Afrofantastic Presents: The Many Deaths of Oscar Mack

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This comic prelude to a fantastic adventure is perhaps an unlikely way to remember the tragic history of Oscar Mack. Nevertheless, *The Many Deaths of Oscar Mack* by Julian Chambliss captures how Afrofuturist practice provides space to understand how we can push beyond the boundaries of the archive. The written archive can often suppress black voices and erase black lives for African Americans. African Americans must rely on systems beyond institutions that provide vital information and remember those deeds, good and ill, that defined black life. The real-life ordeal of Oscar Mack, a WWI African American veteran who defended himself against racial violence, died in the public's mind and lived a secret life, which inspires the comic. His story is fantastic while being a reminder of the complex history of antiblack violence perpetrated toward African Americans in Florida and across the South.

> ***New York Times*, July 19, 1922; "Florida Negro Lynched. Orlando, Florida," Persons coming into Orlando tonight from the Kissimmee Road reported that a negro, believed to be Oscar Mack, charged with killing two white men at Kissimmee last Sunday evening, has been lynched by a mob at Lake Jennie Jewel.**

In July 1922, Oscar Mack faced a daunting challenge. Mack had grown up in Kissimmee with his family. His father, William, was originally from Georgia, and his mother, Maria, was from North Carolina. They met and married in 1888. Oscar was born in 1893.[1] While we do not know the exact circumstances of the family moving to Florida, we know that central Florida had established itself as a destination for African Americans immediately after the Civil War. In 1866, the Southern Homestead Act (SHA) opened land in the former state of the Confederacy to white and black settlers. Despite the reality that the land was of poor quality, that whites resisted black landownership, and there was a lack of government protection, African Americans sought the opportunity the SHA offered. Over 19 million acres were available in Florida, and African Americans seized the opportunity. The Freedmen's Bureau supported freedmen in finding land plots and provided supplies for one month, transportation to the homestead site, and seed. By 1867, the state had 2,000 homesteads, and in 1868, over 3,000—more than any other Southern state.[2]

While our narrative of Florida's black experience often overlooked the dangers in the Sunshine State, it is crucial to recognize that African Americans navigated this landscape with an eye toward freedom in the turbulent years after the end of Reconstruction. An Afrofuturist framework provides one another way to understand this pivotal period. It was a time when black and white people envisioned a wholesale reimagining of societal structures. Black and

[1] "1900 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com," accessed February 21, 2013, http://search.ancestrylibrary.com.

[2] J Taylor, "Florida Land of the Freedman's Bureau," Text, Florida Historical Society, April 15, 2015, https://myfloridahistory.org/date-in-history/august-25-1866/florida-land-freedmans-bureau.

white Republicans wished to overcome the fundamental challenge of slave society constructed over 200 years. This period marks various ideological pathways around freedom explored by black people and their white allies. The fictional writings of Martin R. Delany and Sutton E. Griggs[3] demonstrate this thinking, but we can also see it in the activism of everyday black people across the South. Florida's history highlights how black citizens fought to maintain the gains associated with Reconstruction, even as Florida's Democratic Party worked to re-establish white control in Reconstruction's aftermath.

George F. Drew's administration saw Democrats take control of state government and a period of "retrenchment" and policies such as eliminating grammar school education to balance the budget. While that proposal failed, Drew's government slashed taxes for education and reduced spending on social programs across the board.[4] African American voters viewed Drew's government with unease. In his inaugural address, Drew told Florida's African American residents he would uphold their constitutional rights, stating, "…we are a law-abiding people" resolved to support "free institutions."[5]

Historian C. Vann Woodward described Drew as moderate in outlook and concerned with economic development. Harriet Beecher Stowe, a resident of Jacksonville since 1866, assured Northern friends that Governor Drew enjoyed Republican support, a sign that "the lion and lamb…may yet lie down together."[6]

The reality was much different. Fiscal conservativism was justification for brutal policies that undermined black life in the state. Drew closed the state penitentiary at Chattahoochee, saving $25,000 per year. In its place, he created a convict lease system, effectively keeping African Americans, most of the state's prisoners, in perpetual bondage. The state's lumber and turpentine industries depended on this exploited labor for success.[7] One newspaper account noted the system's brutality and spoke of prisoners "prodded with bayonets or whipped with straps dipped in salt" for the slightest infraction.[8]

While Governor Drew promised African Americans their rights, he did little as more radical elements sought to exclude black Floridians from the public sphere.

