members is that they do not interpret their history in the same way. The history of OBOS is a shared one, but it is also composed of different versions with different voices. Each founder emphasized different parts of the history and gave her own particular take on what happened. In trying to do justice to these differences, I often had to find a balance between the -- sometimes contradictory -- versions of the history.

For example, at the time I did the interviews, there were differences in the ways the individual founders spoke about the way OBOS had changed over the years, its treatment of certain medical procedures (C-sections), the book’s stance on medicalization and whether it had “lost its bite” in the later editions. The same is true with the way founders explained the problematic update process in 1998 and, more generally, the conflicts within the organization.

If I were to do the interviews today, I expect that these controversial items would be explained differently. But that, of course, is the task for others to take on. I sincerely hope -- and, in fact, I am sure -- that there will be further books about the history of OBOS and its important contribution to women’s health and feminist health activism.

- Kathy Davis

In the following list, corrections or changes from OBOS's founders are in red. Suggested deletions are shown by ~~crossing out the words~~.

MOST SIGNIFICANT RECOMMENDED CORRECTIONS CHANGES

- **Page 23, 18 lines from bottom**

Correction:

~~Primarily~~ **Acknowledging that they were** white, middle-class, college-educated women, they **hoped** ~~assumed~~ that other women would share their experiences and interests, **a hope about which the group would develop new and more informed perspectives** ~~stance that would come back to haunt them~~ as differences among women became an issue of concern both within the womens movement and among feminist scholars.

Rationale

The preface to the 1973 Simon and Schuster edition includes the following (pages 1 - 2):

You may want to know who we are. We are white, our ages range from 24 to 40, most of us are from middle-class backgrounds and have had at least some college education, and some of us have professional degrees. We are white, middle class women, and as such can describe only what life has been for us. But we do realize that poor women and non-white women have suffered far more from the kinds of misinformation and mistreatment that we are describing in this book. In some ways, learning about our womanhood from the inside out has allowed us to cross over the socially created barriers of race, color, income and class, and to feel a sense of identity with all women in the experience of being female.

Its very true that differences among women became a key issue of feminist concern in the 1970s. Women of color health activists pointed out to us quite early on that our big focus on abortion rights, for example, needed to be balanced by a concern about sterilization abuse and about racial and class inequities in prenatal care. But we never assumed that other women would share their experiences and interests. As is evident in the 1973 preface quoted above, the group was quite up front about the limits of our being white and middle-class, even though we might express these limits quite differently after the benefit of three decades of learning.

- **Page 64, 5 lines from bottom**

Text which we suggest be amended and moved:

A group of Latinas Amigas Latinas en Accion Pro-Salud (ALAS) worked together with and under the auspices of the BWHBC with one of its members, Elizabeth MacMahon-Herrera later being included in the founder group of the BWHBC.

Rationale

The current placement of this introduction of ALAS leads to confusion as to whether it was ALAS that did the initial translation, which it did not. We suggest moving a corrected and expanded version of this sentence to page 66, line 4, as follows.

- **Page 66, line 4**

Correction/Expansion:

In the early 80s a group of Latinas -- Elizabeth MacMahon Herrera, Maria Lourdes Mattei and Loly Carrillo -- formed ALAS: Amigas Latinas en Accion Pro-Salud (Latina Friends in Action for Health). Elizabeth MacMahon-Herrera joined the staff of the BWHBC in 1982 and served as liaison to the group. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ALAS was dedicated to innovative community outreach and health care work for the Latino community of Boston and in later years, New Mexico.

- **Page 66, first 5 lines**

Text:

The first Spanish OBOS appeared in 1977, but the poor quality of the translation was a bone of contention for many years. There was already an enormous demand for the book in Latin America, where any translation of OBOS even a bad one was treated as better than nothing.

However, by the early eighties members of ALAS were protesting that a bad translation was insulting to Latina American women.

Suggested Substitution:

Following OBOS' publication by Simon & Schuster, two Latinas Leonor Taboada (an Argentinean relocated to Spain) and Raquel Scherr-Salgado (a Mexican-American) -- approached the BWHBC with a proposal to translate the book into Spanish. Their translation was self-published twice by the BWHBC (1977 and 1979) with funding from Simon & Schuster, OBOS royalties, and the Helena Rubinstein and ARCO Foundations. About 50,000 copies of the book were distributed in the United States and Latin America, where the book became quite popular despite its lack of cultural adaptation (although a few new photographs and personal experiences from Latinas were included). Hundreds of letters and requests for copies were sent to the BWHBC from outside the United States during the following decade or so.

