

# The Birth of a Nation and Columbia University: Racism and Activism in the Early Twentieth Century

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Lawrence Grief discusses The Birth of a Nation and Columbia University: Racism and Activism in the Early Twentieth Century: [video]

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*I wondered why there were not enough red-blooded Americans present to rise up and protest against the whole business.*

– James Weldon Johnson[1]

On November 19, 1930, D. W. Griffith, director of the infamous film *The Birth of a Nation*, was invited to speak at Columbia University. Addressing the university's Writers Club, the director extolled the novelty of cinema as a literary genre and its ability to "speak to the entire world." [2] Walter B. Pitkin, a professor at Columbia's journalism school, was cited in the *Columbia Spectator* article announcing Griffith's appearance as having included Griffith among "a group of fourteen living Americans who have achieved the most," and as having claimed that the "social value" of *Birth*, as well as Griffith's

other films, was “high.”[3] *Birth* is a historically inaccurate retelling of the Civil War and Reconstruction era that glorifies the Ku Klux Klan for its efforts to suppress the recently freed black population in the South, which the film depicts in a grotesquely racist manner. The film also directly contributed to the rebirth of the Klan as an organization dedicated to the supremacy of white Protestants, and the Klan gained national prominence in the decade and a half following its release. Pitkin’s comments represent only one instance in a long history of individuals affiliated with Columbia expressing support or admiration for the film. Their support was not exceptional. Perhaps the most successful film of all time, *Birth* routinely sold out screenings in New York City, and it was described by the *New York Tribune* after its first local showing as “a decided achievement for the producer...certain to appeal to everyone who cares for novelty, spectacular drama, and thrills.”[4] The reaction to the film at Columbia reflects and illustrates the extent to which racist views traditionally thought to be rooted in Southern culture were prevalent throughout New York and the greater urban North. Exploring the reception of *Birth* among Columbia students, professors, and alumni offers insight into the racial climate that was present on the university’s campus in the early twentieth century and demonstrates how views regarding issues of race transformed over time in response to increased Klan activity both locally and nationally.

*Birth* was celebrated by students at Columbia upon its release. However, as the Klan grew into a national organization and began to establish roots in New York City, the almost unqualified praise for the film began to waver. The greatest criticisms offered to the film were related to its tendency to encourage racial violence and its association with the Klan. In response to increased anti-Klan sentiment, support declined and opposition became more visible. These trends peaked in response to Klan activity on Columbia’s campus. Analyzing the history of Klan activity and opposition at Columbia and in New York, in conjunction with the reception of the film, offers insight into the relationship between the film’s popularity and the Klan’s growth, as well as how opinion surrounding racial issues at Columbia formed, what factors contributed to it, and how it changed over time.

The *Columbia Spectator* began running advertisements for *Birth* in July of 1916 and continued to do so for the duration of the film's original run. The frequency and continued appearance of these advertisements, alongside *Spectator's* coverage of the film, suggest that Columbia students were viewing the film and that they considered it relevant to student life. *Spectator's* initial review was similar to those of many other New York publications, offering considerable praise for the film's "huge spectacle[s]," and Griffith's "remarkable ability."<sup>[5]</sup> However, it differed in that it also acknowledged the film's inherent racism, admitting that the film "does foster some race prejudice" and that throughout its duration "race hatred among some is certainly easily aroused."<sup>[6]</sup> Somewhat strangely, the review also suggested that certain scenes in the film could instead convince the viewer "that race prejudice is wrong."<sup>[7]</sup> Overall, *Spectator* seemed to wish that their criticism of *Birth's* racist nature would not discourage students from seeing it, advising them to "be prepared to forget that side of the question," in order to fully enjoy the film.<sup>[8]</sup> As a result, the criticism offered by the reviewer was not a rebuke of the film, but merely qualified the adulation given to it. Throughout the duration of *Birth's* initial run, this moderate remark is the only criticism that *Spectator* offered, and it would not attach any qualification to subsequent praise of the film. Later discussions of "wonderful spectacle," "demand for seats," and the film's "nearly eight hundred performances in New York" did not acknowledge its racist nature.<sup>[9]</sup> The publication seemed largely capable of "forget[ting] that side of the question," and ignoring blatant racism for the sake of entertainment.<sup>[10]</sup> It was reported that *Birth's* climax was met with tremendous applause everywhere that the film was shown.<sup>[11]</sup> *Spectator's* coverage does not provide any reason to doubt that Columbia students contributed to this acclaim, cheering as they watched the Klan reestablish herrenvolk democracy through the use of violence and intimidation.

