

## Gruesome Looking Objects

The 1898 lynching of Tom Johnson and Joe Kizer is retold in this groundbreaking book. Unlike other histories of lynching that rely on conventional historical records, this study focuses on the objects associated with the lynching, including newspaper articles, fragments of the victims' clothing, photographs, and souvenirs such as sticks from the hanging tree. This material culture approach uncovers how people tried to integrate the meaning of the lynching into their everyday lives through objects. These seemingly ordinary items are repositories for the comprehension, interpretation, and commemoration of racial violence and white supremacy. Elijah Gaddis showcases an approach to objects as materials of history and memory, insisting that we live in a world suffused with the material traces of racial violence, past and present.

Elijah Gaddis is Assistant Professor of History at Auburn University, and the co-director of *A Red Record*, a comprehensive mapping of lynching victims in the American South.

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# Gruesome Looking Objects

## *A New History of Lynching and Everyday Things*

ELIJAH GADDIS

*Auburn University, Alabama*



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## Preface

I want to begin in a way uncharacteristic of historical writing by first remarking upon what this book is not. It is not a story of lynching victims. Tom Johnson and Joe Kizer were murdered publicly and brutally. After years of searching, I can find little more about them than the prejudicial and sensational accounts made at the time. The lives of people shortened considerably by mob violence deserve a full accounting. Their lives were ended by a few, intense hours of violence, and marked throughout by the emergence and intensification of Jim Crow's pervasive inequalities. Neither fact does justice to their stories. So, while I will talk about each of these men and what their deaths came to mean, I will not focus on the circumstances of their lynching. Nor will I reify the trauma of their unlawful executions by recasting the prurient details of their murders as history. Enough Black trauma has been reappropriated for white history and by white historians. A full accounting of lynching and its aftermaths needs to deal equally with the meaning that white communities made of these horrific events.

Nor is this a personal narrative, though it is one that proceeds in some small way from my life. I learned about the contours of this story from the serendipity of historical research. I was shocked – stupidly, I now think – by finding that the double lynching of these two men and the resulting century of history and memory of those events occurred in places that I knew well. Indeed, this story takes place in the very same communities that I grew up in, albeit at a significant temporal (if not always historical) remove. That discovery, and the subsequent unraveling of its long impact, brought me to this story. And throughout, I rely on my own intimate, lived experience of these landscapes to inform my understanding

as an historian. These tools of affect and experience should always be a part of our approach as scholars but need not dominate our perspective.

If it is neither of these things then, this *is* a story of the meaning made through objects associated with the lynching of Joe Kizer and Tom Johnson. In the absence of correspondence and little firsthand accounting, I have instead turned to *things* and the stories that they can tell. This is a story that insists on the persistence of the past and its presence as a material, enlivened entity both well before and long after what we would typically mark as the conclusion of an event. In this book, I regard this and other lynchings as historical anomalies, events whose contours span the length of a century or more and materialize again and again and again. We are always immersed in memory, and those of us who write history do our best work when we pay attention to its continuities and its conscious uses in the present. We live in the world lynching made.

## Acknowledgments

Scholarship is a collective enterprise, though rarely is one's childhood so directly linked to the work of their career. I have first to thank my parents, Pat and Jay, for purposely nurturing my love of reading and history and incidentally raising me in the landscape where much of this book takes place. My siblings, Zachariah and Hannah, can be commended for leaving me to my books and accompanying me on explorations of our woods and hills. All four of them and now their spouses and children have also contributed immeasurably to my happiness and my success.

Others too helped shape this project unintentionally. Even before the inception of this book, the many archivists in the North Carolina Collection, Southern Historical Collection, and the Southern Folklife Collection in Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina (UNC) provided guidance and crucial connections among sources and people across the state and beyond. The special collections staff at UNC are truly unparalleled in the profession. Archivists and librarians rarely get the credit they deserve as co-creators and so I'd like to enumerate a partial list of those who have helped me immeasurably:

- Bob Anthony and John Blythe (who let me into the warren of Wilson's stacks and invariably knew a source I should look at or a person I should talk to);
- Sarah Carrier and Jason Tomberlin (who answered every question with good cheer and almost alarming speed);
- Aaron Smithers (who made me many reproductions to listen to, and pointed me to sources I'd never heard of);

- Biff Hollingsworth and Chaitra Powell (who explained the workings of the library to me, sought access to people for me, and generally went above and beyond for me).