In the early 80s a group of Latinas -- Elizabeth MacMahon Herrera, Maria Lourdes Mattei and Loly Carrillo - formed ALAS- Amigas Latinas en Accion Pro-Salud (Latina Friends in Action for health). Elizabeth MacMahon-Herrera joined the staff of the BWHBC in 1982 and served as liaison to the group. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ALAS was dedicated to innovative community outreach and health care work for the Latino community of Boston and in later years, New Mexico. ALAS was critical of the 1977 NCNV, and viewed it as a bad translation that was insulting to Latina American women.

Rationale

We believe the problem with the 1977 Nuestros Cuerpos was less the quality of the translation than the fact that it was a direct translation and thus less useful than an adaptation could have been. We have letters and materials from Spanish language experts from Latin America that documented the good quality of the translation itself. Translators Leonore Taboada and Raquel Scherr-Salgado worked hard and generously on the translation, and we believe it is inaccurate to state, as the current text does, that the quality of their work was the main problem.

We understand that creating a direct translation (which was what Simon & Schuster had agreed to include some money for in the contract) was insufficient for the wide and diverse Latina world, but it seemed the best we could do at the time, for the following reasons: The \$3,000 we won in our contract with Simon & Schuster was barely enough even to pay the translators; we lacked the resources to set in motion a full adaptation; there was such demand already in the U.S. for a Spanish language version that sooner seemed better. The 1977/1979 translation was used in health centers, clinics, and bookstores in Spanish-speaking communities for many years. We were unable to prevent it "escaping" beyond U.S. borders, and we did respond to many requests from Latin America when they came in. The later translation/adaptation, created with input from several womens health groups throughout Latin America, was clearly a great improvement on a word-for-word translation.

- **Page 66, second paragraph**

Suggested change:

~~By neglecting the important work of~~ **During the 1980s members of the BWHBC met several**

times with U.S. Latinas and women from Latin America about the idea of developing a culturally sensitive text that would reflect the experiences of Latinas in both the United States and Latin America. ~~OBOS ran~~ **The BWHBC did not want to run** the risk of arrogantly imposing its own brand of feminism on women in the South

Additional information

During the lengthy project in which Latinas in the United States and Latin America created the Latin American adaptation of OBOS (Severn Stories Press, 2000), the BWHBC raised significant grant income to cover the costs of the Boston-based coordinators.

- **Page 87, 22 lines from bottom**

Correction:

In 1995 the staff announced that it was bringing in a union. ~~After~~ **During** a tumultuous period **in the organization** of negotiations, a major financial crisis necessitated voluntary layoffs. The staff lost all confidence in the organization ~~and resigned en masse in 1997~~. **The BWHBC paid significant severance packages to the several staff members who left. After the layoffs, the board chair negotiated the union contract over a period of several weeks with the non-founder staff members remaining, and agreement was reached on a contract.**

- **Page 87, 17 lines from bottom**

Correction:

Several staff members also filed a complaint of discrimination against the BWHBC -- a complaint that ~~nearly five years later at the time of this writing, is still pending~~. **the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination dismissed as without merit in April 2003.**

- **Page 92, lines 3 through 15 from the top**

Correction:

~~By the eighties, an organization had grown up around the book,~~ **While the Collective had for some time operated legally as a non-profit organization, but informally and without a central office, by the eighties the continued demand surrounding the book required systematized operations and a more structured organization.** ~~and in 1983 two staff members, Sally Whelan and Pamela Morgan~~ **Pamela Morgan and Sally Whelan began working in** ~~who had been working since 1979 and 1980 as librarian and coordinator~~ **and documentalist, respectively, and were officially invited in 1983 to become members of the BWHBC board.**

~~Elizabeth MacMahon-Herrera, who had initiated~~ **a co-founder of Amigas Latinas en Accion por Salud, worked within the BWHBC as a liaison with the Latina community starting in 1982, and began serving on the board a few years later.** ~~was the first woman of color to become an official founder of the BWHBC 1996.~~ **Pamela, Elizabeth and Sally, along with Judy Norsigian, Esther Rome, and Norma Swenson, were instrumental in building the organization itself and all that entailed -- an administrative infrastructure, office, staff, an information center open to the public, and the programs that grew up around the book, including the sister organization ALAS. These accomplishments allowed an informal group with its ground-breaking book to become an**

organization that carried the work forward for three more decades. While the term founder suggests an original group, it was not, in fact, part of the vocabulary of the BWHBC until a retreat in 1996.

