

# THE LEGACY AND FUTURE OF *OUR BODIES, OURSELVES*

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## Feminist Authorial Agency: Copyright and Collaboration in the Boston Women's Health Book Collective

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**Abstract:** This essay situates *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in the narrative of feminist critiques of authorship and intellectual property. It describes ways that the Boston Women's Health Book Collective leveraged copyright law to exercise feminist authorial agency, particularly in its use of royalties and active encouragement of translations of the book.

**Keywords:** agency, authorship, collaboration, collaborative writing, copyright, derivative works, feminist authorial, intellectual property, translation

We were just glad when the book could get out at all, and we did what we could to help. (Sally Whelan, qtd. in Davis 62)

Thus, as the millennium approaches, our original goals for this book remain as important to us as ever: to fit as much information about women's health between the covers of this book as we can, providing women with tools to enable all of us to take charge of our health and lives; to support women and men who work for progressive change; and to work to create a just society in which good health is not a luxury or a privilege but a human right. (1998 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* 22)

## Introduction

The political economy of authorship and intellectual property in academia and the publishing industry is set up to reward single authors in the form of name recognition and sole ownership of copyright and its attendant royalties. Where is the glory in being one among 500 coauthors and directing royalties into a nonprofit organization? Although single-authored scholarship is still privileged at some universities, we know the value of collaboration now; perhaps it is familiar to hear deans and provosts call for more collaboration among multiple disciplines of study, even going so far as to put collaboration into universities' strategic plans for accreditation reviews. We (okay, I) love a new *collab* between a beauty influencer and makeup brand, or Isaac Mizrahi x Target, or a group of musical artists. We also have relatively new options for configuring the copyright ownership of our work in the form of the General Public License (for software) and Creative Commons for other formats, if we want to encourage other people to share and adapt our work: to translate it into other languages or make audio recordings of it, for example.

However, in the early days of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, collaborative writing did not have the aura it currently enjoys, and those particular alternative models of copyright were not available. Still, the BWHBC embodied an ethos of collaboration and sharing that was remarkable for its time. Their collaborative model is best described as distributive authorship, a term that Susan Wells traces back to its use in avant-garde art in the early 1980s. In 2003, Sarah Robbins defined distributed authorship as “a view of shared textual ownership adaptable to today’s writing and publication circumstances” (157). Wells notes that it refers to writing that “is done by multiple authors, often removed from one another in space and time” (64). I would like to highlight copyright and authorship as a key aspect of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*’ legacy and bring the BWHBC’s work to bear on rhetoric and composition studies’ ideas about authorship and copyright in the context of feminism. *OBOS* has been, and continues to be, an exemplar of collaborative knowledge production. I will situate *OBOS* in rhetoric scholarship on authorship, access, and copyright and analyze it as a platform of feminist authorial agency.

As I stated previously, in the last fifteen years, we have seen the proliferation of open access publication and alternative models of copyright, like Creative Commons, which automatically and preemptively grant specific permissions, including copying and distributing, as well as derivative works, like translations or audio recordings. Although *OBOS* predates Creative Commons, the BWHBC did have a progressive approach to copyright. According to the timeline on the *OBOS* website, when the BWHBC negotiated their deal with Simon & Schuster to publish *OBOS* for commercial distribution in 1972, they secured an agreement for health clinics and nonprofit organizations to get a 70% discount on copies of the book (which has remained in place for every new edition) plus some funding toward a Spanish translation. They have also donated many copies. While the print form of *OBOS* is not as inexpensively distributed as an online text would be, the BWHBC has taken access seriously and has worked to get the book in the hands of low-income readers all over the world. Moreover, the BWHBC has leveraged the proceeds from sales of *OBOS*, along with donations to the organization, to maximize the agency of the book and the work of the authors. They have helped to fund the translations of *OBOS* into 30 languages, as well as advocacy efforts with legislators, and they have provided grants and launched projects like the website Surrogacy 360 and a documentary film about egg donors. They held a symposium in 2011 on health and human rights that is still available to stream online. Working within traditional strictures of copyright law and publishers, the BWHBC has managed to share rights to *OBOS* with translators and copies of the book with those unable to afford it.