While most New York publications unabashedly praised the film, some also published critical views. An editorial titled "Capitalizing Race Hatred" that was featured in the *New York Globe* is notable because Griffith thought it merited a rebuttal, which appeared shortly after. The initial *Globe* article accused Griffith of attempting to "revive the passions of the Civil War period, relight the fires of sectionalism," "intensify race prejudices," and, notably, "pervert history."<sup>[12]</sup> At several points in his response, Griffith

replied directly to this last claim, stating that his film was “based upon truth in every vital detail” and “upon the authenticated history of the period,” and boasting that school administrators were requesting to screen the film to allow “their pupils to view it for its historic truths.[13]” He actually spent a great deal of time consulting historical sources during *Birth's* production, and the film's advocates often invoked claims to historical authenticity while appealing to censorship boards. Scholars have noted that the representation of the Reconstruction era found in the film does not actually diverge significantly from the dominant historical interpretation of that time, that of the Dunning school at Columbia University.[14] Professor William Dunning spent his entire academic career at Columbia, publishing two books that offered a Southern apologist interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction and educating a generation of historians to publish similar works specific to each of the former Confederate states. One of his students, Walter L. Fleming, who received a doctorate degree in history from Columbia in 1904, published two works that Griffith consulted as he prepared his film, *Reconstruction in South Carolina* and *The Prescript of [the] Ku Klux Klan*.[15]

It is important not to overstate the direct influence of the Dunning School on Griffith's film. The vast majority of sources Griffith consulted had no relation to Professor Dunning, or Columbia University. However, while *Birth* was not heavily influenced by Dunning, it is likely that his respected position in the academy, eventually serving as president of both the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, and the broad acceptance of his historical interpretation had an influence on discussions of the film's historical accuracy and its general reception. It is even more likely that Dunning influenced the reception of the film at Columbia, where he taught for over twenty five years, delivering courses on subjects such as “the Civil War and Reconstruction,” and performing public duties such as speaking at the university's “opening exercises.”[16] He was also respected and popular among undergraduates, labeled by the graduating class as one of their “favorite professors” in 1904 and 1911, one of the two “best teacher[s]” in 1911, and among the “hardest professor[s] to bluff” in 1914.[17] Given Dunning's public campus profile, his popularity among students, and that he published scholarship and lectured specifically on the subjects of the Civil War and Reconstruction, he probably had an impact on how Columbia students viewed this

era and thus helped to shape their views on *Birth*. Dunning's influence on campus helps to explain why none of *Spectator's* reporting on the film during its initial run was critical of the film's historical inaccuracies.

The film's greatest and most consistent source of criticism was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The organization lobbied to have *Birth* censored prior to its New York premiere and launched a public relations campaign against it once those efforts failed. Attempts to block or discourage people from viewing the film were led by J. E. Spingarn, who was chairman of the NAACP's Board of Directors at the time. Spingarn received an undergraduate degree from Columbia in 1895, a doctorate in 1899, and then served as a professor of comparative literature until 1911.[18] He is notable not only for his lengthy and admirable career fighting for racial equality, but also because he provides a rare example of an individual affiliated with Columbia who publicly expressed disapproval of *Birth* during its initial tenure in New York City. At the national meeting of the NAACP in 1916, Spingarn stated that the film showcased "a complete mis-reading of the facts of reconstruction and the venomous spite of a narrow and ignoble mind." [19] He presented the NAACP's arguments against it to the National Board of Censorship in March of 1915 and seemingly convinced them to cut the second half of the film, but the board later reversed their decision. Spingarn next appealed to the mayor of New York, John Purroy Mitchel, who promised him that the worst scenes in the film would be cut. Ultimately, the mayor did not keep his promise, and the NAACP accepted that they had failed to have the film blocked in New York.[20]

The NAACP's later efforts to combat the film by influencing public opinion included publishing and widely distributing statements from notable public figures that denounced it. One such person was Upton Sinclair, a friend of Spingarn and a former Columbia student, who referred to it as "the most absolute[sic] terrifying and poisonous play that [he] ha[d] ever seen," and suggested it would be the cause of "a hundred thousand murders." [21] The NAACP's initial campaign was largely unsuccessful. In April of 1915, May Childs Nerney, national secretary of the organization, told a reporter to "kindly

remember that we have put six weeks of constant effort on this thing and have gotten nowhere.”[22]

