

## Introduction

### *Fragments*

Joe Kizer and Tom Johnson were lynched on May 29, 1898. To the extent that we know anything definitive about the event, it is through the fragmentary and circumstantial accounts of the people who murdered them, and those who sympathized with this mob. The same absence masks our understanding of their lives. As is the case with so many other racial terror lynchings, historical evidence offers us only passing insight. Through the lens of history, we can understand how they came to be accused, murdered, and transformed into cautionary tales against Black criminality. Through the auspices of historical scholarship, we might begin to regard them as victims of a profoundly unjust system that reached its nadir at this liminal moment between the end of slavery and the full-scale implementation of Jim Crow apartheid. Both offer us incomplete narratives.

Still, the outline of their story, or at least its ending, is a familiar one. Johnson and Kizer were Black men, working as laborers and living around Concord, North Carolina. Later accounts would hint that the men were lawless, former convicts or at least dishonest. But prior to 1898, they were absent from the official records not just of arrest but of habitation or employment.<sup>1</sup> This is hardly unexpected: Ordinary Black folks rarely bore

<sup>1</sup> Almost certainly these characterizations were justifying fictions. A few days after the lynching, one article reported that “Kizer bore a bad reputation. He ran away from Union county with another woman, leaving a wife and three children. It is said that there were several indictments against him there. He came here last December. Johnston came here from Lincoln county and hauled coal for Mr. K.L. Craven last winter. He went to work for Mr. Bonds last March. He had, we learn, the mark of shackles on his ankles”; “A

either attention or held official interest without some suspicion of wrongdoing. As a category, Johnson, Kizer, and countless other Black people might be often remarked upon, but as individuals they undoubtedly attracted only passing interest from official chroniclers of their day. Perhaps they eluded much of this attention by design, or maybe it was solely the product of official disinterest. But as with so many other victims of lynching, white scrutiny eventually bore down upon them. That attention came to them by force late in the afternoon of May 29. Thirteen-year-old Emma Hartsell was discovered by her parents when they returned from church. She had been sexually assaulted and murdered.

With characteristic speed, Kizer and Johnson were accused. In the late afternoon, Joe Kizer was apparently headed to town to report the crime. This caused his employer to become suspicious, uncertain of how he came to possess knowledge of the incident. The employer held Kizer and summoned the police.<sup>2</sup> Tom Johnson was detained by a mob of citizens around the same time, though the undoubtedly paltry evidence that justified his capture went unreported. The twin posses that helped capture both of them followed the men into town and remained outside the jail, “a howling mob” for the next several hours.<sup>3</sup> Sometime between their arrival at the jail around 8:00, and a bit before 10:00 p.m., the mob found their way into the prison.<sup>4</sup> As was commonplace in lynchings, newspaper reports stressed the resistance of the police and jailers, even reporting the minor injuries that they suffered in their would-be defense. Using hammer and chisel, the mob broke eight locks, tied ropes around the men’s necks, and proceeded out of town.<sup>5</sup>

Horrible Crime,” *The Concord Times*, June 2, 1898. There were other bizarre and seemingly unfounded theories, like the notion that Tom Johnson was actually an alias for another man wanted on various charges: “Was it Joe Williams?” *Daily Concord Standard*, June 20, 1898. This kind of idle speculation and justification also served to prolong the story and, presumably, sell more newspapers.

<sup>2</sup> “Judge Lynch at Cabarrus,” *Lexington Dispatch*, June 1, 1898.

<sup>3</sup> “A Day of Tragedy,” *Daily Concord Standard*, May 30, 1898.

<sup>4</sup> “Cabarrus’ Day of Tragedy,” *Daily Concord Standard*, May 30, 1898.