## **Copyright, Authorship, and Feminist Rhetorics**

Authorship and feminism have an interesting intellectual history together. The simple sketch is that the “solitary, originary, and proprietary” Romantic view of authorship as termed by Martha Woodmansee—the man alone in his garret, the singular genius—is hierarchized over a (feminized) collective, mixological, and open-access model. As Lunsford writes, “solitary, original authorship = powerful, privileged, and good; collaborative, shared authorship = ‘uncreative,’ transgressive, and bad,

very nearly a 'crime' of writing" (530). Women's writing historically took place in circumscribed contexts; as Royster and Kirsch describe, "in the social-aid societies, in church communities, in literary societies and garden clubs, in public libraries and historical societies and many other kinds of organizations," engaging in, for example, "the sharing of recipes, keeping of minutes for social and church clubs, recording of local histories, presentations for other club members," and other similar genres (60). The Romantic author prevailed until around the mid-twentieth century, when critics called him into question and creators embraced collaborative authorship.

There is some truth in the simple sketch, but of course we know it's more complex than that; we see evidence of collaboration in the distant past and strict Romantic notions of authorship right now, and it is important to see the narrative of authorship as complicated, contradictory, and iterative to best see how the Boston Women's Health Book Collective fits into this history. Indeed, as Ede and Lunsford maintain, there are multiple ways to do collaborative writing (236). Sarah Robbins argues that "connections between authorship and textual ownership need to be viewed in particular material contexts rather than framed in a simple then/now narrative" (164-5). Robbins illustrates her claim by analyzing embedded notions of authorship in Anna Barbauld's *Lessons for Children*, a primer originally published in 1778 but which circulated into the nineteenth century, particularly in the United States. Displaying a quite Creative Commons-like disposition toward her work, Barbauld wrote, "This little publication was made for a particular child, but the public is welcome to the use of it" (qtd. in Robbins 164). When American women edited *Lessons for Children* for an American reading audience, they were "community-oriented Barbauldian editors," downplaying their role, choosing not to have their names listed as coauthors, and foregrounded the purpose of their edits—the benefit of American children's education—rather than their own work (164). Robbins points us to this one ordinary example of an early notion of authorship that does not adhere to the Romantic idea of the author. Its everydayness suggests multiple ideas of authorship existing simultaneously. Robbins' position on authorship emphasizes reflection on the emergence of a text. She explains that "an extreme application of 'free use' can actually elide aspects of the social writing processes behind a particular text" and claims that "we should try to teach practices that create a record of the meaningful, materially situated links between our writing and its sources, not because others we 'credit' with conventions like footnotes are the sole owners of their texts, but rather to show *how* they have shared their work with us" (168, emphasis in original).

We see this clearly in the BWHBC, across the various editions of *OBOS*. The edition that I know best is my personal copy, which I have owned since 2002, the 1998 *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century*. The Acknowledgements section is a three-page list of hundreds of names. The two-page spread in between the Preface and the Introduction is a grid-style collage of around 80 photographs of contributors. Each chapter also has its own careful list of author credits, all of a style resembling chapter two, "Food," which says at the top: "By Maria Bettencourt and Christina Economos, based on earlier work by Esther Rome," and then on the next line, "With special thanks to Trisha Brown, Patricia Cooper, Marilyn Figueroa, Bonnie Gage, Deb Levine, Bonnie Liebman, Ruth Palumbo, Caterina Rocha, Judith Stein, Margo N. Woods," and then an asterisk that leads to the footnote, "Over the years since 1969, the following women have contributed to many versions of this chapter: Judy Norsigian, Marsha

Butman, Tricia Copeland, Demetria Iazzetto, Bonnie Liebman, Vivian Mayer, Ruth Palombo, and Christine Rugen” (BHWBC 44). The reader gets a clear sense of past, present, and ongoing contributions, all of which are acknowledged. Some changes came in response to letters from readers. Wendy Kline has shown how *OBOS* readers have contributed to subsequent editions through their responses. They wrote to the BWHBC to share their stories about diagnoses including vaginitis, pelvic inflammatory disease, small vaginal opening requiring a hymenectomy, amenorrhea, explaining the trial and error of finding solutions that finally worked, and urged the BWHBC to include these solutions in subsequent editions, which they did.