Although Spingarn was one of the greatest advocates for racial justice to receive a degree from Columbia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his later activism does not appear to have been influenced by his years at the university. Biographers have proposed that Spingarn’s interest in public service may have been partially inspired by a commencement address delivered to his graduating class at Columbia in 1899. The speaker, Theodore Roosevelt, “emphasized the need for men of action who would struggle to eradicate society’s ills.”[23] While this viewpoint may have encouraged Spingarn not to confine himself within the traditional boundaries of an academic career, it does not in itself explain why he eventually focused on the subjects of racial equality and black uplift. His interest in these causes probably did not emerge prior to 1910, when he purchased a large estate in Dutchess County, New York, and realized “the colored people in [his] hometown were socially homeless.”[24] In order to help this neighboring population, Spingarn bought a small house, which he called “the Heart of Hope Club,” “to provide free hot meals and recreational facilities” to the area’s “destitute blacks.”[25] Recognizing that he was “ignorant of the whole problem,” he then reached out to W. E. B. DuBois for advice on how to operate the recently established club, and became involved with the NAACP shortly thereafter.[26]

The story of the origin of Spingarn’s racial justice work suggests that his later activism was not inspired by any experience he had while either a student or professor at Columbia, nor was it facilitated through connections with any Columbia faculty. Instead, his education at Columbia had left him, in his own words, “ignorant” of the problems specific to African American communities. If Columbia did have any impact on Spingarn’s later work it was small, and his dedication to racial equality was not a reflection of his early relationship with the university. However, Spingarn’s experience clearly demonstrates that although racial prejudice existed at Columbia during this time period, it was not a pervasive enough force to preclude students from ever engaging with black populations and attempting to eliminate racial disparities.

Critics and activists who feared that *Birth* would encourage racial prejudice and violence against African Americans were ultimately proven right. Shortly before the film's Atlanta premiere, a group of Georgia men led by William Joseph Simmons, whose father had been a member of the original Klan depicted by Griffith, attempted to "reviv[e] the hooded order," and petitioned for an official charter from the state.[27] As *Birth's* showings in Atlanta attracted a record-breaking number of people, Simmons commissioned local newspapers to print advertisements for the resuscitated Klan directly next to those for the film. The organization quickly became national in its scope, spreading to nearly every major city, and attracting "perhaps as many as five million" members, aided in its recruitment by *Birth's* immense popularity.[28] The *Confederate Veteran*, a Southern publication, suggested in 1916 that the film was able to do "more in a few months' time to arouse interest in the Klan than all the articles written on the subject in the last forty years." [29] The Klan even made inroads into New York City, which Simmons described as "the most un-American city of the American continent," meaning the least likely place to embrace the Klan's anti-black, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic sentiments.[30] This description was likely inspired by the city's incredible diversity, hosting a population that spoke "thirty-seven languages," and was only one sixth made up of "white, native-born Protestants." [31] In 1921, the group reportedly established offices in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. It eventually received support from several members of the New York clergy and began publication of a pro-Klan newspaper, *The American Standard*. While the Klan was able to establish a presence in the city, it also faced extreme resistance from figures in journalism and politics. The group was opposed by every New York City newspaper besides the *American Standard*, as well as several notable judges and politicians, including Mayor John F. Hylan, who ordered the police commissioner to "ferret out these despicable disloyal persons who are attempting to organize a society, the aims and purposes of which are of such a character that were they to prevail, the foundations of our country would be destroyed." [32] Ultimately, the Klan's presence in the city was relatively small. In a city of six million residents, the Klan never had more than 15,000 members.[33]

While the Klan was not able to achieve success in New York to the same degree that it did elsewhere, New Yorkers were enamored by the hooded figures Griffith depicted on

screen. Following the popularity of *Birth's* initial run, “Ku-Klux hats,” shaped like the hoods worn in the film, and “‘KK’ kitchen aprons” were manufactured and sold, and “Ku-Klux balls” were organized by the wealthy elite.[34] This infatuation with the Klan was coupled with an increased appreciation for Southern culture. James Weldon Johnson, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, reported that during the film’s revival in 1921 “the Capitol Theatre [wa]s decorated with Confederate flags,” and observed that some New Yorkers appeared to believe it was “‘classy’ to be regarded as Southerners.”[35] The NAACP, recognizing the city’s tendency to romanticize Southern attitudes, endeavored to link the film with the Klan of the present, associating the figures onscreen with the individuals who had begun organizing in New York City in defense of white supremacy. This strategy helped the NAACP gain new allies who were also targeted by the Klan, including Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. An anti-Klan pamphlet distributed by the NAACP in 1921 asked readers if they were aware “that the Ku Klux Klan [wa]s not only anti-Negro but anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic.”[36] Efforts to discourage support of both the film and the Klan were led by Johnson, who served as Executive Secretary from 1920 to 1929, and described *Birth* as “not art,” but “propaganda, and propaganda of the worst and most insidious sort.”[37]

