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Book Review: Steven Deyle's Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life

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Steven Deyle is a professor of history at the University of Houston. He specializes in nineteenth-century U.S. social and political history, especially slavery and the Old South. His book *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (2005) was the recipient of the Southern Historical Association’s Bennett H. Wall Award for best book on southern business or economic history. It was also a finalist for Yale’s Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery’s Frederick Douglass Prize. This is Deyle’s only book currently in publication, but his next work is entitled “Honorable Men: Isaac Bolton, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the Murder of James McMillan,” which also focuses on the antebellum South. (http://vi.uh.edu/faculty/deyle_s.asp)

Deyle has several aims with *Carry Me Back*, and I believe he meets them all. First, he says the domestic slave trade was the “lifeblood of the southern slave system,” (4) and as such, it deserves more scholarship than currently exists on the topic. Deyle says that in order to understand the Antebellum South, and in fact the early U.S. as a whole, we must understand the domestic slave trade and all of its components. The interregional trade of slaves between the upper South and the lower South served to link the two together with common economic interests and ensured that the upper states would secede with their Deep South neighbors. The demand for slaves in the lower states raised the value of slaves and made it the second most valuable investment in the country next to land. Because of the dependence the trade created between the two regions of the South, “not only was the domestic slave trade responsible for the creation of the Cotton Kingdom and for bringing it great wealth, but in many respects, it also contributed to its eventual demise” (6).

Deyle also aims to prove the domestic slave trade was not separate from the market revolution occurring in America, but was actually an important part of it. He says this trade is generally absent from studies on the market revolution because those studies tend to focus on the North and how transportation, communication, and industrialization transformed society and modernized business practices there. Deyle argues that the interregional slave trade in the South “was not simply a consequence of this development (the market revolution) but a central component compelling it,” (6). He says the Southern slave traders employed market techniques just as their Northern counterparts in business did, and he shows how they used new forms of communication and transportation to increase their profits and expand their markets. For example, the invention of the telegraph in 1844 allowed traders to discuss prices and demand across long distances. This mostly benefitted the larger traders, but all dealers in the slave market used new communication whenever it was possible. The traders also made use of the financial instruments of the market revolution by borrowing
money to start their business and extending credit to customers.

The first three chapters deal with the origins of the domestic trade, the rise and fall of the Cotton Kingdom, and how the interregional slave trade contributed to both. Those chapters serve as excellent background information on the institution of the domestic trade, but for me personally, the most interesting parts of the book are the later chapters that deal with the details of the trade and how various groups of people viewed it. Deyle describes in detail how slaves would be transported in coffles where rows and rows of people were shackled together and forced to walk up to 25 or 30 miles a day. He portrays the slave trader as someone looking to get rich quick, and most of the time they succeeded. A slave trader could easily make twice the salary of a bank president with a few good sales, and they knew how to pick out the slaves who would sell easily. They also knew how to deceive buyers by making the slaves look younger and healthier on the auction block.

Deyle also describes the perceptions of the northern abolitionists who wanted to end the interregional slave trade through congressional intervention. He discusses northern attacks on slavery through newspapers and works such as Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and how abolitionists made special appeals to both women and children’s sense of morality. After discussing how “outsiders” viewed the trade, Deyle describes the effects the trade had on white southerners. He states that slaveholders were able to deflect the political arguments against slavery much more easily than the moral attacks by abolitionists. Paternalism was the slaveholder’s answer to every question on the morality of slavery. Slave owners proclaimed they rarely sold slaves willingly, and only sold those who misbehaved. Many claimed to be tricked by ambitious traders, on whom they placed much of the blame for the interregional trade’s existence.

The final chapter discusses what the interregional trade meant for those who were actually being bought and sold on the auction block. Deyle notes that, while not all slaves experienced the trade between states, “for the vast majority of African Americans, the domestic slave trade was a dreadful reality that posed a constant threat to their lives,” (245). This chapter also discusses how many slaves resisted being sold by running away, faking an illness or injury, or even taking their own lives or the lives of their children. These acts of defiance served to undermine the paternalistic ideal their masters were trying to portray.

Deyle makes a convincing argument that the domestic slave trade in America was in fact a business that contributed to the market revolution in its own way. He also demonstrates that this trade became so entrenched in southern society and had the upper and lower South so economically invested in each other that it led to the construction of the Cotton Kingdom as well as its demise in the Civil War.

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