The 1990s saw, in rhetoric and composition studies, the beginning of a productive strand of scholarship about copyright and intellectual property. Lunsford and West vigorously critique the ideology of authorship as it plays out in scholarly publication and in teaching. They ask, “How do most contemporary writing classrooms continue to perpetuate traditional concepts of authorship, authority, and ownership of intellectual property,” and point to “a deep and abiding investment in knowledge as a product to be traded in the academic marketplace” (397). Lunsford and West push deeper into this line of inquiry: “should teachers operate under a tacit assumption that we somehow own the knowledge on which we build CVs and which we ‘give’ to students or ‘rent’ to others, who must cite us as the autonomous authors who have created and thus necessarily control what we claim to know?” (397). They call out the politics of citation norms, “the academy’s nearly compulsive scholarly and teacherly attention to hypercitation and endless listing of sources,” which

are driven, for the most part, by the need to own intellectual property and to turn it into commodities that can be traded like tangible property, a process of alienation that is at the heart of copyright doctrine based on the abstract concept of “work.” This process is self-perpetuating, of course, when we cite others with the expectation that our own “intellectual property” will be acknowledged similarly elsewhere. (397)

One might say the copious listing of names in *OBOS* is also hypercitation, but the difference is that the BHWBC does not feel compelled to tag particular terms, phrases, or sentences with individual authors’ names in a territorial way, but honors all individuals in the group as equally important members of the group.

Lunsford and West go on to argue for new direction in authorship. During the late 1990s, rhetoric and composition scholars were just beginning to understand the massive changes that the internet would bring to global cultures, and their work with authorship and copyright contends with the rise of the internet directly. They call for the audience to “join us in beginning this process of renegotiation and in owning up to our responsibilities as intellectual laborers—as creators, consumers, teachers. These responsibilities include, in the first place, making our voices heard in the public policy arena through political action regarding intellectual property law and, in a larger sense, understanding as fully as possible what it means to write and read in a new information economy” (403). I am reminded of my department chair, Dr. Dayana Stetco, a playwright, who once observed that for many writers, when the writing is done, the project is finished. For her, though, finishing the writing is only the beginning; she

must then work to secure a venue, design sets, cast actors, organize rehearsals, and much more. What if we thought of our work that way—that finishing the writing is only a brief stopping point in the project? It is daunting, but I see the BWHBC doing this as well: writing the book, but then working for the nonprofit organization, managing the partnerships for translations, securing grant funding for women's health care, and then some. In her 1999 article “Rhetoric, Feminism, and the Politics of Textual Ownership,” Lunsford writes (535):

I hope that, working together, feminist rhetoricians can create, enact, and promote alternative forms of agency and ways of knowing that would shift the focus from owning to owning up; from rights and entitlements to responsibilities (the ability to respond) and answerability; from a sense of the self as radically individual to the self as always in relation; and from a view of agency as invested in and gained through the exchange of tidy knowledge packages to a view of agency as residing in what Susan West defines as “the unfolding action of a discourse; in the knowing and telling of the attentive rhetor/responder rather than in static original ideas.” (190)

Like the author and editors of *Lessons for Children* Sarah Robbins studied, the BWHBC was doing this collaborative work all along, since the late 1960s. Bringing their work into dialogue with Lunsford's critique makes a place for *OBOS* as the embodiment of what Lunsford's vision looks like, certainly the model of ownership and intellectual processes over products, but particularly the notion of answerability regarding race, class, sexuality, ability, gender, culture, and religion. Leigh Patel's work on answerability applies here, as well as the related concept used by the BWHBC, cultural humility.