Johnson moved to New York to write songs for the vaudeville circuit with his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, and Bob Cole at the turn of the century. He decided to attend classes at Columbia in his free time after Cole and his brother began traveling across the country to perform their songs. He studied English and drama, and he developed a close relationship with Professor Brander Matthews.[38] The notoriety Johnson had gained while writing for the vaudeville circuit was largely responsible for his close relationship with Matthews, and made his campus experience somewhat unique from most students, white or black. His time at Columbia was brief, lasting for only three years, and as in the case of Spingarn, it is unlikely that it propelled him towards a career in activism. There are many earlier experiences that are more likely to have inspired Johnson to dedicate himself to the pursuit of black advancement. In his autobiography, he wrote that he first developed his understanding of race while a student at Atlanta University, and began to believe that his studies were “preparation to meet the tasks and exigencies of life as a Negro, a realization of the peculiar responsibilities due to



[his] own racial group, and a comprehension of the application of American democracy to Negro citizens.”[39] He also detailed several encounters with racial prejudice and instances where he was threatened with violence because of his race. One early encounter involved him and a few classmates being forced to leave a train’s first class car after a black porter told him they would be confronted by “a mob with guns.”[40] Furthermore, Johnson had already participated in endeavors aimed at uplifting his race prior to his studies at Columbia. These activities included teaching poor, rural black students, delivering a speech entitled “The Best Methods of Removing the Disabilities of Caste from the Negro,” and establishing a black newspaper in Jacksonville, Florida.[41] Johnson’s career in activism began long before he attended Columbia, and the English and drama classes he took there probably did not contribute to his understanding of the unique problems facing African Americans.

When *Birth* returned to New York in 1921, the NAACP, led by Johnson, again lobbied to have the film censored, and their efforts were again unsuccessful. Following this initial failure, Johnson organized a “peaceful demonstration” outside of the venue showing the film.[42] “Negro ex-service men” and “negro women” stood in front of the theater carrying signs, some of which read “We represented America in France, why should ‘The Birth of a Nation’ misrepresent us here?”[43] There were also pamphlets distributed that said “Stop the Ku Klux Klan Propaganda in New York.”[44] Police officers asked the protestors to leave, and when their request was declined they arrested five individuals who they believed were leading the demonstration. Those arrested were initially found guilty, but the decision was later reversed by a judge in a higher court who argued that “it would be a dangerous and un-American thing to sustain an interpretation of a city ordinance which would prohibit the free distribution by a body of citizens of a pamphlet setting forth their views against what they believed to be a movement subversive to their rights as citizens.”[45]

One of the five individuals arrested was Edward F. Frazier, who was described by the *New York Times* as an “ex-service man and Columbia University student.”[46] He was actually a research fellow at the New York School of Social Work, which was affiliated with Columbia at this time. Like Johnson, his activism began before he came to

Columbia. While an undergraduate at Howard University in 1916, he petitioned to desegregate Woodrow Wilson's inaugural parade, which Howard had been invited to participate in. When the Inaugural Committee declined his request for all colleges participating to be ordered alphabetically rather than placing Black colleges at the rear, Frazier refused to march.[47] Both Frazier and Johnson were educated in historically black colleges, and it was there that they were deeply ingrained with the ideal of black uplift. This message was conspicuously absent at Columbia, but the two men maintained their dedication to it, and demonstrated this through their actions in 1921. Ultimately, the time he spent at the School of Social Work appears to have had relatively little impact on the life of Frazier.

