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Women and the Domestic Slave Trade in the Antebellum South

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Editorial introduction

“History of the South: Southern Symbols,” one of the most popular history courses taught by Dr. Maggy Carmack at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, is a survey of the South’s history and culture, starting with early English settlement and progressing to the modern day. It attempts to interpret “Southern” symbols and how the South is imagined today versus the reality of the past. One of the major readings assigned for this class is Steven Deyle’s famous book, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (2005), which concludes by arguing that “only by acknowledging the centrality of the domestic slave trade to the early history of the United States can we truly understand the many complexities of antebellum American life.” Perhaps most students would agree with Deyle that the domestic slave trade was central to antebellum life, but the question how the domestic slave trade worked to shape white Southerners conceptions of themselves and their place in an evolving market society could always be understood differently. In the following paper, Allie Cobb takes a gendered approach to assessing the domestic slave trade, exploring the roles of gender and sexuality during the antebellum period based on her reading of Deyle’s work.

While the domestic slave trade and the market economy were symbiotically connected, these entities also created links in other realms. During the antebellum period, both were used as tools by Southern slave owners to keep a hierarchy of society and self-fashion themselves at the top, keeping both white and black women as inferior. The women's place was traditionally at the bottom of the hierarchy. While white women may have fared better than black slave women, an undeniable link was created between these two groups through somewhat paralleled experiences. The domestic slave trade and the market economy perpetuated this societal hierarchy entailing a woman's traditional place and created similarities between white and black women by constructing an environment that reinforced ideas of a woman's sexuality, connected womanhood to motherhood, and broke apart both white and slave families.

Female sexuality has been a cause for debate for many centuries. The proper white woman was expected to be "pure" but not totally sexless. These women were expected to fit into very narrow limits of how sexuality was properly expressed. When white women were sexually active outside of marriage it was known to make her less desirable. However, being a complete "prude" was just as undesirable. In other terms, a white woman could not be overly or insufficiently sexual without repercussions.

The domestic slave trade, fueled by the market economy, gave white men power over slave women's sexuality and caused slave women to face some of the same problems as their white counterparts. When slave women were "sexual[ly] licentious" they were often sold in the slave trade as evident in the case of two sold Alabama slaves whose owner called them "incorrigible strumpets," and another case in Georgia when a slave woman was sold "because of her liking the men too well" (232). If slaves were sexually promiscuous they were punished, but if they refused sexual advances made by their masters they were also punished by being sold.

Many of these women were not able to fight off physical advances and therefore many suffered the experience of rape by their master.

When a white woman did have sex with her husband, it was largely for the purpose of conception. A white woman's sexuality was linked directly to her becoming a mother. Indeed, a woman's role in her marriage and her life was to be a mother and take care of her family in the domestic realm. If a woman was unable to have children, it was often shameful to the couple and detrimental to the wife's status as a woman.

In this same manner, the domestic slave trade confined slave women's roles to this traditional sphere of motherhood. Fueled by the demand for more slaves, slave traders realized the potential of a female slave's reproductive abilities to bring a profit. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson stated, "a woman who brings a child every two years [was] more profitable than the best man of the farm" (28). By the end of the eighteenth century, "a woman's reproductive ability had clearly become part of her appraised value" (28). Meanwhile, single men and women who could not have children were sold before couples who produced children (270). At auctions, a woman's reproductive abilities could be "assessed" by looking at her genitals and examining her breastfeeding abilities (264). This clearly shows that the domestic slave trade placed value on slave women in accordance with their ability to reproduce. The bond between womanhood and motherhood was established for slave women as it was for white women. By defining and controlling a woman's sexuality through punishments, be it not getting married or a sale, and by confining women's sexuality to the notion of reproduction and motherhood, the domestic slave trade confined women to traditional spheres while asserting the white men's, or the controllers' dominance over them.

While a woman's role was to take care of the family, the domestic slave trade and market economy often competed with that ability for both white and slave women by breaking up families. White women's husbands who were employed by the slave trade were obviously the breadwinners of the family thus strengthening their place at the top of the family's hierarchy. However, this increased economic gain could not blind their wives from the other difficulties the slave trade placed on their relationship. The trade demanded traders be gone for months at a time sometimes and both husbands and wives expressed that they missed each other. Also while on these trips, men often engaged in the vices of the lucrative slave-trading world, including prostitutes, gambling, and exorbitant drinking. These activities and their consequences, such as sexually transmitted diseases, put a strain on the family dynamic back home.

Slave women endured a more obvious family breakup through the domestic slave trade. Slave owners were able to distance themselves from the domestic slave trade and the market economy by a cloak of paternalism. Paternalism enabled white men to see themselves as benevolent caregivers who had the slaves' best interests at heart. In its very definition, a hierarchical relationship implies that white men assumed the role of parent above their slaves who were thought of as children. Many owners said that the sales were for the slaves' own good and many admitted that they, as Henry Clay said, "take care of [their] slaves...They multiply on [their] hands; [they] cannot find employment for them, and [they are] ultimately, but most reluctantly and painfully, compelled to part with some of them" (212-213). The owners used paternalism as a justification for getting involved in the slave trade and thus contributing to the market economy.

The slaves, especially the women, did not see it this way. A Memphis resident told of an account of seeing a slave woman have her family broken up during auction in which "she begged

and implored her new master on her knees to buy her children also, but it had no effect...it was truly heart rending to hear her cries when they were taking her away” (263). Laws passed against the sale of children in several states serve as evidence as to how often that occurred before the legislation. Steven Deyle brought up infanticide, which often occurred after a slave woman was raped by her master. This was just another example of how slave women were stripped of control over their ability to fulfill their roles as mothers by white men at the top of society.

Whether white and slave women were conscious of the connections between their confined sexualities and their traditional roles as mothers was not explicitly expressed, but their connection between broken families was. While sometimes slaves were sold with their children fathered by their masters at the insistence of the master’s wife, many white women were sympathetic (or empathetic) of the slave woman’s familial plight. The grief expressed at a slave’s sale mostly came from the wives of the masters. Once, a man even had to buy back a family that he had sold because it tormented his wife so much (218).

The domestic slave trade sparked abolitionist sentiment in the North that trickled down to the white women of the South. Interestingly, there is a direct connection with a woman’s traditional role and the way abolition was marketed to her. Abolitionists targeted women with the problem of the destruction of the slave family as their platform. The breaking up of the family was a direct attack on a woman’s role. Deyle states that it was “[people’s] belief that issues concerning the domestic sphere were of special importance to women and that this was an area in which women had both a right and a moral responsibility to act” (127). This only furthered the idea that a woman’s place was that of the traditional sphere. When women spoke out in public about this idea, it was with this reasoning that they justified them actually taking a stand and having a political voice. Abolitionists thought that in the same way the domestic slave trade and

market economy had created brotherhoods among the traders and business partners, the women of the nation needed to form a sisterhood of their own that rested on protecting the woman's traditional place (189).

By keeping women inferior to white men through the domestic slave trade charged by the market economy, the white males of the South were able to position themselves at the top of society. White and slave women were not only connected in their place below that of white men, but also in how they got there: by being imposed by strict definitions of proper sexuality that linked womanhood to motherhood and the breakdown of their families. While the domestic slave trade perpetuated this inferiority, it also sparked abolitionist sentiment in women for the same reasons and therefore contributed to the eventual demise of slavery.

About the author

Hailing from Batesburg-Leesville, South Carolina, Allie is currently a senior English and history major at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. She hopes to pursue a Master's degree in American history.

Reference

Deyle, Steven. *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.