<sup>5</sup> In his cultural history of the noose, Jack Shuler notes the difficulty of tying the knot properly, which leads to the supposition that most lynchings would not have had a noose but rather some approximation of it. This matters in part because it allows us to see the technological competencies of the crowd and to inhabit, however provisionally, their actions and decisions. I am not dedicating a chapter of this book to the rope or the (likely ersatz) noose that hanged the men. But as Shuler’s example demonstrates, that could well be a productive area of inquiry in many other lynchings: Jack Shuler, *The Thirteenth Turn: A History of the Noose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

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Joining in the mob were at least two doctors, a minister, and a reporter who documented each step in forensic detail. Once the mob was out of the town proper, they turned by Cold Water Lutheran Church and sought out “a spot suitable for hanging.”<sup>6</sup> Their site turned out to be a medium-sized dogwood, a curious choice in a forested area dotted with older growth and populated mostly with larger species of tree. The men were both hanged on the same tree at 10:44 p.m. The two attending doctors pronounced them dead ten minutes later.<sup>7</sup>

Hewing closely to the rituals of lynching, the mob “riddled” the men’s bodies with bullets. Those present in the mob, by some calculations up to 2,000 people, had first share of the lynching souvenirs. They took scraps of clothing from the bodies of the men, stripped a cap from Kizer’s head, cut pieces from Johnson’s brand new suspenders. Other mobs came the next day to share in the ongoing spectacle. They took more keepsakes from Kizer’s and Johnson’s bodies, stripped branches from the tree, used their penknives to cut off pieces of rope. The dead men were left hanging for a full day before, by routine, the Cabarrus County coroner pronounced them dead from the hands of unknown persons and ordered them buried. No kin or friends came forward to claim the bodies. Joe Kizer and Tom Johnson were buried by two other Black men pressed into service from the chain gang. Charles Barnhart and Ed Williams were the last human hands to touch the two, whether out of obligation or impulse to help them to a final resting place. The men were buried at the county home with no permanent markers on their graves.<sup>8</sup>

But Kizer and Johnson, or at least the popular perceptions created around them, were not yet forgotten. Over the coming months, minor details of their deaths showed up in newspapers state wide. Often these were notes about another souvenir of their lynching being found, or a retrospective judgment about their character and criminality. In short order, the specifics of their lynching were translated into symbols of a larger white supremacist repudiation of Black life. Again, familiar.

<sup>6</sup> “A Day of Tragedy,” *Daily Concord Standard*.

<sup>7</sup> “Judge Lynch at Cabarrus,” *Lexington Dispatch*. I base the composition of the landscape on the consultation of period maps of Cabarrus County. Of particular use was a map of “Rural Delivery Routes, Cabarrus County, NC” (Washington, DC: Post Office Department, 1921), in the North Carolina Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and “Soil map, North Carolina, Cabarrus County Sheet” (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Soils, 1910), in the collection of the author.

<sup>8</sup> “The Lynched Negroes Buried,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1898; “It’s All Over,” *Daily Concord Standard*, May 31, 1898.

In November, Emma Hartsell's father wrote a short letter linking their lynching to the cause of white supremacy and the repudiation of Fusion politics. As increasingly more symbolic cultural forms, the imagined figures of Kizer and Johnson showed up in songs and stories, serving as periodic invocations of white nostalgia. Undoubtedly too these memories were invoked on the other side of the color line. There Johnson and Kizer might have served as warning signs and reminders of the brutal savagery underneath the surface of the more quotidian racism of the later Jim Crow years. The stories and objects from their lynching remained a part of everyday life for the better part of a century, even if the men themselves were mostly forgotten.

The result of this speculation was a fragmentary narrative. What we know about Kizer and Johnson comes largely through the lens of their lynching, and from written records that trafficked in stereotype and innuendo. As with the majority of the thousands of victims of racial terror, we know little more than their names and supposed crimes. For many others, we have even less information. The work of historians and sociologists in the past twenty-five years has given us an abstract portrait of both lynching victims and mob members. This has been one way to address the paucity of evidence and the lack of surety: to reconstruct a collective identity through the pieces of evidence that we do have.<sup>9</sup>

Still, these are portrayals and interpretations marked largely by absence. At the center of such reconstructions is the gaping hole of the