Readers today may imagine that the arrest of a Columbia affiliate for participating in a peaceful demonstration would demand considerable attention from the student body, but this does not seem to be the case. *Spectator* did not report on the incident whatsoever, neither at the time of the arrest nor after Frazier's multiple court appearances. This lack of coverage could demonstrate that as a research fellow at an affiliated school, Frazier was too disconnected from campus life to merit notice. However, it could also be a result of the general omission of minority students from campus publications. One of the main limitations of using the *Spectator* archive to ascertain the attitudes held by students at this time is the absence of black students' voices and perspectives, likely due to their distance and exclusion from campus life. Most black students lived off campus in the early decades of the twentieth century – Frazier lived near the intersection of Seventh Avenue and 133rd Street – and probably felt a greater sense of community in their Harlem neighborhoods than at Columbia.[48] When black students later began to occupy space on campus, it caused great controversy and these students were targets of tremendous vitriol.

*Spectator's* glaring absences are ultimately revealing, demonstrating the degree to which Columbia remained a white dominated space in the early twentieth century and showing how readily campus publications silenced or dismissed black viewpoints. A rare example of an article written by a black student, Herman Dreer, appeared in *Spectator* in 1919. It was a letter to the editor protesting the publication's use of the term

“darkey” to refer to black students, and more generally the use of racial slurs as “the common vocabulary of cultured folk.”[49] Printed directly above Dreer’s letter, was a response written by the editorial board that complained he was “suffering...from a too sensitive temperament,” and explained that far from being an insult, “darkey” was actually “a term of humorous and sometimes affectionate meaning.”[50] The editors then proceeded to admonish Dreer for asserting that he could speak on behalf of all black Americans, while failing to recognize that they were doing the same. In a rare instance where the editors of *Spectator* actually published the perspective of a black student, they preceded it by dismissing the point of view expressed and bemoaning the “personal prejudices” of the writer.[51] Examples such as this one help to illustrate that almost all of *Spectator*’s reporting solely reflected the perspectives of the white majority of the student body. While black students were probably much more critical of *Birth* than their white peers, their opinions were not recorded in campus publications.

Ultimately, the NAACP’s campaign to influence public opinion of *Birth* was more successful in 1921 than 1915. New York newspapers offered less unqualified support than they had during the film’s initial run. A New York Times article discussing *Birth*’s return praised the film’s “power to stir the imagination,” while also calling it “as blindly partisan as the most violent sectional tradition,” and suggesting that using “so garbled and prejudice-feeding an account as ‘The Clansman’” was a detriment to the film.[52] *Spectator*, which published numerous articles praising and reporting on the film during its initial run, did not publish a single article announcing or commenting on the revival. There were also no advertisements for *Birth*’s revival printed in *Spectator*, which is perhaps even more revealing given the frequency at which advertisements appeared in 1915 and 1916. This silence could reflect the duration of the revival, which was much shorter than the film’s initial run, but it could also demonstrate that students were less willing to publicly support the film six years after its initial premiere. Given the NAACP’s efforts to associate *Birth* with the nascent Klan, exploring student discussion and opinion of the Klan at the time helps to explain the absence of *Birth*’s 1921 revival from *Spectator*’s reporting.

William Joseph Simmons characterized Columbia as “the least American of all schools,” implying that like New York it was similarly unreceptive to the ideals of the Klan.[53] Students were certainly cognizant of the organization, evidenced by several public discussions of the Klan announced or advertised in *Spectator*, and there does appear to have been considerable anti-Klan sentiment at the university. Columbia’s most public opponent of the Klan was President Nicholas Murray Butler, who had been “assailed with countless letters of a threatening and scurrilous nature from persons in sympathy with the Ku Klux Klan.”[54] He spoke out against the hateful organization in public venues and helped encourage support for political candidates devoted to fighting the Klan. Another area in which Columbia demonstrated institutional opposition to the Klan was the selection of Pulitzer Prize recipients. In 1922, the *New York World*, and Memphis’ *Commercial Appeal* in 1923, received the “gold medal for the most disinterested and meritorious public service rendered by an American newspaper” in recognition of its efforts to expose the Klan.[55] Similarly, in 1926, Georgia’s *Enquirer Sun* was awarded the medal partially for its “brave and energetic fight against the Ku Klux Klan.”[56] It is possible that these selections were influenced by Butler. He was an “ex-officio chairman of the board” that decided award recipients, and held considerable sway over their final choices. In 1941, he forcefully reversed the decision to award the Pulitzer Prize for fiction to Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom The Bell Tolls* because he considered the novel “offensive.”[57] Regardless of the degree of his influence, it is clear that Butler, the Pulitzer selection board, and likely even more Columbia officials, demonstrably opposed the Klan.