I recently wrote to Joan Norsigian, the leader of the *OBOS* Board, and asked for context about their choices related to copyright. She generously sent me an internal policy document that guides their global partnership work. In it, toward the beginning, they define the term: “Cultural humility suggests a willingness to suspend what you know or think you know about a person, based on generalizations about their culture and, instead, develop an understanding based on their personal expression of their heritage” (4). They continue, observing that “Program partners know their culture best, and an egalitarian partnership is best served when we ask rather than assume and (educate) them on what they know best. This is why program partners have full editorial control over their adaptations and make/own all decisions about their projects” (4). With *OBOS*, the end of the (collaborative) writing is the beginning of the work, and only the middle of the relationships formed and maintained throughout the process. Nearly every project eventually ends, though, as some of the BWHC's work has, which is why sustainability is especially important, particularly with regard to making archives accessible. The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College houses all the BWHC's print and audio archives related to *OBOS*; while most of those archives have not been digitized, I hope that the *OBOS* Foundation has a long-term plan to keep their web content online in sustainable digital file formats that are not vendor-based.

## ***OBOS* and Progressive Approach to Copyright**

The story of *OBOS*'s distribution has been told in many books and articles, but to provide a gloss of it

that focuses on copyright: the Collective had a publication arrangement with a small independent publisher, the New England Free Press, but the demand for copies of OBOS outpaced their production capacity, so the Collective decided, against the wishes of the New England Free Press, to enter into a contract with a commercial publisher (Wells 4). According to Wells, they had offers from both Simon & Schuster and Random House, and at this point we can note the care with which the Collective attended to matters of copyright. They declined the offer from Random House via a letter from BWHBC member Norma Swenson, who mentioned that Random House was owned by RCA, which she described as “a war contractor” (qtd. in Wells 4-5). Scholars echoed these concerns around 35 years later from 2005 to 2007 upon discovering that Reed Elsevier's parent company was involved in both the legal and illegal arms trade, including illegal land mines, many of us who were born around the time Swenson was writing her letter believing this was a shocking new development (“Reed Elsevier” 987-990).

Not only was the Collective progressive in its choice of publisher, they also set specific terms of the copyright contract that ensured the sharing of and access to OBOS, another exercise of feminist authorial agency. They insisted on “a 70 percent discount for health clinics, a clause that is included in every subsequent contract, as well as funding for a Spanish language translation of the book” (“OBOS Timeline”). They make it easy for global partner organizations to re-use graphics that OBOS got permission to use, effectively building in a type of “Share Alike” clause that would be popularized by Creative Commons later: According to their “Program Manual for Global Partners,”

To facilitate the use of *OBOS* graphics, *OBOS*'s contract with photographers, illustrators and graphic designers contributing to our publications explicitly asks permission on whether or not their images can be used in materials based on or using the “Our Bodies Ourselves” title, including our own publications and those developed by program partners overseas. This basically means that program partners do not have to waste time and money seeking permissions and have ready access to many *OBOS* images in three easy steps. (27)

The Collective's progressive approach to copyright operates on the same principle as Creative Commons: to use the existing copyright law structure and its concordant rights of ownership in order to grant rights of use to others; in other words, when I own something, I have the right to give it away. What that means for *OBOS* is most clearly seen in the use of royalties from the sales of the book and the encouragement of derivative works, specifically translations.

### **Royalties**

Among those who have followed the history of *OBOS*, it is common knowledge that the Collective did not profit from the sales of the book; they opted to put the royalties into their US nonprofit organization. According to Norsigian, Diskin, Doress-Worters, Pincus, Sanford, and Swenson, “We took no profits from sales of the books, using the royalties to support women’s health projects and eventually to start our own WHIC [Women's Health Information Center] and advocacy work” (n.p.). Using this funding as well as donations, they have contributed money to women's community health centers over the years. Again using the Share Alike principle and feminist authorial agency, Jennifer

Yanco writes that “By 1977, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective had adopted a policy of working only through country-based women's groups when signing tracts with foreign publishers, thereby facilitating feminist editorial control and the return of foreign-earned royalties women's health projects in those countries” (513). The Collective strategically used their agency as authors and copyright holders when they originally entered into the contract with Simon & Schuster, but also in these subsequent agreements with overseas publishers, ensuring that some of the royalties from the sale of the translations went to local women's community health organizations.

