

# The Treatment and Framing of Early Black Students at Columbia University

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Columbia University & Slavery Course

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On the Columbia University Undergraduate Admissions website, there is a webpage entitled *Columbia by the Numbers*. Here, we see not only that Columbia has a three to one student to faculty ratio in the physical sciences or that more than thirty museums are accessible for free with a Columbia ID but also a series of “firsts.” Proudly, Columbia notes that it is the home of both the first African American advocacy group on a multi-racial campus in the United States and the first gay-rights advocacy group on any college campus. It is the first university in the United States to award a Ph.D. in chemistry to an African American woman (Marie M. Daly) and the first university to have 1,000 international students (in 1953) (Columbia by the Numbers). Implicit in these firsts, however, is a not-so secret history of oppression and exclusion.

Clearly, the appeal of identifying the first, be it a student of a historically underrepresented background or simply a type of campus group, regardless of connection to an identity group, is not lost on Columbia. The first signifies innovation – pioneering progress. Especially within the specific category of college admissions, there exists the paradox of the first: in order to have the progressive first step, there must have been some sort of barrier that made the accomplishment of the first impressive. Without the stumbling block, there is nothing to celebrate or note. In situations where this impediment is simply due to the difficulty or scale of the task, such as with Neil

Armstrong's Moon landing, as opposed to representing an explicit correction of past discrimination, commendation without overt reference to the original, prejudicial (and almost certainly still existing) condition of things does not tell the full story.

For instance, Zora Neale Hurston, the first black student to attend Barnard College, is honored both on Barnard's 2015 125th Anniversary website and Columbia's 2004 250th Anniversary website. A transfer student from Howard University, Hurston graduated from Barnard in 1928. Her profile on each website celebrates her role in the Harlem Renaissance and her lasting legacy and impact through her anthropological work and novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Barnard's website reads: "Half a century after her death in 1960, Hurston's writing remains an integral piece of America's literary fabric" (Barnard 125). Similarly, Columbia's equivalent offers no new revelations about Hurston's actual experience at Barnard: "A published short story writer by the time she came to New York in 1925, Hurston studied anthropology at Barnard, where she was the college's first African-American student. Her admission was secured and expenses paid by Barnard cofounder and longtime trustee, Annie Nathan Meyer" (Columbia 250). Although this single profile is not intended to be a comprehensive examination of Hurston or her time at Barnard, the extent to which this small blurb speaks to Hurston's true experience at Barnard is limited to simply identifying her as *the first* without further exploration. Of her time at Barnard, Hurston said:

I have no lurid tales to tell of race discrimination at Barnard. I made a few friends in the first few days. ... The Social Register crowd at Barnard soon took me up, and I soon became Barnard's sacred black cow. If you had not had lunch with me, you had not shot from law. I was secretary to Fannie Hurst and living at her 67th Street duplex apartment, so things were going very well with me. (Barnard Archives)

Although this statement does not speak to an extremely traumatic, racist college experience, it does hit at the discomfort that Hurston felt while at Barnard. Referring to herself as "Barnard's sacred black cow" addresses the idea of tokenism that inevitable followed her being the only black student on campus at the time. In *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, Valerie Boyd writes that:

even among her black friends, Zora expressed satisfaction with the way Barnard was treating her. 'I suppose you want to know how this little piece of darkish meat feels at Barnard,' she playfully wrote to Constance Sheen, the sister of her still-long-distance sweetheart, Herbert Sheen. 'I am received quite well,' Zora bragged. 'In fact I am received so well that if someone would come along and try to turn me white I'd be quite peevish at them.' (Boyd 108)

However, in *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Renato Rosaldo argues that in identifying herself as the "sacred black cow," an object of worship, Hurston "feels a certain discomfort with her place on the pedestal. Like a classic form of sexism doubtless well known to her, the cult of the black cow derives from white supremacy manifest not as brutal degradation but as patronizing elevation" (Rosaldo 151). Through Hurston's own account, it is clear that Columbia's and Barnard's descriptions of her were not intentionally omitting horrendous incidents of racially-motivated violence or harassment that had occurred against her; however, neither official website makes any mention of any struggle whatsoever, namely how Hurston as not allowed to live in Barnard's standard dormitories and undoubtedly must have faced other obstacles during her time at Barnard. Despite perhaps not feeling actively discriminated against by other Barnard students, racist views were prevalent on campus at the time. Through a 1930 letter between the Dean of Bryn Mawr College, M. Carey Thomas, and the Dean of Barnard College, Virginia C. Gildersleeve, regarding policy concerning the admission of "negro women into residence" (Documents on Zora Neale Hurston). In the letter, Thomas writes to Gildersleeve, "Will you tell me whether you have ever admitted a negro woman into residence and if so how it works especially whether her negro men friends call on her in the dormitories" (Documents on Zora Neale Hurston). Thomas refers to the past admission of four black women into the dormitories at Bryn Mawr over the summer and comments that "whenever entertainments are given by the summer school a solid block of negro men from the neighborhood of Bryn Mawr appears in the audience" (Documents on Zora Neale Hurston). All but outright said, this letter shows that blacks were unwelcome on campus certainly at Bryn Mawr and likely at Barnard as well, based on the Thomas' tone. As the campus climate certainly did not shift drastically between Hurston's time at Barnard and 1930, we can gather that Hurston

had to endure the poor treatment of those with similarly racist mentalities during her time at Barnard. Yet Hurston's struggle is not taken into account, and her story is often used as a way to praise Barnard and Columbia for accepting her rather than as a way for these institutions to acknowledge their racist pasts.