The establishment of an official Founders group took place in 1996, as the BWHBC continued its evolution into a more formal organization with a community board of directors. At a 1996 retreat, in recognition that the BWHBC had both author founders and institution-building founders, and marking Pamela, Sally and Elizabeths many years of dedicated work on staff and on the board, the eleven founder/authors of OBOS recognized the three women as Founders of the BWHBC. Elizabeth MacMahon-Herrera, co-founder of ALAS, was thus the first and only woman of color to become an official Founder of the BWHBC.

SMALLER CORRECTIONS

- **Page 5, 16 lines from bottom**

Correction:

By the late 1970s, it had already appeared in **Japan and** most Western European countries, as well as ~~Japan and~~ **a pirated edition in** Taiwan.

- **Page 21, 4 lines from bottom of page**

Correction

By the fall of 1969 ~~It wasnt until 1970 that~~ they decided

- **Page 22, 8 lines from bottom**

Correction

, selling 250,000 copies **in two years.**

- **Page 24, 7 lines from bottom of first paragraph**

Correction

And, finally, the contract included **\$3,000 toward** a ~~simultaneous~~ Spanish translation

- **Page 24, 6 lines from bottom of first paragraph**

Correction

It was in the wake of negotiating this contract that the BWHBC was officially formed ~~from~~ **by** the core group of twelve women **that** had crystallized from the fluid membership of the first years.

- **Page 24, 2 lines from bottom of first paragraph**

Correction

Became a legal ~~legal~~ **non-profit** corporation

- **Page 27, top line**

Correction

The BWHBC decided to include a **whole** chapter on lesbians.

Rationale

There was lesbian content in the sexuality chapter of the newsprint edition (1970). 1973 was the first time there was a whole chapter devoted to lesbians.

- **Page 27, 3 lines from top**

Correction

They **relinquished** ~~handed over~~ full editorial control to a local lesbian group, which wrote a chapter called In Amerika They Call Us Dykes

Rationale

The lesbian group insisted on full editorial control, which is why relinquished is more appropriate than handed over.

- **Page 27, 13 lines up from bottom**

Correction

~~Some of the members began a parenting group, which led to several spinoff books,~~ **Some collective members also created related books, such as** *Ourselves and Our Children* (1978), ~~and~~ *Changing Bodies, Changing Selves* **Lives** (1980) for teenagers, *Ourselves Growing Older* (1987 and 1994), and *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love* (1996).

- **Page 33, 2 lines up from bottom**

Correction

The husband of another founder died suddenly in the ~~same~~ **previous** year.

- **Page 36, 4 lines from top**

Correction

For the first time, the decision had been made to have the staff **coordinate** ~~undertake~~ the revision instead of ~~having~~ the founders. ~~come back to work on the book.~~

Rationale

Founders came back to work on the book in 1998, just not to coordinate (except for one original author on the coordinating team, see below).

- **Page 36, 6 lines from the top**

Correction

~~A young African American woman on the staff was~~ **A group of three staff and one original author were** given the responsibility for coordinating the update, and a concentrated attempt was made by ~~the~~ **this** editorial group to bring in the viewpoints of women of color at all stages of the production process (editing, reading, and contributing).

Rationale

The responsibility for coordinating the update fell to the group of three staff and one original author. An African American woman was hired later in the process by the coordinating group (as reconstituted part way through by the addition of two more original authors) to serve as Junior Editor.

