

*Social and Women's History: An Investigation Into the Importance of the Mundane,  
Unextraordinary, and Oppressed*

With the emergence of the French Annales School following the cessation of the Second World War, the historical discipline ushered in a new, more refined gaze at the past's methodological survey. While men like Theodore Momson, a superstar within academic circles, crafted works that discussed political leaders, historic battles, and the generalized, less-specific structures of once-great civilizations, the growing popularity of historical concepts, like the French Annales School, generated a divergent set of expectations for both academic and popular historians. While Momson's esteemed, celebrated work, *The History of Rome*, underscored the importance of studying and analyzing important historical figures, like Julius Caesar, his meticulous attention to military action created gaping holes within the historical record. For academic historians like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, these gaps not only demonstrated the need for structural changes within historical cataloging, they also presented an opportunity to evaluate and study the mundane, everyday lives- facets that monographs like Momson's unwittingly ignored. The explosion of popularity in diversifying the historical discipline, therefore, allows investigating historians a unique opportunity in weighing the importance of social and women's history in regards to the already established "popular history." Social history and its consequential branching into women's history delivers a unique and vital perspective in analyzing, understanding, and documenting the past. Through these schools of thought, the historical record widens our understanding of the sociopolitical structures of different societies, offering an intersectional glimpse into marginalized groups' erased histories.

In January of 1796, Martha Ballard and her pioneering family endured strenuous, arduous conditions. As a midwife for her local municipality, and the surrounding rural community,

Ballard traversed through thickly laid snow, thunderous windstorms and meandered across icy rivers to help deliver children across the growing state of Maine. Unlike many women of her time, however, Ballard meticulously recorded meaningful, often mundane, and uninteresting accounts of her day-to-day life as a midwife, mother, and housewife. Take, for example, her account of January 7th, 1796. Singularly stating that the weather remained "cloudy" and her only notable achievement came from the knitting of a pair of socks, Ballard inadvertently presented a critical benchmark for the perusal into the study of her life.<sup>1</sup> For Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a prominent historian at Harvard University, the contents of Ballard's diary offered an essential tool for the investigation into the study of early-America. Within her acclaimed monograph, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, Ulrich richly underscored the importance of social history and its applications. Before the arrival of social history as a significant historical methodology, ordinary women, such as Ballard, remained left outside of the historical canon. More importantly, however, ordinary people's erasure of accounts by previous methodologies disallowed historians from understanding the full portrait of society and its various structures.

As Ulrich presented within her monograph, social history distinguishes why this form of record-keeping pushes the boundaries of history to important, undiscovered realms. Take, for example, the examination of Ballard and her family. Martha Ballard, a multi-faced, dynamic character in the narrative of early-American history, existed as an ordinary citizen. As a woman of no significant wealth, Ballard performed her duties as a mother and midwife purely for survival with no access to political agency. Ballard's role as a midwife so fully represented the mundane and ordinary that her accounts would have been lost to history without her meticulous

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<sup>1</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 205-206.

record-keeping. However, through these unextraordinary diary entries that the importance of social history fully pronounces itself. On August 19th, 1787, Ballard recorded that she had given medical remedies to a woman who had given birth days prior, stating that "[Mr. Hinkley's wife] remained poorly till afternoon then by remedys and other means shee got Easier," Ballard gave a critical gaze into how simple diary entries allow for historical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> According to Ulrich, the investigation into this particular entry details the various ways in which Ballard's medical expertise benefited her community, especially when regarding the physical health of the women under her charge.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the entries of August 1787, Ballard recorded various accounts of helping women dealing with postpartum medical maladies.<sup>4</sup> By examining these examples, Ulrich detailed the particular reason why social history represents perhaps the most important form of historical interpretation. Through the investigation into these accounts and entries, the historical record is enriched with the life of a woman who protected her community from child mortality. While past historians, like Theodore Momson, would have ignored individual accounts such as Ballard's, Ulrich's perusal into the ordinary midwife's life and struggles detailed how the average colonial woman perceived the world and carved a space within it. Moreover, because Ballard maintained fastidious accounts of her day-to-day life, social historians like Ulrich allow colonial America's methodological study to develop into a more nuanced, personal survey. This is due, in part, to essential interpretations that social history provides historiography. The careful examination of Ballard's diary reveals much more than a midwife's simple account and her experiences within society. The conscientious examination of Ballard, her family, and most importantly, her work as a woman in colonial healthcare, Ulrich offers a panorama of women

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 40-46.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 36-41.