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[3] Wilson J. Moses, "Literary Garveyism: The Novels of Reverend Sutton E. Griggs," *Phylon (1960-)* 40, no. 3 (1979): 203–16, https://doi.org/10.2307/274562; Gerry Butler, "Delany, Martin Robison (1812-1885)," www.blackpast.org, accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.blackpast.org/aah/delany-major-martin-robison-1812-1885.

[4] Samuel Proctor, "Prelude to the New Florida, 1877-1919," in *The New History of Florida*, 1st ed. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 267–69.

[5] Seth A. Weitz, "George Franklin Drew: Florida's Yankee Redemption Governor" (54th Annual Florida Conference of Historian Meeting, St. Augustine, Florida, February 1, 2014), http://www.floridaconferenceofhistorians.org/.

[6] C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913: A History of the South* (LSU Press, 1981).

[7] Timothy C. Prizer, *Pining for Turpentine: Critical Nostalgia, Memory, and Commemorative Expression in the Wake of Industrial Decline* (ProQuest, 2009), 96–98.

[8] Weitz, "George Franklin Drew: Florida's Yankee Redemption Governor," 4.

Organizations such as the Constitutional League of Florida advocated for opposition to black political participation but broadly cast a wary eye toward outsiders. In 1868, anti-Republican violence led to over 20 Republican deaths in Florida. Between 1869 and 1872, Jackson County's clan members targeted blacks and whites to "kill" every Republican in the region.[9]

Historian George Pozzetta documented that the state sought to entice settlers throughout this period. Immigrant agents and land promoters lauded Florida as a land of opportunity for white settlers equal to and surpassing the West in some ways.[10] After 1880, suspicions of outsiders prompted state officials to reduce these efforts. As the narrative of a "New South" allowed Northern whites to accept the rise of segregation, Florida took the lead in excluding black people from the public sphere. The 1885 Florida constitution, which replaced the 1868 constitution adopted as a part of the state's reentry into the United States, allowed poll taxes as a prerequisite for voting.[11] Nonetheless, Florida shifted public perception from "frontier" to "unspoiled" in travel narratives written during this period.[12]

Facing questions of political inclusion and community building in the post-Reconstruction South, African Americans navigated the changing political, social, and economic landscape to achieve those goals promised by citizenship. Historian Robert Cassanello demonstrates the depth of black activism in *To Render Invisible: Jim Crow and Public Life in New South Jacksonville*. He shows how the contested nature of political identity linked to public and private spaces was a crucial measure of freedom for African Americans. Cassanello's examination of the late-nineteenth-century emergence of Jim Crow segregation suggests it was not inevitable nor uncontested. Instead, African Americans sought to resist each step of the way.[13] These overt and indirect efforts offer a different picture of how African Americans addressed racism in Florida. Indeed, Historian Paul Ortiz described an "insurgent" black culture that resisted oppression and created social institutions to sustain the black struggle for freedom in the aftermath of Reconstruction in Florida. [14]

This is the world that informed Oscar Mack's upbringing. While Mack grew up and worked in Kissimmee for most of his life, this dynamic political landscape shaped his outlook. The period leading to U.S. participation in WWI was transformative for African Americans. Famously, the patriotic furor offered an opportunity for African

[9] Weitz, 4.
[10] George E. Pozzetta, "Foreigners in Florida: A Study of Immigration Promotion, 1865-1910," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (October 1974): 164–80.
[11] State Library and Archives of Florida, "Constitution of 1885," Florida Memory, accessed November 19, 2017, https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/189169.
[12] Henry Knight, "Southward Expansion: The Myth of the West in the Promotion of Florida, 1876–1900," *European Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 (July 2010): 111–29, https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.29.2.111_1.
[13] Robert Cassanello, *To Render Invisible: Jim Crow and Public Life in New South Jacksonville* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).
[14] Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920*, 1 edition (University of California Press, 2006).

