

## **Book Review: Margaretta Jolly's *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1968 – Present* (2019)**

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Margaretta Jolly's *Sisterhood and After* is the first monograph published on the eponymous oral history project, which was directed by Jolly from 2010 to 2013 and consisted of sixty interviews with feminist activists.<sup>1</sup> Jolly's study is monumental: it spans over four decades and all four UK countries, bringing together the voices, memories, and the afterlife of the UK's Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). Jolly encompasses the stories of women's groups, who did not officially associate with the WLM, such as the trade unions, the Black Women's Movement (BWM), and the Organization for Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD). Ultimately, Jolly's aim was twofold: first to challenge the understanding of the WLM as a cohesive and singular organized campaign; second, to adopt a centrifugal view of the 'second wave'. Her temporal scope supported her fundamental argument that feminist action does not come in 'waves', nor has the WLM's agenda been achieved.

Jolly argues that 'the challenge of feminism today is that the notion of choice, facilely equated with happiness, has become associated precisely with anti-or "post"-feminism...women in Britain have greater autonomy, though not greater equality.'<sup>2</sup> To assess the successes and failures of the WLM, Jolly traces the activists' lives, commencing with their childhoods in the 1940s and 1950s to questions of death. Jolly's study uncovers unparalleled insights into the activists' campaigns, ideas, and the lifestyles they led from the 1960s onwards, as her narration cleverly weaves between the activists' personal stories and the larger headline-making events of the British WLM.

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<sup>1</sup> The project's archive is available online via the British Library, see: <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood#>

<sup>2</sup> Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1968 – Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 217.

Jolly's chapter devoted to oral history as a feminist method provides a helpful elucidation of the natural partnership between oral history and preserving the stories of women. In the *Sisterhood and After* project, Jolly and her research team incorporated 'long life interviews,' which meant that the interviews lasted approximately seven hours and went 'beyond the ostensible theme or achievement for which an individual is selected' to enable 'an individual to reflect and connect with their former self'.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Jolly's annotated archival transcriptions in the 'intelligent verbatim style' illuminate non-verbal cues.<sup>4</sup> For example, each interview ended with the question, 'how do you think your life compares to your mother's?' Jolly notes that almost all of the sixty participants exhaled before answering. Jolly's carefully crafted oral history methodology successfully delivers a more holistic social and emotional history of the British WLM.

Jolly attempts to include the voices of British women of color, especially in her interviews with Stella Dadzie, co-author of *The Heart of The Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, and Pragna Patel, Director of Southall Black Sisters.<sup>5</sup> Jolly argues, 'attention to individual voices refreshes and complicates the question of difference between women and women's movements.'<sup>6</sup> In *The Heart of The Race*, Dadzie explicitly disassociated the BWM from any shared genealogy with the WLM, she argued, 'it just didn't make sense for us to be talking about changing lifestyles and attitudes, when we were dealing with issues of survival, like housing, education, and police brutality'.<sup>7</sup> *Sisterhood and After* could have been strengthened through a deeper investigation into why the BWM refused to be associated with the WLM. By emphasizing the shared goal of gender equality between the BWM and the WLM, Jolly's study understates the complex and ongoing conflicts between the two movements.

Jolly is forthcoming about the challenges of the movement's disintegration when constructing her monograph. She states, 'the *Sisterhood and After's* all white interviewing team were concerned about our ability to engage fully with questions of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>5</sup> Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of The Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Verso, 1985): this book, recipient of the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, is one of the key texts on Black British Feminism.

<sup>6</sup> Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, *The Heart of The Race*, 148 – 149.

racism, particularly with ethnic minority interviewees.<sup>8</sup> The result is a sense of tentativeness when Jolly writes about race. She details the formation of the OWAAD and provides extracts from interviews with Dadzie and Patel. These are prefaced with one to two sentences on race, such as:

‘First or second-generation immigrant women often had significantly more difficult memories...Pragna Patel, whose family came to the UK from Kenya in 1965, remembers surviving on toast...Stella Dadzie’s painful memories of homelessness reflected the difficulties of her parents’ mixed-race marriage.’<sup>9</sup>

Jolly does not pursue this line of inquiry further and does not delve into why immigrant women had more difficult childhood memories than the white feminist activists she interviewed. One has to wonder whether the analysis of race relations could have been richer if Jolly and her team of researchers had asked black and Asian PhD history students to conduct the oral history interviews with the OWAAD and the BWM members? Perhaps this decision is reflective of the chronic underrepresentation of Black British women and women from other ethnic minority groups in the UK’s higher education system and in academic posts.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the magnitude of Jolly’s project, her detailed exploration of feminist oral history methodology and memory, and her inclusive intentions, unanswered questions about how race interacted with and influenced feminist activists’ experiences in the UK linger after reading *Sisterhood and After*.

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<sup>8</sup> Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 248.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>10</sup> See ‘Fewer than 1% of UK University Professors are Black, Figures Show’ (*The Guardian UK*, 28 February 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/27/fewer-than-1-of-uk-university-professors-are-black-figures-show>; in 2018, there were only 25 black female professors employed by UK universities; Nicola Rollock, ‘Staying Power: The Career Experiences and Strategies of UK Black Female Professors’ (February 2019), *University and College Union*: [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10075/Staying-Power/pdf/UCU\\_Rollock\\_February\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10075/Staying-Power/pdf/UCU_Rollock_February_2019.pdf)