across developing America. Using Ballard's rich experiences, such as her care and treatment of John Shaw's laboring wife in May of 1809, underscored that the impact of social history on historiography must not go understated. Female midwives across colonial America performed the same duties and held the same responsibilities that Ballard herself recounts.<sup>5</sup>

Historians need to recognize social history's impacts when gazing astutely at primary source documents, like Martha Ballard's diary. By taking a critical lens to women's everyday lives in colonial America, a fresher perspective comes into focus. Investigating historians, using Ulrich's cleverly developed monograph as an example, must utilize social history to uncover how daily lives, outside of aristocratic perspectives and accounts, detail the real history of colonial America and its various structures. While the study of men like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Alexander Hamilton do allow for the portrait of the early governing structure to highlight how the political foundations developed, social history offers a much more critical perspective. While much less ostentatious than perhaps Momson's approach, the methodological application of social history offers a more intensive examination into society, culture, and interpersonal relationships of the colonial epoch.

By utilizing the entries Ballard left behind, our understanding of women as dynamic entities comes into focus. While previous methodology left these women outside of various studies, Ulrich's interpretation of *The Midwife's Tale*, underscores a pressing need for new perspectives and stories. Engaging with a singular individual from the primary sources left behind, historians understand that women engaged in roles of medicine that the newly emerging professional doctor could not handle. In examining Ballard, for example, Ulrich presents the discourse with a woman who worked tirelessly as a mother, making clothes, tending to crops, preparing meals, and, when her husband found himself in prison for debt, as the head of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 309.

household.<sup>6</sup> The advantage to utilizing personal narratives comes from their ability to tell us about both the authors' own experiences, while also setting the backdrop for societal functioning. How many other women participated in the same domestic and professional responsibilities as Ballard? How many other rural citizens across America faced hardship as America transitioned from a collection of colonies into a united nation? With social history, and the perusal into the lives of the ordinary, historical understanding of these perceptions and worries paint a more detailed portrait of society- a facet that remains continually unanswered by consensus history.

In investigating the life and legacy of Martha Ballard, and her significant contributions to the discipline of social history, the importance of historians to analyze and interpret emotional accounts left behind remains paramount. As social history investigates ordinary people's lives and their reactions to the social structures surrounding them, historians like Ulrich utilize loss and tragedy to depict ordinary people's experiences further. Take, for example, Ballard's account of death within her community and her reactions to brutal loss. In February of 1801, Ballard recorded that she and her family attended the funeral for the son of John V Davis. Unlike the other deaths that Ballard records throughout her diary, Davis' son's funeral represents an essential look at colonial Maine's social portrait. As an illegitimate child to a prominent figure within Kennebec, the death, funeral, and autopsy of John Davis represented a societal conundrum. As a midwife, Ballard's appearance at the autopsy, where she participated in investigating the cause of death to the child, demonstrated significant notions of women and their place in the medical field.<sup>7</sup> For Ulrich, Ballard performing the autopsy offered a glimpse into the ways women enacted agency within their various professions. As a practicing midwife, Ballard's duty required her to give both her professional opinions and expertise.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 260-272.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 236-237, 248..

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

For social historians, this account of womanhood work outside of the domestic sphere remains nothing short of significant. As a woman in early-America, Ballard existed outside political autonomy, however, Ulrich's account of her place at the autopsy offers the historical record something more than baseline misogyny; not only did Ballard's role as a midwife require her to attend this examination, her contemporaries relied on her medical expertise to secure accurate findings.<sup>9</sup> This specific instance of women working outside of the home underlines why social history offers essential insights into the historical record. Through the implementation of Ballard's diary, historians like Ulrich further detail gender-relations within early-American society and how, sometimes, the lines between gender and duty confounded our understanding of social structures. Social history, and the browsing of ordinary lives, underscores why this methodology is not only the most interesting within academic circles, it's also the most enlightening. Without social historians like Ulrich investigating ordinary women's life and trials, the understanding of colonial America only offers an elitist version of historical events. Ordinary citizens account for most historical characters and to ignore their contributions, no matter how minuscule, leaves wide gaps in our depiction of events and outcomes. By studying social history as the principal historical methodology, investigating historians continually uncover and explore rich histories that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

The development of social history as both a methodological construct and its profound impacts on academic historiography offers diverging perspectives to explain the events of the historical canon. In unveiling previously unimportant primary documents, such as Ballard's diary, social historians deliver a unique viewpoint in interpreting periods like colonial America. By detailing the working-class's mundane and seemingly unextraordinary lives, a fuller understanding of history presents itself. However, the question arises on the subject of whom