<sup>9</sup> The historical scholarship on lynching particularly is classifiable through the rough categorizations of aggregate characterizations of lynching and more focused studies of specific elements of lynching. Historians and sociologists have made particular strides in recreating the historical conditions of lynching and of lynching victims. Especially useful for the former approach are W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993) and Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004). Likewise historical sociologists have been particularly focused on the documentation and characterization of historical victims of lynching. The most comprehensive of these studies is Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), which offers a collective, demographic characterization of the Black men killed by lynch mobs. This book follows more closely in the vein of interdisciplinary works in American and African American Studies on the culture of lynching. See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *The End of American Lynching* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

particular, the lack of specificity that in some ways reifies the obliterating violences done by the practice of lynching. Scholars have been far too fixed on interpretation and comprehension of events that were, if not singular, marked by their own neatly formulaic narratives in the form of a structuring violence. Lynchings were and are meant as events that create their own context and build their own historicity. To think that we can begin to comprehend them through narrative, even counternarrative, is to accept both their obliterative logic and their own creation of an historical context. Lynchings were never self-contained events – but they aspired to be. Part of the violence of a lynching was epistemic. Its ritual pageantry, routinized narratives, and other ties to the logics of white supremacy made each lynching a paradoxical event at once particular and part of a larger framework. In turn, these logics inform both the very information that scholars have access to and the means by which we shape our narratives. We have to resist these contemporaneous efforts at record keeping and historical creation and look at lynchings in light of the larger conceptual, material worlds from which they sprang.

I propose that we seek to understand lynching through a praxis of fragmentation. In *Gruesome Looking Objects*, I consider the things associated with the lynching of Tom Johnson and Joe Kizer and the stories attached to them. These objects and object narratives offer multiple, sometimes conflicting ways of understanding lynching both in their contemporaneous context and in the wake of memory during the many years afterward. This is an approach rooted in the methodologies of material culture, a close study of objects extant and destroyed, real and imagined. This method is both a narrative and a material fragmentation: the remains of *things* and of stories that were constructed as complete explanations of the lynching. In *Gruesome Looking Objects*, I will examine objects and object narratives not as a means of pulling together a comprehensible whole out of a fragmented past, but in order to mark particular moments of emphasis. In part, this is reflective of the constellations of meanings that form around objects. As I discuss later in this Introduction, objects cycle in and out of both our notice and their own meaning. But this is also a gesture to resist the narrative wholeness of the lynching and to reflect on the absence of humanity at its core.

#### ASSEMBLING A FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE

The previous pages outlined the conventional narrative of the lynching of Tom Johnson and Joe Kizer. I use the label “conventional” in two

particular senses. It is conventional both in the immediate context of the history of this lynching, and in the context of lynchings more generally. This particular narrative was assembled primarily from dozens of newspaper accounts. These many individual scraps of information though are in reality rearticulations of three major narratives whose details and claims emerged in the immediate aftermath of the lynching. Oral narratives based largely on rumor, innuendo, and stereotype were transformed into fact through their reproduction into print. With each reprinting, they further reified the assumptions of the original articles, and helped make a fixed narrative of the lynching that remained in effect for a century. In this sense, there has been a conventionalized narrative of the lynching that helped dictate local and regional understanding of the events for more than one hundred years. I seek to undermine those conventions by pointing to their origins and dissemination as part of the larger cultural logic of lynching.<sup>10</sup>

By conventional, I also refer to broader conventions of reporting and other narrative retellings of lynching events. The outline of Johnson and Kizer's lynching followed a familiar pattern, both in the way events unfolded and in the way the lynching was talked, written, and thought about. From the initial and grisly reports of a white girl's assault and murder through the abduction, capture, hanging, and ritual defilement of the men's bodies, mob members and readers alike could follow a familiar pattern. As with other lynchings, they made sense of Johnson and Kizer's murders from their cultural knowledge of the existing conventions of crime, punishment, and race that constituted the usual facts of lynching. For all the local particularities of this or any other lynching, it was through this reciprocal process that lynchings were made comprehensible.