- **Page 36, 15 lines from the top**

Correction

When the update process seemed doomed to fail because the ~~coordinator~~ **coordinating group** wasn't doing a very good job **of handling the immensity of the task of the promised 30% revision of the book**

- **Page 43, 7 lines from bottom of longest paragraph**

Correction

For example, a controversial practice such as the elective C-section (a medically unnecessary cesarean section) is ~~no longer explicitly attacked~~ **critiqued** as a symptom of the overly medicalized politics of childbirth, ~~Instead it is~~ **while at the same time C-section as a whole is** presented as a practice about which a woman should consider the benefits and the risks and make her decision based on the best available **evidence** ~~information available~~ (BWHBC 2005, 469-70).

Rationale

This example as currently expressed appears seems to stem from a misreading of the 2005 text. On page 469 there is a series of bulleted points on why are there so many c-sections. The fifth and last bulleted point in this series is a rather long critique of elective cesareans. Following that series, after a space, come two sentences that encourage women to consider the benefits and risks. These two sentences about considering risks apply *not just to the last bulleted point on elective cesarean but also to the whole prior discussion*. Thus the most recent edition of OBOS did include some critique of the practice of cesarean section.

- **Page 43, Last paragraph before A Feminist Success Story**

Correction

For some, this shift marked the end of OBOS as a political, feminist book. The book had as one founder put it lost its bite. For others, however, the shift involved a ~~tempering of the old~~ **reshaping of the earlier** radical critique of medicine ~~a critique that could make women who use conventional medical procedures and technologies feel bad (i.e. guilty) instead of helping them become informed consumers of health care who,~~ **so that this critique would continue to help women become informed consumers of health care while at the same time be less likely to make**

them feel bad (i.e., guilty) should they use conventional medical procedures and technologies. Women were still urged to act to extend the frontiers of criticism and acknowledge the many individual women, advocates, and families who have learned to fight the medicalization of women's bodies from *inside* the medical establishment (Bonilla 2005.)

- **Page 44, 16 lines from bottom**

Correction

After nearly succumbing to the internal and organizational turmoil of the nineties, they made the transition from a ~~grassroots~~ nonprofit collective to a nonprofit organization with a community board, director, and more formal management structure.

- **Page 44, 3 lines from bottom**

Correction

~~While the group did not use profits from the book to pay the~~ Founders received no royalties from the book, and were paid for their work only when serving as BWHBC staff. The substantial royalties...

Rationale

Contrary to what the current text suggests, profits were used to pay founders when they served on the staff or coordinated/edited revisions of the book.

- **Page 51, 2 lines from bottom**

Correction

Nestle ~~milk~~ infant formula

- **Page 52, 11 lines from bottom**

Correction

~~,including Chinese~~ always at the initiative of publishers or women's groups in other countries.

Rationale

We never tried to export OBOS.

- **Page 53, 4 lines from top**

Correction

and a pirated edition of ~~the book~~ OBOS appeared in Taiwan

- **Page 64, 8 lines from the bottom**

Correction

The fate of the Spanish translation of *OBOS* is a particularly dramatic one. This was the only homegrown translation that is, the original contract with won from Simon and Schuster included

a provision that the book would be simultaneously translated into Spanish \$3,000 toward a Spanish translation to be disseminated in the Latina community in the United States.

- **Page 80, 5 lines from top**

Correction

... who became feminists in the late sixties and early seventies

- **Page 106, 2 lines from top**

Correction:

Pamela Morgan started working before Sally Whelan.

- ***** Page 227, footnote #61**

Correction

public health educators education had always been their natural ally.

Rationale

BWHBC founders and staff have attended American Public Health Association annual meetings since 1975, and frequently team up with public health people on projects.

- **Page 230, footnote # 20**

Correction

While This remark may have been strategic politically necessary, it ignored leaving unmentioned, as it did, the work of local Chinese feminists.

Appendix The versions of NCNV need to have their publishers listed, as follows:

- **Page 214, seventh entry**

1977/1979 (out of print); Self-published by the BWHBC
2000 Collaboration; Latin America, coordinated by the BWHBC office and published by Seven Stories Press (NYC)

- **Page 216, first entry add the second Spain edition**

2001; Debate, an imprint of Plaza y Janes, based in Barcelona

Key typographical and spelling errors:

- Page 91, 12 lines from top: Should be Helen Rodriguez-Trias.
- Page 224, footnote #15: Should be Paula Doress.
- Page 225, footnote #27: Should be Diana Siegal.