This institutional opposition appears to have extended to the student body as well. The *Spectator* reported in 1921 that they had conducted a search for Klan activity on campus, and “not a single member of the above named Order could be found within the College.”[58] In 1923, a sociology professor surveyed the students in one of his courses and found that when given the prompt “Americanism is white Protestantism,” sixty-six students rejected it, three were “equivocal,” and only six agreed with the statement. [59] The freshman class was surveyed similarly in 1924, and the views of the Klan “received almost no support getting about twenty-five votes out of over two hundred cast.”[60] Additionally, a *Spectator* editorial that appeared in 1923 urged Columbia students to use

the influence they held in their communities to discourage support of the Klan and argued that “harmony can be restored among the different denominations and nationalities only thru[sic] the abolishing of the Invisible Empire.”[61] Although students would sometimes denounce the group, there were many who did not always take the issue so seriously. A large portion of *Spectator* articles from the 1920s that mention the Klan are actually from a satirical column called “The Off-Hour,” which offered neither condemnation or support. Instead, mentions of the Klan were simply meant to be humorous and often trivialized the real danger that the group represented to minority groups. For example, following a report that the Harvard Klan was recruiting new members, the column joked that members enrolled in “Klalkulus, Khlemistry, Khlinese, and Khliropractic Klourses,” and suggested that when the Klan reached Columbia the university would change its name to “Klolumbia.”[62] For any student to enjoy such an article, they must have either been unaware of the danger the Klan posed, or having recognized it, remained entirely unconcerned. This suggests that while a contingent of the student body did genuinely oppose the Klan, many were largely indifferent.

The surveys mentioned above reveal that most students harbored anti-Klan sentiment, but they also clearly show that support for the Klan did exist among a minority of the students at Columbia. The university was not unique in this aspect. Many of the elite northeastern colleges were home to individuals who endorsed the views of the Klan. A Klansman and Yale graduate, Clifford Slater Wheeler, boasted that he was able to recruit several members of the Yale Club, and Harvard and Princeton even had chapters of the organization founded on their campuses.[63] A *Spectator* article reporting that Harvard’s Klan was attempting to recruit more members, suggests that students at Columbia were aware of the growing Klan presence at their peer institutions.[64] While it could prove impossible to determine whether groups of students met privately to affirm and discuss the Klan’s views, public Klan activity, meant to signify the group’s presence and intimidate local minorities, reached Columbia in 1924.

Controversy first erupted when students discovered that a black student, Frederick W. Wells, had been living in Furnald Hall, one of the campus dormitories. The Hall Committee, led by Chairman and fellow student John B. Rucker, requested that Wells

be removed from his residence after this revelation. Their request was rejected by Dean Herbert Hawkes. Many newspapers later asserted that Rucker was a Klansman, but he sharply denied these allegations. The committee's request inspired a group of students to leap to Wells' defense, drawing up a petition denouncing the actions of the committee and ultimately receiving over one hundred signatures.[65] However, Hawkes' denial did not resolve the issue, and the following morning, "a flaming cross, six feet high, was erected in the centre of South Field." [66] A burning cross, now an infamous symbol of the Klan, first became widely associated with the group after being featured prominently in *Birth's* climax and promotional material. For the first time, the type of activity that Griffith had glorified on screen, and that had been met with cheers by Columbia students not even ten years earlier, had reached campus. The cross only burned for about five minutes before it was taken down by "a small band of students," but this was more than enough time for the message that Wells was not welcome to be received.[67] The cross was followed by a pair of letters from the Klan that reached Wells, threatening his life if he were to continue living in Furnald.

Wells refused to leave Furnald, and following the incident, he received an outpouring of support and admiration for his courageous stand. Letters he received from fellow students at Columbia, as well as alumni, reveal how individuals affiliated with Columbia responded to the cross burning with sympathy for Wells. One of these was from George Edmund Haynes, Columbia alumnus and founder of the National Urban League, who wrote to Wells, stating "as an alumnus of the University and one of the former Negro students to enjoy its privileges, I commend the position you have maintained in what is by no means a personal matter." [68] He continued, suggesting that Wells was "acting not only for [his] personal interest but also for the academic opportunity of a great company of aspiring Negro youth." [69] Wells received similar support from a number of other African Americans and black institutions, including the NAACP. He received a telegram from James Weldon Johnson, Executive Secretary of the NAACP and another Columbia alumnus, who "express[ed] the admiration which the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [felt] for the manly stand which [he] ha[d] taken." [70] Much like Haynes, Johnson articulated to Wells that through his actions he was not only defending his own right to an education and access to an elite institution,

but also “representing the hopes and aims of the best and bravest in the Negro race.”[71]

