

# {essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the  
University of Virginia

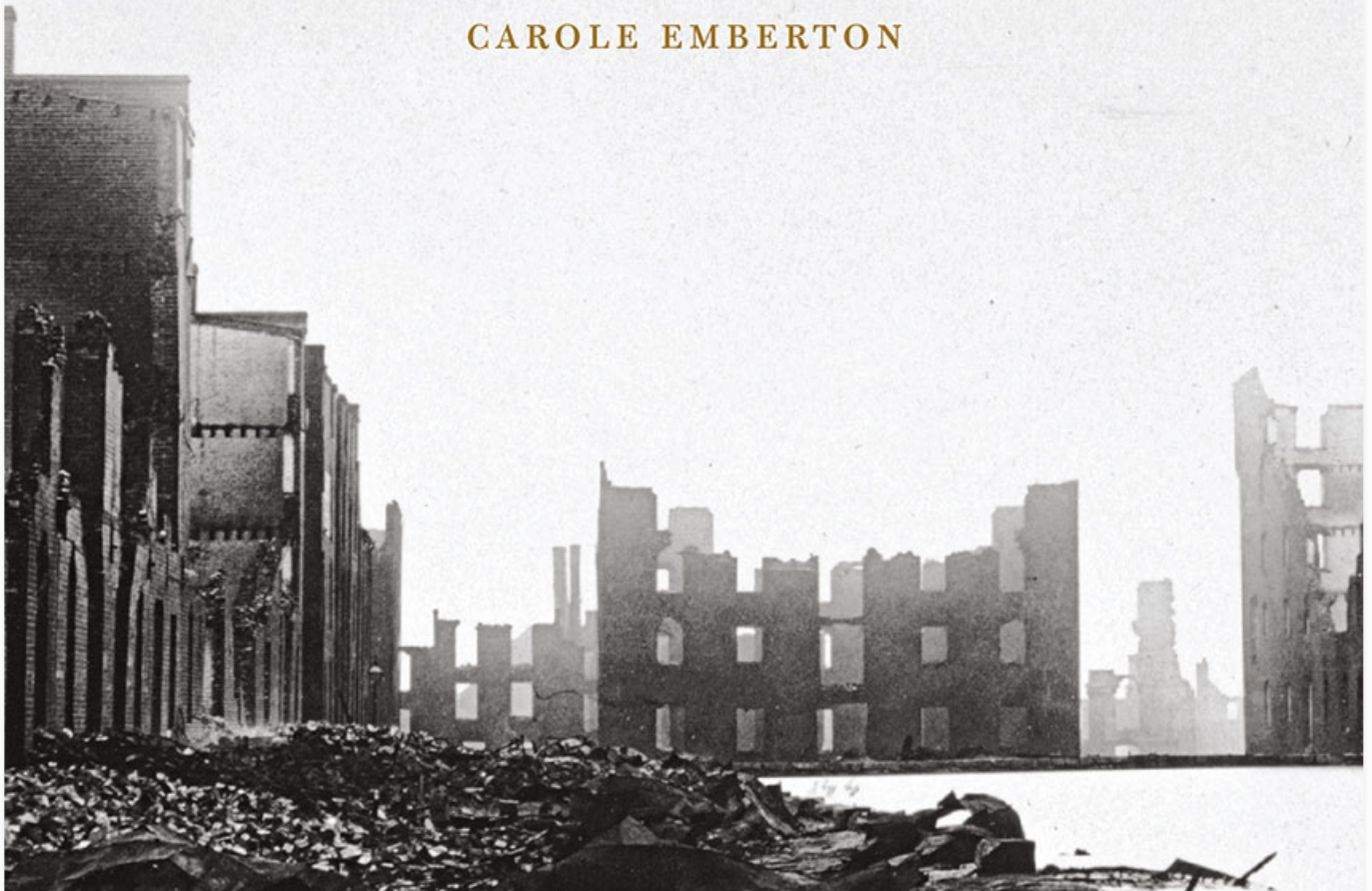
## Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War

# *Beyond Redemption*

Race, Violence,  
and the American South  
after the Civil War



CAROLE EMBERTON





Volume 47 (2014)

### Reviewed Work(s)

*Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War.* By Carole Emberton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). 296 pp. Cloth, \$45.00.