### **Translations/Derivative Works**

A derivative work is distinct from a copy, legally speaking. Some forms of copying and derivative works are protected under Fair Use and the first amendment, such as parody, but generally, permission from the copyright holder is required to distribute derivative works, which include translations, film adaptations, and audio recordings. Subgroups of the BWHBC themselves have written spinoff books based on *OBOS* that would be considered derivative works: *Our Bodies Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth*; *Our Bodies Ourselves: Menopause*; *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: A Book for Teens on Sex and Relationships*; *Ourselves and Our Children*; and *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Because derivative works can be considered market competition for the original works they're based on, authors and publishers can be reluctant to grant permissions for them. The Collective, however, has strongly encouraged translations of *OBOS*, contributing funding themselves from their foundation and helping to find other sources of funding, such as Soros Open Society. Their Program Manual for Global Partners remarks, “Program partners were actively encouraged to 'tear the book apart' and change as much content as possible—guidance that OBOGI [Our Bodies Ourselves Global Initiative] has continued to offer and recommends going forward as, without adaptation, the resulting resources cannot be relevant or useful to the communities for which they are created” (6). Davis writes,

In addition to situating women's health as a global issue, part of an international feminist health politics, each new edition of the U.S. *OBOS* was produced so that it could be literally “passed on.” This involved a series of interventions, including making every aspect of the book available electronically; negotiating global rights for photographs and printed material; providing guidelines on how to produce, distribute, or update the book; and sustaining an interactive Web site and a discussion list for “global conversations”. (80)

Because the original *OBOS* emerged from the context of the U.S. health care system, there are practical reasons that translations cannot be direct; the translators must make departures from the source text. The Collective sought to encourage adaptations beyond that, though, practicing the principle of cultural humility.

Translators in other countries have had wide discretion to adapt *OBOS*, from word-level changes to changes at the level of the whole discourse, or “cultural transformation of content,” as the Our Bodies Ourselves Global Initiative (OBOGI) has called it (Chatterjee 6). In the most recent translation for Ugandan women in 2017, Diana Namumbejja Abwoye “incorporated slang commonly used by

Ugandan women, along with their experiences. For example, in reference to HIV, Ugandans refer to condoms as ‘bugalimpitawa’ or ‘where would it pass to get to me.’ She intentionally used this cultural term—over other generic language—to help women negotiate safer sex with resistant partners who believe condoms have no business in marital relationships” (Chatterjee “Luganda”). This is a small instance of cultural humility. The Serbian translators, for their 2001 translation, made more sweeping changes to the form of the book. Chatterjee describes it:

This edition is situated in ethnic and gender-based violence and focuses on the use of women’s bodies as weapons of war. It is designed like a journal, with blank space on each page, so women can record their experiences and share copies—and stories—with one another. The OBOGI program partner also omitted content related to healthy eating, to be sensitive to the number of Serbian people living in starvation during and after conflict. (6)

In a place and a situation so catastrophic, dire, and tragic, we feel like bystanders unable to do anything to ease the suffering of so many women on such a scale. But the BWHBC made a small gesture—again, a small act of feminist authorial agency—and encouraged the Serbian translators to make this adaptation a participatory book that could help women heal.

The work with translators sometimes took the form of advocacy. The early translations to Taiwanese, Dutch, and Italian had used images that were stereotypical and offensive. The Dutch translation, “*Je Lichaam Je Leven* featured a ‘lurid cartoon’ (One of the members of the BWHBC recalled ‘We made them tear it off, cover by cover, and replace it with a plain red cover with black lettering.’)” (Davis 59). The Collective was also concerned about censorship, with good reason, given restrictive laws in many countries about abortion and sexuality. They were “concerned that the ‘problem’ chapters on controversial subjects such as abortion, lesbian relationships, or masturbation” would not make the final versions of the translations, so they “began to establish guidelines, which stated that no foreign adaptation could use the *OBOS* title if it did not include at least some part of every chapter of the original book” (Davis 59). Although the Collective’s main concern was that a foreign government would censor *OBOS* content for anti-feminist reasons, it could be said that the compulsory use of part of every chapter functions as a form of censorship or colonialist power. Still, censorship of the governmental variety remains a problem for translators, albeit in fewer countries now than when the first translations were being written, and in more subtle forms. With the Serbian translation in mind, Anna Bogic explains that:

The role of translators and publishers’ translation ideologies also needs to be examined in addition to profit-making motivations that characterize new, post-socialist, capitalist book markets. While the specific institutional agents involved before and after 1989 are different, it remains the case that they all imposed constraints on the selection of texts for translation. Although more overt mechanisms of censorship that were prevalent to varying degrees in some communist countries have disappeared—specifically censorship implemented by state officials—funding provided by foreign and domestic foundations and profit motivations continue to steer text selections in specific, constrained directions. (220)



The BWHBC has tried to help negotiate and navigate these diplomatic situations as well. Financial donations have at times come with strings attached. Bogic explains that one American woman donated \$7,500 for the Serbian translation, which “came with a number of conditions, including the stipulation that 200 copies of the translation had to be distributed to three different NGOs in Bosnia and Croatia” (218), and “this condition encouraged feminist activists involved in the translation to remove any markers that would make ATTA/explicitly Serbian, in content or in presentation” (219). Even though there will no longer be new editions of *OBOS* and the organization has downsized into a volunteer operation, translation projects have not come to an end. They have, however, changed, and in ways that further enable access and circulation of the work.

As of June 2018, the OBOS Foundation only gives the rights to publish a translation of twenty pages of *OBOS* at a time. This change makes it manageable for the foundation to provide the same level of support (which includes fundraising) to translators that they did for larger-scale projects when they had more financial resources. The foundation has made translating and adapting 20 pages of *OBOS* very easy. Translators just fill out one agreement form and then do the adapting and translating. It is then possible to scale up from there, twenty pages at a time (Chatterjee “Manual”).

Certainly, the Collective has failed to take some opportunities to provide access to *OBOS*. Nadia Farah, who worked on the translation for Egyptian and Arab women, relayed an occasion when she was meeting with Palestinian women. She writes that “one young woman confronted me. She expressed her agony at being illiterate and therefore being deprived of reading such a book. She then asked if the collective could put the information on cassette tapes, so it would be accessible to illiterate women” (25). Farah added that the Egyptian collective was moving forward with that idea, but to date, there is no audio version of *OBOS* in English, which would also be more accessible for readers with particular disabilities. But an audio recording is still possible; the BWHBC’s work is not done yet.

## Conclusion

Feminist scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have engaged in critique and analysis of authorship and intellectual property issues for over twenty years. Perhaps we didn't immediately consider the BWHBC's work in the 1990s and 2000s when much of the scholarship about copyright, collaborative writing, and authorship was being written and published, but now, looking back on the legacy of *OBOS*, we can clearly see its important place in the story of feminism and authorship, not only as a complex and enduring model of collaboration, but also as a model for feminist authorial agency, of *flexin'* and power moves, of strategically using copyright law to be strict with those seeking to censor content about the body and sexuality or to put insulting, sexist, stereotypical visual representations of women into translations, while also using copyright law to be generous toward women's health nonprofits. The Bulgarian translators, in their preface, state:

The authors consign the copyright to their foreign colleagues for a symbolic price and

understand the term “copyright” quite freely. They insist on adapting the book in a way that it will make it maximally useful in the specific context even if some radical changes are to be made. At the same time they provide consultation based on the experience of other collectives that have translated the book. (Chatterjee 33)

The most recent *OBOS* translation project, which was a 2017 booklet for Ugandan women, is freely available online. Also, linked from the “Our Story” section of the *OBOS* website, is a PDF to the full 193-page text of the 1970 first edition, the course booklet “Women and Their Bodies.” I believe the OBOGI will continue to encourage a small-scale, open-access model in the future. In her vision of new forms of feminist authorial agency and new approaches to ownership, Lunsford calls for maneuvers that “work toward a balance between protecting individual dignities and rights—especially those not protected by earlier regimes of intellectual property—and protecting the public good” (537). Working from an orientation of cultural humility, the Collective has sought to achieve this balance. When the writing is done, the work is only beginning.

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