This had significant implications for the material culture of Kizer and Johnson's lynching particularly in the years after its commission. White people understood the lynching through the frame of their own experience, one largely mediated by the objects related to it. Johnson and Kizer became mere Black victims, ciphers through which the ordinary processes of the lynching could be projected. Objects came into particular focus during this process of sensemaking. Material forms of information established the conventional narratives of the lynching. In newspaper articles, letters, published circulars, handbills, and other forms of public communication, these conventions circulated throughout North Carolina and well beyond, adding to the accumulated epistemological frameworks of white supremacy reinforced by racial violence.

<sup>10</sup> Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*.

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People also kept more direct remainders of participation in the lynching. Souvenirs and relics allowed them to place themselves squarely at the lynching, either in memory or in imagination. The retellings that these objects enabled allowed their possessors to center themselves as the subjects of the lynching narrative. Their tales of daring acquisition or routine purchase enforced their role not just as spectators, but as participants. And what I call objects of imagination and memory, ordinary objects transformed into conceptualizing things, allowed people to continue remaking the lynching's legacy. Broader than just objects of memory, these conceptual things normalized the lynching by embedding its meaning in everyday objects. A ballad written, sung, and eventually recorded made the lynching of Kizer and Johnson into a tale of heroism and evil. Mediated through a familiar form and melody, it helped preserve those heroic actions and mythic qualities as a marker of southern authenticity. Tools repurposed from the routines of everyday life and labor were likewise reimagined into avenging weapons. These most quotidian things became mythic symbols in the outsized narratives of the lynching over time.

Throughout *Gruesome Looking Objects*, I turn to each of these categories of object, seeking to unravel one fragment after another of the otherwise neatly woven narrative of Tom Johnson and Joe Kizer's lynching. In a sense, the remainder of this book is an unraveling. The metaphor of textile and production is particularly fitting here. A finished shirt or quilt offers a cohesive whole. But if we pick at the seams, pop the stitches, pull apart the layers, we can see the pieces out of which it is composed. There is an obvious analogy here to the work of historical production. It is less that the appearance of the neat whole is a falsity, and more that the illusion of completeness conceals other ways of understanding. This is why I invoke fragments not solely as parts of a larger whole, but as things themselves.

## FRAGMENT AS METHOD

It is always the case that our understanding of the past rests in the fragments of testimony that we can uncover about it. For scholars of material culture, this is particularly true. The basis of our field has been the assumption that objects can reveal pasts otherwise untold. We turn to objects to interpret the lives of people who lived before literacy as we now understand it, who existed without the benefit of means to communicate about their own lives, or who otherwise remain silent in the annals of what we confidently call the historical record. Enslaved people, women, the working classes, all come to be understood in part



through the material remains they left behind, the enduring detritus of everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

I hold less faith in objects. This is not because they are a less comprehensive source than written records. Material culture carries different omissions and requires different approaches than the textual sources that are the conventionally assumed basis of historical understanding. My distrust is a distrust of the possibility of our knowing with any degree of certitude about the past, and about the inadequacies of narrative to make the past comprehensible. In this book, then, I use an approach to *materiality* – the objects themselves and their array of cultural explanations and understandings – as a way to tentatively approach the past.<sup>12</sup> This reconstructed materiality is useful in that objects do not just give us evidence of how the world was, but serve too as reminders of how people wanted or imagined the world to be. People did things with words, but they made them with objects.<sup>13</sup>

Objects, and the framework of materiality by which we understand them, are always unstable. This is because they do not remain in one

<sup>11</sup> A myriad of examples abound for each of the categories of inquiry, and a great many others, that I offer here. Excellent examples include Bernard L. Herman, *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780–1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2005); J. Ritchie Garrison, *Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County, Massachusetts, 1770–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650–1800*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Zara Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

In general, historical material culture studies in the American context have most often taken Early America as their subject. I would argue that this reflects an assumption that material objects are less necessary when the written records become more extensive and inclusive of a greater number of people. I disagree with this assumption. Indeed, if scholars of historical material culture are to continue insisting on its methodological distinctiveness, this means extending its scope of inquiry into areas sometimes characterized by an abundance of other source material.