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 248-251.

investigating historians should study. While social history became a vital component of academic historiography, many marginalized groups continued to see their histories, both erased and rejected. However, the introduction of women's history upon the historical record hoped to remedy this facet of academic erasure. Social history, while a significant methodological construct that contributes a tremendous understanding of society and its structures, remains only one part of the puzzle. Women's history, a social history product, goes even further to clarify and examine erased narratives. This particular, specific branch of historiography finds its significance in studying, understanding, and interpreting women's lives across various epochs. More substantially, historians who engage in the study of women's history find that their investigations lead them into the constructs of gender, misogyny, and how intersectional trends of prejudice lead to a different experience for those who have historically identified as female.

Understanding the importance of women's history on the discipline refines the practice of social history. While social historians, like Ulrich, delved into the stories left behind by ordinary citizens, what becomes of those accounts who have suffered under structural oppression? Women's history, specifically when discussing Black women, allow these stories to document a series of sexual violence, racism, and structural oppression unique to Black women. For the women's historian Jennifer Morgan, these concepts presented a critical addition to the historical record. In her investigative article, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder": Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," the perception of Black women's bodies underscored a significant proponent of both racial conceptions and their connections to the developing sociopolitical structure of colonial America. According to Morgan, the perception of Black women as an inferior, "savage" subset of humanity stems from White

colonialism and its subjugation of African slaves.<sup>10</sup> By attributing inhuman behavior to Black women's bodies, by ascribing inhumanity to the enslaved women being removed from West Africa, White Europeans, such as Robert Ligon, sought to define a dichotomized standard. While White women, followers of the Judeo-Christian tenants that ruled Western Europe vis-a-vis de facto cultural control, represented chastity, innocence, and magnanimity, Black women symbolized a more insidious sort of cultural phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

For the enslaved Black women, their cultural practices, their differing styles of dress, and, most importantly, their darker skin not only represented something dangerous, it represented a phenomenon that needed to benefit the machine of European colonization. As Ligon defined these women as both beautiful and uncivilized, an instance of cognitive dissonance that would later account for high rates of sexual violence, the colonizer dove into a vital benchmark in oppression, significant to Black women's history.<sup>12</sup> While these women perhaps had a differing set of beauty standards not yet observed by White colonizers, they could never hold the same prestige as their White contemporaries because of their skin color. Misogynoir, a term used to define the intersectional oppression that applies explicitly to Black women, found its roots in the early years of European colonialism. By defining these women as different from their White

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer L Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 1 (1997), 167-170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-174.

<sup>12</sup> Stereotypes that Ligon outlines in his diary entries ultimately detail the ways in which Black women suffer in healthcare. For many women, their pain is ignored, their treatments are not swift, and these women are left vulnerable to medical malpractice because of racism. Stemming from both Eugenics and the stereotypes that Ligon describes, Black women have been victims of racism within healthcare that both endangers their safety and emotional stability. I added this footnote under this section because it's important to discuss the ways in which these structures of oppression still permeate our understanding of medicine and its relation to Black women. Moreover, Black women are more likely to live impoverished and not having access to good healthcare, only deepening their suffering, this can be found in Morgan's article, however, I thought it important to expand on this development.

counterparts, Black women swiftly underwent a process of oppression, violence, and ridicule; this same ridicule is still so prevalent in sociopolitical institutions today.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the Black and White women's juxtaposition explains why focusing on women's history remains a paramount tenant of new-age historiography. According to Morgan, while seen as "beautiful," these women remained the objects of oppression because of their skin color. Black women, both as women and slaves, found themselves in a malevolent position. The vilification of their bodies, the hypersexualization of their secondary sex organs, and the demonization of their physical appearances, such as their hair and unique cosmetology, created an evil stereotype that these women were unworthy of human decency. Ligon and his contemporaries created an entire demographic of free labor- ripe for exploitation.<sup>14</sup> By ensuring White supremacy safeguarded the governing institution, Morgan emphasizes that Black women specifically remained controlled. Therefore, the gendering of Black women and their bodies highlights that institutions of sociopolitics, stemming back to colonial America, disregarded, erased, and dehumanized women of color and their achievements.<sup>15</sup>

Women's history, especially when observing Black women's history, offers established historiography more than just the stories of women of color and narratives, however. When historians, such as Morgan, engage and interpret the social and racial constructs that impacted Black women, historical discourse transforms with complex dialogue. Black women interacted with different social regulations, different sets of expectations, and completely different worldviews than their affluent, White contemporaries. An enslaved Black woman viewed the world in a different manner than perhaps a wealthy governor. Therefore, because these narratives remain so contrasting, historians have a duty to engage with these experiences. The