The political violence that pervaded the postbellum South has long held scholars' attention. Carole Emberton's *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South* sheds new light on the civic theology of redemption that pervaded the postwar United States and its associated political violence by rethinking the origins, scope, and meaning of both. Ever ambitious, Emberton avers that her study seeks to illuminate how notions of redemption and political violence provided the basis for the "making of manhood, freedom, and citizenship" in the aftermath of the Civil War (2). Her focus on big questions is admirable, and fortunately Emberton's work rarely falters under the weight of such lofty aspirations. With originality and insight, Emberton has provided an invaluable contribution that should compel historians to rethink political violence in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The language of redemption, Emberton posits, provided a "multivalent discourse that gave voice to disparate movements and agendas" in the postbellum period as Americans sought, paradoxically, to seek redemption from violence and redemption through violence (4). Nowhere was this ambivalence more evident than in the experience of African Americans, where the interplay between redemptory language, violence, and state power combined to create an ambiguous meaning for African-American citizenship. Emberton exposes the inconsistencies in the liberal ideology underlying emancipation, an ideology that she suggests sought to use state power to free and make citizens out of African-American slaves, while also fearing that state support could unintentionally breed dependence and insolence. Emberton suggests that white northerners sought to explain the violence and suffering that

African Americans experienced immediately after emancipation as an unfortunate but necessary byproduct of their nascent state of citizenship. Here, Emberton shows how notions of black suffering and redemption provided an important mechanism that allowed northerners to make the difficulties of emancipation and black citizenship intelligible within their existing ideological framework.

The book's most notable achievement rests in how Emberton traces a constellation that connects redemptive civic theology, violence, and manhood. Emberton argues that a sense of "martial manhood" grew out of the Civil War, which "reduced freedom to nothing less than a violent struggle between men" and consummated a relationship between violence and democratic politics (9). Like notions of redemption, the discourse surrounding martial manhood proved malleable. Emberton contends that African-Americans' ability to exercise the legitimate use of violence undergirded their claims to freedom, manhood, and citizenship. Conversely, she notes that southern whites viewed martial manhood and citizenship in more exclusionary terms; indeed, African-Americans' claims to citizenship and their acting out of martial manhood provided, in the view of conservative white southerners, a direct threat to white citizenship and freedom itself. Thus, the violence that marked Redemption in the 1870s was nothing less than the result of this militarization of politics and white southern men's attempts to monopolize claims to citizenship and manhood on the contested political terrain of the postbellum South. For Emberton, the establishment of "home-rule" by conservative white southerners amounted to nothing less than an attempt to circumscribe who could make claims to manhood, freedom, and citizenship. Violence was integral to this process.

Emberton is less convincing when she attempts to nationalize Reconstruction violence. Emberton posits that northerners generally accepted southern violence – and, in turn, lost their faith in the efficacy of black citizenship – because they shared in this discourse of martial manhood and white supremacy. In essence, Emberton suggests that violence provided a common grammar that made the discourse of martial manhood legible for northern and southern whites. Yet, while Emberton does well to demonstrate that this discourse transcended region, she seems to confuse visibility for preeminence. Indeed,

northerners showed marked ambivalence for southern violence throughout the 1870s. To suggest that all, or even most, northerners accepted southern violence serves to obscure more than it elucidates. Northerners often condemned southern violence in newspapers, and Congress repeatedly investigated and condemned, even if it did not overturn, the South's fraudulent elections. Given the ambivalence with which northerners received news of southern violence and paramilitary activity, the cross-sectional appeal of martial manhood and southern violence seems less concrete than Emberton suggests.

This critique aside, the disparate threads that Emberton attempts to tie together related to southern violence, redemption, and citizenship come together into a cogent argument. Her contribution to the study of southern violence far exceeds that of any existing monograph on the topic, especially in the way that it finds important continuities between violence in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and even later in the Jim-Crow South. Her work also provides an important contribution to the study of American manhood, and especially how the Civil War solidified the relationship between violence, manhood, and citizenship. For these reasons, her work warrants the attention of any serious student of the Civil War era, violence, or gender.

**Jacob S. Clawson**

*Auburn University*



Published by



[View all posts by](#)

**Book Reviews**

## 19th century, Civil War, Race

**COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.**

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

---

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