The nature of this book meant that I mined the depths of important and often underutilized local archives and collections, each of which was crucial for this research. At the Eastern Cabarrus Historical Society, where I spent many hours as a child cultivating my love of history, I have to thank Vickey Cline for giving me complete access to the museum's files as well as lots of local guidance. On the other side of the county, staff at the Cannon Memorial Library Local History Room gamely shared all the information they had and made the kind of excellent suggestions that only professionals immersed in a community's history can. Melissa Lindberg at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division was also exceptionally helpful.

While in graduate school at UNC, I was fortunate to be in a department that was immensely supportive of its graduate students. From the American Studies and History Departments, I assembled an enviable (and overly large) dissertation committee: Bernie Herman, Fitz Brundage, Claude Clegg, Sharon Holland, Seth Kotch, and Patricia Sawin. They spent my entire defense probing one half of a single chapter. That kernel has become this book, and I'm grateful to each of them for recognizing its significance before I did.

Seth Kotch and I embarked on the study of lynching together, and I remain grateful for his guidance and collegiality. Bobby Allen is and has been my best professional mentor. He hasn't read a word of this book, but his influence is everywhere in it. And while I have strayed far from the worlds of early America and contemporary art in which Bernie Herman spends so much time, it is his teaching, his methodologies, and his words that I come back to as a model time and time again. His fingerprints are all over this manuscript, as are his many admonitions. Bernie, I hope I have not lost sight of the objects.

At Auburn University, I have been lucky to be surrounded by one of the most formidable assemblies of southern historians anywhere, and a wide range of colleagues who study places distant in time and space, but in ways that have influenced my own thinking. I am often hesitant to share my writing, but it was enriched greatly by the thoughts of Kate Craig, Xaq Frohlich, Jason Hauser, Guy Mount, Daren Ray, Joel Webb, Diana West, and other members of the Junior Faculty Club. I owe each of them, and all my colleagues, a beer at The Hound and unlimited gratitude. I reserve particular thanks for Christopher Ferguson. Ferg encouraged my idea from its outset and was the first person to read a full draft of this manuscript.

*Acknowledgments*

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I have also been favored with exceptional student colleagues. To the dozens of students at UNC, Auburn, Xavier, and Jackson State who have collaborated to collect data on lynching victims, I owe immeasurable thanks. At Auburn, many graduate student colleagues have conducted research and asked questions that deepened my insights.

I am grateful for the attention and feedback of audiences when I have presented this material. Colleagues at the American Studies Association, Vernacular Architecture Forum, Memory Studies Association, the Africana Studies Speaker Series at Auburn, and elsewhere were unstinting in both praise and criticism. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Karen Bassi, Gretchen Henderson, and all of my cohort in the Museums: Humanities in the Public Sphere summer seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I have benefited tremendously from the good counsel and editorial prowess of a rotating group of colleagues who initially came together around a table to discuss our dissertations. Trista Porter and Steve Mandrevalis are original members of the group and have seen me through multiple projects and papers. Rachel Kirby, Karen Sieber, and Josh Parshall are later but no less valuable additions. Thanks for letting me monopolize our discussions for years, and for your sharp critiques.

At Cambridge University Press, series editors Mark M. Smith and Peter Coclanis were enthusiastic and responsive. My editor, Cecelia Cancellaro, was both helpful and patient in guiding a first-time author through the process of publication.

I have been able to complete this book because of time afforded me to do so. I had two semesters of leave from teaching, one from my department and one from the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn. This was an essential, generative time for which I am grateful. But I also realize that time to do the work of scholarship is precious in an increasingly market-driven profession.

I marvel alike at those colleagues working in academic precarity who nonetheless manage to produce new research, and at those for whom the demands of teaching or other employment don't allow them to pursue their research projects.

Finally, Andrea. You have never known me without this uncompleted book looming over my shoulder. Now that it is through, may I be as generous a partner and as fierce an advocate as you are.

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