Americans to demonstrate their citizenship in the face of white racism that suggested they could not be soldiers. W.E.B Du Bois's call for African Americans to "close ranks" and set aside "our special grievances" highlight the depth of belief that the war was a transformative event.[15] However, the war's theme of global democracy did little to undermine white supremacy at home, even as it opened the eyes of African Americans who fought in Europe about how they might live a fuller life at home.

The details of Mack's military record state that he joined the army in April 1918 and was honorably discharged on July 17, 1919.[16] In 1922, he bid on a contract to transport mail from the railroad depot to the Kissimmee post office. An elderly white man previously held the contract, according to newspaper reports.[17] Mack's success triggered white resentment. The assistant postmaster, a white man named C.C. Collins, gave Mack a firearm to protect himself. While Mack's first day of work on Sunday, July 16, passed without incident, he reported receiving a letter warning him to leave town in 24 hours.[18] Later that night, a group of men visited him. Accounts of the confrontation in the various newspapers differ widely. One report suggests the men, Eugene Rinehart, Stewart Ivey, Ben McClellan, and D.H. Alderman, arrived at Mack's home by mistake. Whatever the circumstances, Mack shot and killed Rinehart and fatally wounded Ivey in the confrontation.[19] While reports indicated that McClellan was wounded, all accounts indicated that Mack escaped.[20]

As information about the incident spread after the shooting, African Americans in Kissimmee started to flee. As one report suggests, the black community feared white anger would trigger a mob event like the Ocoee Massacre. In November 1920, African Americans attempted to vote during the national election. A white mob killed black residents and burned homes in Ocoee, a community in West Orange County. The most notable death was July Perry, a prominent black resident who was beaten, shot, and lynched for asserting his rights.[21] At least 25 black homes, two churches, and a Masonic lodge in the community were destroyed. The number of black lives lost remains a point of contention, but we know all black residents left Ocoee, forced to abandon or sell the land and homes they owned.[22] The recent racial history shaped black-and-white reactions to Oscar Mack's case. In the hours after the incident, Mack disappeared. Sheriff L.R. Farmer organized a posse and

[15] Chad Williams, "W. E. B. Du Bois, World War I, and the Question of Failure," AAIHS, August 27, 2018, https://www.aaihs.org/w-e-b-du-bois-world-war-i-and-the-question-of-failure-2/.
[16] "World War I Draft Registration, Florida: Osceola County, Ancestry.com https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/1656975:6482.
[17] "Two White Men Killed By Negro at Kissimmee; Hunt for Fugitive Unsuccessful," *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 18, 1922, pg1.
[18] "Negro Kills Two White Men Who Go to His House," *Tampa Tribune*, July 18, 1922, pg1.
[19] "Assassin Has Made a Temporary Escape," Ocala Evening Star, July 18, 1922, pg 1.
[20] "Negro Kills Two White Men Who Go to His House," *Tampa Tribune*, July 18, 1922, pg1.
[21] Robert Stephens, "The Truth Laid Bare: Lessons from the Ocoee Massacre," Pegasus Magazine, Fall 2020, https://www.ucf.edu/pegasus/the-truth-laid-bare/.
[22] "EJI Unveils Historical Marker Recognizing Lynching in Orlando, Florida," Equal Justice Initiative, June 21, 2019, https://eji.org/news/eji-unveils-historical-marker-recognizing-lynching-in-orlando-florida/.

affirmed his belief that Mack would be captured. Sheriff Farmer publicly assured African Americans that there would be no violence, even as a crowd gathered in downtown Kissimmee.