<sup>12</sup> On the concept of materiality, see Daniel Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–15. I am also relying here on the work of Bernard L. Herman, who distinguishes between object-centered and object-driven approaches to material culture. The former is perhaps the more familiar, documentary approach that centers a close examination of the object itself. I more often use the object-driven approach in this book, looking to the constellations of meaning and the material worlds created by objects and the perception of them. See Bernard L. Herman, “On Southern Things,” *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 3 (2017): 7–13.

<sup>13</sup> I am invoking here the performative vocabularies theorized in J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).



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place or in the hands of one person, but have multiple meanings as they are imagined, created, inherited, donated, destroyed. The classical approach to this problem in material culture studies was formulated by Igor Kopytoff, who conceptualized the lifecycles of commodities. His “Cultural Biography of Things” regarded materiality as processual, a constant making and unmaking of objects in the marketplace of commodities. This Marxian formulation is comprehensive, though it fails to account for the object’s tendency to exceed its designed intention and accrue other meanings.<sup>14</sup> To rethink again the lifecycles of objects is to consider what happens to them as their purpose exceeds the memory of those who created and possessed them. Even the most ordinary objects are palimpsests that retain some trace of each of their prior meanings, and each of their prior owners or users.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly the case with the fraught objects associated with lynchings. Some are so evidently associated with the event that it is impossible for them to lose the original force of their meaning. Visual remainders of racial violence – postcards and photographs – are the most obvious example of this enduring materiality. I am concerned here with more ordinary things, those objects that could pass into the everyday and the mundane, that could become objects of both memory and forgetting.

For this, we have to turn to an approach rooted in the fragmented and incomplete. Among any number of other possible organizing metaphors, this one stands out for its ability to express the condition both of many objects themselves, and of the narratives attached to them. My dual concern here then for both object and object narratives is best expressed in the material fragments of things and the snatches of story that attach to them. By advancing this notion of the fragmentary and fragmented as an approach to history, I am consciously invoking the silences inherent in the production of the past. Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us that history has a material basis, but it is the selection, preservation, archiving, and retrieval of the archived object that create History. Narratives accrue at each of these points, making the unitary narrative of the historian

<sup>14</sup> Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–92. On the tendency of objects to exceed or otherwise depart from their original, designed function, see Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Susan Stabile, “Biography of a Box: Material Culture and Palimpsest Memory,” in *Memory and History*, ed. Joan Tumblety (London: Routledge, 2013), 194–211.

simply another among the accreted fragments of comprehensibility.<sup>16</sup> That makes the process of writing the past seem impossible or pointless, a position I have surely inhabited at times during the writing of this book. But in the later chapters of *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot offers us a way forward. He writes of the three overlapping Sans Soucis, unpacking their various iterations and the meanings that they lent to each other. In this he conceptualizes history as always a product of the moment in which it is written. As creators of the past, we are its contemporaries. Or, as William Faulkner has it, “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”<sup>17</sup>

Following Trouillot, then, we might conceptualize the distinctions between memory and history as a continuum for envisioning the past. American historical scholarship of the past two decades has complicated those boundaries with complex studies of historical memory.<sup>18</sup> I only diverge from that body of work in insisting that we go back to Trouillot’s refusal of the distinctions between history and memory. I prefer instead to see the entanglements of history and memory as part of the production of a complicated, unresolved, and incomplete past always in the process of becoming. Particularly useful in this regard are Saidiya Hartman’s meditations on the work we can do with “the scraps of the archive,” the small pieces of the past preserved largely by accident. Her notion of critical fabulation is one that shows us how to enliven these fragments, to work at the intersections of fiction and history that are always, as Trouillot reminds us, transgressable boundaries.<sup>19</sup>

But Hartman also cautions us against uncritically giving voice to the specters of history without considering the ramifications of the past in the present. Her own approach has been to resist the re-creation of the horrors of the past to instead find the sublimated pleasure amid history’s erasures. And other scholarship on the archive reminds us that its

<sup>16</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26–30.

<sup>17</sup> This quotation, invoked often as a truism bordering on cliché in southern studies, originally appears in Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*.

<sup>18</sup> This historiographical trend has been particularly rich in studies related to the South and to the American Civil War. See for instance Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, no. 2 (July 2008): 4.