The black community rallied in support of Wells, but they were not the only ones to express their pride and appreciation. There were also many white people who wrote to Wells, condemning the cross burning incident and praising Wells’ refusal to relinquish his dorm room. These letters offer tremendous insight into how race was being considered and discussed among the more progressive and racially sensitive students at Columbia. One of Wells’ classmates, Paul W. Wood, wrote “I for one, believe that as long as you abide by the rules and regulations and live up to the spirit of the Law School, that you have as much right to the privileges thus afforded as any student, regardless of color, age, or digestion.”[72] Recognizing that his attitude was probably not shared by all students at Columbia, Wood told Wells that if due to his support he “should thereby lose some friends from [his] acquaintances in the Columbia Law School, [he] should not consider that a misfortune.[73] He seemed concerned with how the cross burning reflected on white people as a whole, asking Wells not to “misjudge us white fellows because of this unfortunate occurrence, because we want to pull and work together for the glory and perpetuity of our sacred traditions and institutions in America.”[74] Wood was attempting to reassure Wells that an inclusive future could be built upon the existing American foundation, but he failed to acknowledge that the “unfortunate occurrence” he referred to was itself a manifestation of an American tradition of racial exclusion and intolerance, whose continued presence in American institutions was made evident by the unique circumstances of Wells’ student experience at Columbia.[75]

Overall, the maintenance of white innocence, the idea that the perpetrators of the incident were “ridiculously insignificant and unrepresentative,” was a chief concern among those who wrote to Wells.[76] Vell B. Chamberlain, a Columbia student who had previously served on the Furnald Hall Committee, wrote to Wells of his own experiences with Rucker, testifying that for two years he had known him to be “petty, prejudiced conceited and deceitful.”[77] This comment reveals that Rucker’s prejudice had not been previously concealed. While the two men attended the same university, Wells’

race inhibited him in a way that Rucker's bigotry did not. Rucker could serve in an important position regarding student life, holding considerable power and openly harboring racial prejudice, while Wells could not live on campus without having his life endangered due to the color of his skin.

There are interesting differences between the letters Wells received from black and white writers. Most of the letters he received from black people expressed that his bold stand had made him a great representative for his race, and connected Wells experience with the greater African American struggle for advancement. Many of the letters he received from white people self-consciously attempted to avoid this connection. Chamberlain told Wells that by maintaining his stand he could "win a preey[sic] victory not so much for [his] own race, as for broadmindedness in general as opposed to the revolting nastiness and narrowness of some people." [78] These letters reveal a tendency to avoid speaking on the subject of race, even while discussing a topic absolutely related to it. While Wells' greatest detractors were more than willing to focus on the subject of his race, his white sympathizers were reluctant to fully engage with it, preferring to discuss the issue in terms of right and wrong, or "broadmindedness" and "narrowness," rather than black and white. [79] Another letter, addressed to Wells from "a friend," provides an example of another phenomenon that may have existed on campus regarding discussions of race. [80] The writer told Wells "your skin is dark brother, but you are white – white to the core." [81] There is nothing in the letter to suggest that Wells' self-proclaimed friend was a fellow student at Columbia, but his comment bears striking resemblance to similar ones made by President Butler in the same year. After receiving threatening letters from the Klan, Butler denounced the writers of these letters in a public address, describing them "as neither white nor American." [82] While both of these men meant well, one attacking the Klan and the other sympathizing with its target, their comments both problematically equated whiteness with righteousness. Butler's statement was not a critique of white supremacy, but a declaration that the Klan were not deserving of the prestige whiteness denoted. Wells' sympathizer wished to extend whiteness' positive connotations to Wells, but never critiqued their existence. Even while opposing the organized white supremacy of



the Klan, these individuals were relying upon and reinforcing a more pernicious racism, one that associated whiteness with goodness, morality, and justice.