Figure 1: Image of Downtown Kissimmee

Fearing retaliation for his role in supporting Mack, C.C. Collins resigned from his position. He was subsequently relocated to Jacksonville under the protection of federal officers. A Post Office Inspector investigation on July 19 concluded that the gun Collins gave Mack was not used in the killings. However, despite this, Collins answered, "Take the job and go with it," when offered the opportunity to return to Kissimmee. [23]Reports of Mack's lynching spread across the country, even as Sheriff Farmer searched for him. The reasons for this are linked to a confrontation between Sheriff Farmer and an armed mob on July 18. Farmer had arrested a man named G.L. Scott for assisting Oscar Mack in his escape immediately after the shooting on July 16.[24] According to reports, Sheriff Farmer was returning to Kissimmee when 50 men near Lake Jennie Jewell confronted him. He persuaded the crowd that Scott had broken no laws and had not helped Mack, avoiding his lynching. However, several eyewitnesses saw the confrontation and reported it to local media.[25]

This near lynching of G.L. Scott became the lynching of Oscar Mack in the public's mind. In the following days, newspaper headlines across the country confirmed that Oscar Mack was lynched near Lake Jennie Jewell in Orange County. This story appeared in newspapers across the country while local feelings ran high. Throughout this period, Sheriff Farmer continued assuring the crowds in Kissimmee that Mack would be captured, even hinting that he knew his location. These constant assurances suppressed the potential violence the black community faced while allowing the story of the near lynching to become a fact for many residents. By July 22, newspapers in the region had dropped the story. Mack was dead to the broader public, and his whereabouts were unknown.

In 2013, at Curtis Michelson's behest, my African American history class taught at Rollins College began looking into the lynching of Oscar Mack. Michelson has worked with a local civil rights organization called Democracy Forum to uncover the details surrounding the Ocoee Massacre in the late 1990s. The group effort helped uncover the location of July Perry's grave and sparked a public discussion of the Ocoee incident that helped bring it to public light.[26]

[23] "Death Weapon Not Army Gun, Says Officer," *The Tampa Times*, July 19, 1922, Pg 1.
[24] "Report Mob Hung Negro," *Tampa Bay Times*, July 19, 1922, Pg 1.
[25] "Sheriff's Eloquence Saves An Innocent Negro From Lynching," *Tampa Tribune*, July 19, 1922, Pg 3.
[26] "Bending Toward Justice Chapter 14: Framing Events," accessed November 19, 2022, https://bendingtowardjustice.cah.ucf.edu/index.php/chapter-14-events/.

My class's work helped define many of the elements of the story we know today, revisiting the archive and digging through the newspaper accounts to understand the events. The students identified the men who came to Mack's house, made clear the threat to his life, and documented the moment of potential violence the white mob offered searching for Mack. The story they told startled the public, sparking consideration of the broader links between the Ocoee incident just two years before and the Mack experience. We posted the research online. While the class ended and students moved on, I continued revisiting the archive doing searches related to Oscar Mack. Indeed, many of the details I recounted here were discovered after the class, and I continued to explore newly digitized newspaper archives.

Those additional details called attention to the uncertainty of Oscar Mack's fate, but ultimately, his family answered the question of what had happened to him. After discovering our website, a descendant of Oscar Mack contacted us. Our website provided an answer to a family mystery. The great-great-grandson of Oscar Mack contacted us to tell us the story of Lanier Johnson, a man who told stories of having a different name—the research we posted filled in the blanks for the family.[27] On June 28, 2017, the family gathered at the Glendale Cemetery in Akron, Ohio, to lay a new gravestone with two names, Lanier Johnson and Oscar Mack, offering some closure to this fantastic story.

Figure 2: Two Names

The year 2023 marks the 100th anniversary of the event. Thanks to the efforts of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP) at the University of Florida, we now know more about this case. They have documented the community members who supported Mack's escape, found a descendant of Mack's attacker, and done much to create context around the black and white residents' actions during and after this event. The SPOHP documentary *Oscar Mack versus the Ku Klux Klan* is available online on the SPOHP YouTube channel.

Figure 3: QR Code

[27] *An Oral History With the Family of Oscar Mack, June 29, 2017*, Video (Gainesville, FL: Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kueDiGzS-4I.

Oscar Mack's story deserves the dedication that has culminated in the creation of this defining documentary. Mack's struggle to survive is ripe for the Afrofuturist re-telling, not because it is fantastic but because the comic story has the potential to capture the transformative thinking black people must employ to survive.