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 170-171.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 170-174.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 175-180.

methodological consideration of women's history and its engagement with historically marginalized groups' narratives enriches and enhances established history. Just as Morgan interacted with the gendering of Black women and their bodily perception of White colonizers, similar studies conducted by women's historians offer a way to explain how institutions of misogynoir and structural oppression develop and continue. As a reasonably new methodology, women's history underscores the importance of studying marginalized and oppressed. In its most raw form, this method's entire focus takes from social history and examines how women have historically shaped the historical canon's continuity.

Women's history, and the examination of women of color, remain perhaps some of the most important conceptions of how historians interact and interpret the past. Nevertheless, women's history does not only exist to define the origins of oppression and marginalization. Instead, this specific methodology highlights the necessity to investigate more modern histories, histories that probe sexual violence, structural power, and women's role within these systems. While historians, like Morgan, offer a detailed account of gender and its conceptions within colonial America, other historians offer a different benefit to historiography. For Danielle McGuire, a women's historian investigating the Jim Crow South, Black women's narratives fully encapsulate misogynoir's sociopolitical atmosphere. In her article, "It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped": Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle," McGuire provides the historical canon a glimpse into the sexual assault of a Black woman, Betty Owens. According to McGuire, the story of Owens, a student at Florida A&M University, exemplifies how structural power and misogynoir endangered Black women. After being sexually assaulted seven times by a gang of White men, led by Patrick Scarborough,

Owens reluctantly called for legal action.<sup>16</sup> The investigation into the connections between sexual violence and misogynoir allows McGuire's article to illuminate the importance of women's history. By describing the courtroom's polarization and its matching fervor within the local community, McGuire argues that while Black women have historically spoken out against sexual violence and bodily harm, a specific "culture of dissemblance" coerced them into silence.<sup>17</sup> For women's historians, this "culture of dissemblance" offers an intriguing proponent of structural power as a methodological focus.

While Black women remain the least protected demographic, history underscores that the voices held less value than their White counterparts. While White women held no political agency, women of color found their sovereignty, and physical safety, in a more sinister predicament. Black women, like Owens, often had their physiological health attacked by the very legal system pledging equal opportunity. Therefore, when historians engage with this form of history, the study of women of color, historiography becomes ingrained with meaningful, less discussed experiences. By studying these acts of violence, and the subsequent upheaval within the Black community, narratives, like Owens' own, detail how Black women understood and interacted with White supremacy and misogynoir both in their everyday lives and on a structural level. Women's history allows the historical understanding of oppression and Black women's personal sovereignty to complete our understanding of social structures, the judicial system, and how ordinary women endured these institutions. Just as Martha Ballard's diary allowed Ulrich to encapsulate an ordinary midwife's life and her responsibilities, both in and out of the home, historians like Morgan and McGuire offer historiography the crucial narratives Black women and the sociopolitical barriers they endured.

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<sup>16</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, "'It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped': Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle," no. 3 (2004), 907-909.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 913-917.

Moreover, the methodological survey of women's history allows historians to engage with marginalized groups and their narratives on a much deeper, holistic level. In turn, the refusal to engage in these sorts of historical cataloging not only hinders our ability to accurately and objectively interpret primary sources, the erasure of these narratives only serves to continue racial prejudice. More blatantly, without the contributions of women's history to the discipline, academic and novice historians will continue to deem these histories unimportant, leading to erasure, which all historians must overcome.

Both social history and women's history serve as perhaps the most significant and essential methodological additions to all established historiography. While social history offers a glimpse into the narratives of ordinary people previously left out of the canon, women's history expands on this facet, bringing marginalized women's narratives, specifically Black women, to the forefront of study. Historians like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who used the meticulous diary entries of the midwife Martha Ballard to detail the social setting of rural Maine, offer historiography a better understanding of how systems of the past impacted the average individual. However, for Danielle McGuire and Jennifer Morgan, the engagement with Black women's lived experiences, and their oppressors underscore how misogynoir and structural power interact to create different experiences and narratives than previously recorded. Social history and its consequential branching into women's history delivers a unique and important perspective in analyzing, understanding, and documenting the past. Through these schools of thought, the historical record widens our understanding of the sociopolitical structures of different societies and offers an intersectional glimpse into marginalized groups' erased histories.