The cross burning incident drew attention to the presence and threat of the Klan on campus, increasing anti-Klan sentiment among students and having a lasting impact. About six months later, *Birth* was once again mentioned in *Spectator*, in an article on the increased place of movies in society, which stated that “the first K.K.K. propaganda on a huge scale was spread through Ince’s picture “The Birth of a Nation.”[83] This mention of *Birth* contrasts sharply with the publication’s earlier remarks on the film, which offered high praise and very limited criticism. Since *Birth* is only briefly mentioned in the article, and listed among multiple other examples, it was not necessary for it to be included. This suggests that the description of the film, while dramatically more critical than earlier reports, was probably widely accepted among the student body at the time. If this comment had been considered controversial or inflammatory, the editorial board could have removed it without damaging the article. Their decision not to do so demonstrates that the campus’ opinion of *Birth* had changed significantly since its premiere. In the wake of a nationally prominent Klan organization, a cross burning outside of Furnald Hall, and letters from the Klan threatening the life of a student, Columbia’s undergraduates no longer supported the film that had served as the inspiration for these events. It is important to recognize that changing opinion was entirely linked to the Klan, and not to any of *Birth*’s other objectionable aspects. The change was not inspired by the recognition that *Birth* depicted men like Wells as lazy, unintelligent, sexually aggressive, and undeserving of democracy, but instead by a burning cross and a death threat. The opinions of students at Columbia were not changed by looking upon Wells, recognizing their shared humanity, and denigrating anything that reinforced his oppression. Instead, after seeing a group of men, who looked far too much like themselves, manifest into reality things they were only willing to enjoy on screen, they distanced themselves and withdrew their support.

The Klan began to decline in the years following the cross burning, as “observers around the country...report[ed] smaller numbers and dwindling influence.”[84] By the 1930s, it was no longer prominent. In its absence, *Spectator*’s coverage of *Birth*

reverted back to its initial characteristics, offering praise without critique. When the film returned with sound in 1930, advertisements could once again be found in *Spectator*. The publication announced when the original version of the film was revived in 1938, and displayed advertisements for that showing as well. D. W. Griffith was invited to speak on campus, having been chosen on the basis of the value of his films, including *Birth*. Professor John Coss labelled *Birth* one of the two “best moving pictures he ever saw.”[85] All of this provides evidence that the decline in support of *Birth* at Columbia was a result of heightened anti-Klan sentiment, and was ultimately temporary. When the hooded organization fell from the national stage, and the fictions Griffith represented onscreen no longer paralleled a present force in society, individuals at the university felt free to embrace the film as they had in 1915, when the Klan remained a distant historical memory.

Columbia’s relationship to *Birth* can be contextualized within a broader understanding of the university’s historical relationship to slavery and its legacies. This is an institution that was financed by the profits of slave labor, and whose earliest graduates often owned slaves. Columbia was not radically abolitionist, maintained global ties to slavery even after it had been abolished in the United States, and was not among the first of its peers to begin admitting black students. Within this context, it is not surprising that the opinions of black students were not considered by the majority of the student body. Most students, even if unwilling to embrace the racist narrative depicted in Griffith’s film, were willing to accept it for the sake of entertainment. They did not object to the depiction of African American congressmen as woefully incompetent, the depiction of a sexually charged black man rabidly chasing after a white woman, a historical interpretation that blamed the newly free black population for the failures of Reconstruction, or, initially, the glorification and celebration of the Klan. They only began to object when the racism on screen could be associated with racism in real life, and with a real and present danger. The perspective of a black student only began to be considered when his life had been threatened. When this threat disappeared, objections ceased and the perspectives of black students were once again ignored.

The response to *Birth* at Columbia reveals the racial attitudes that were prevalent on campus in the period between the film's initial release and the demise of the Klan in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Throughout this period there were individuals from Columbia, such as Spingarn, Johnson, and Frazier, who fought determinedly to oppose *Birth*. Their actions were admirable, but anomalous. They were not inspired by the time these men spent at the university, and not in accord with the climate that was present on campus. Columbia at the time was marked by racial insensitivity, and students' enthusiasm for the film was a result of their greater failure to acknowledge and consider black viewpoints. Were it not for the Klan's white hoods and burning crosses, they may have never rebuked the film. While exploring the legacies of slavery at Columbia, it is important to recognize the persisting invisibility of black students on campus, and how it reinforced a tacit willingness among students to accept racism while offering limited dissent.

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[23] B. Joyce Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1939*, 10.

[24] "Speech of Mr. J. E. Spingarn At Banquet Honoring Dr. W. E. B. DuBois," February 23, 1938, Joel E. Spingarn Papers, Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room, New York Public Library.

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[28] Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, xi.

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