Despite a disconnect in the framing a first as a praise of the institution that was formerly exclusive, what is more troubling is that Columbia University has not yet even identified its first black student. Finding the first black student at Columbia is complicated by innumerable factors, ranging from white passing to silences in the archives. Even in the case of Zora Neale Hurston, there very well may have been black students before her at Barnard who were not visibly black. This raises yet another question: if these theoretical white passing students were not perceived to be black and were not treated as such, do they deserve the same designation as visibly black students? This question became especially relevant in the case of James Parker Barnett, a student at Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons who had been enrolled for two years before being expelled in 1850 after it was discovered that he was a "colored" student (Expelled for 'African Blood').

Despite lacking the identity of the very first black student, several early black students at Columbia University have been discovered. The unique experience of each of these students, as well as the way that Columbia has either honored or forgotten them, speaks to the university's historic tendency to exclude yet exploit black students.

In the Columbia University Class of 2021, 14% of students identify as African American, and an additional 46% of students belong to other minority groups. In presenting its diversity statistics prominently on its admissions website, it is clear that Columbia prides itself on its diverse student body: "Columbia is committed to creating and supporting a community diverse in every way: race, ethnicity, geography, religion, academic and extracurricular interest, family circumstance, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background and more" (2021 Class Profile). Given the historic discrimination against black students in admissions, Columbia's emphasis on diversity in 2018 naturally would seem to be a fairly modern establishment; however, Columbia, as early as 1904 was

congratulating itself for accepting diverse students while simultaneously perpetuating racist views and discriminatory admissions policy.

In an article published in *The New York Times* on October 23, 1904, the then president of Columbia University, Nicholas Murray Butler, considers the future of Columbia, writing that it will “continue to draw to itself, in even larger measure than now, ambitious students from the Old World as well as from the New” (The Future of Columbia). In other words, Columbia will continue to interest students from all over the world as it grows.

Clearly, the fact that Columbia attracts students from a wide array of physical locations is a point of pride for Columbia. Butler’s praise of geographic diversity as it frames the university in a flattering and desirable light is similarly seen in another article in the same issue in which a Columbia professor who had also attended Columbia for his 1871 undergraduate degree reflected upon the changes he had seen in his time at Columbia. When he was a student:

Columbia was scarcely more than a day school that some of the better youth of New York attended because of its convenient location. The student body was made up almost entirely of New York boys, a few from Brooklyn, and fewer still from Jersey. Today the Blue and White shelters men from all parts of the earth – from Zululand, from Russia, from China, from Spain – nearly every State and Principality is represented. (1754 – Columbia’s Sesquicentennial – 1904)

In this article, the mention of a student “from Zululand” is referring to Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, an early black student at Columbia who also made headlines across the country when he enrolled at Columbia University in 1902. On Sunday, April 15, 1906, an article entitled “Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University” was published in *The New York Times*. It profiles four students: Pixley Ka Isaka Seme of Zululand, Africa, Aghasi Samuel Shimmon of Urmi, Persia, Srirangan D.S. Iyengar of Mysore State, India, and Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo of Shanghai, China.

The article begins by elevating Columbia in terms of its intellectual prestige through its commentary about the “average Anglo-Saxon’s” perception of the “foreigner, particularly the Asiatic, the African, and the islander of the southern hemisphere” (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University). Despite the fact that a person of any of these origins is perceived to be “a mediocre individual, all right maybe in his own sphere, but not a factor of importance in the modern world,” Columbia rises above the popular belief, recognizing talent wherever it may be from (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University). No matter how progressive this statement may make Columbia appear, the language used in the article clearly demonstrates the true way in which non-white students were perceived and treated. From the very first sentence, the precedent is set that although the majority perceives non-whites to be inferior, Columbia is such an attractive institution that it has many foreign students. Instead of countering a racist viewpoint, the author merely accepts it and uses it to enhance Columbia’s image.

Even though Columbia was actively discriminating against black students in the admissions process at the time, it is portrayed as a “cosmopolitan” institution that attracts students from all over the world and gives students who are stereotypically thought to be less capable the opportunity to prove themselves (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University). Of Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, the author writes:

He gained his first knowledge of American and the English language through the American missionaries some ten years ago, and the faint ray of light which the missionaries showed him aroused in him the desire for more light and more knowledge. Believing that upon him rested the great responsibility of uplifting and bettering his people he came to America eight years ago to work and to study. (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University)

Essentially imposing a modified version of the White Man’s Burden on Seme, it is clear that although accepted to Columbia, Seme had significant, additional obstacles to tackle. The average white student was not asked to apply his Columbia education to his entire race, thereby demonstrating just one way in which Seme was treated unfairly and

held to different standards than were his white peers. Even more explicitly, the author continues:

With a knowledge of American social life and “Yankee” business methods, with a mastery of many industrial problems, and with a first-class university education, Mr. Seme will return to his native land fully fitted to take up the task of raising his fellow-men to the higher planes of life, instilling into them a realization of their power and ability, and creating in the minds of the outside world a fuller and better understanding of a generally misunderstood race. (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University)

Seme’s Columbia education is supposed to give him the “best” skills and knowledge, therefore enabling him to carry out a similar process once he returned to South Africa. Understood here is the perceived superiority of Columbia’s academic and cultural offerings to that of South Africa. Furthermore, although clearly qualified enough to study at Columbia, Seme was not perceived as eligible to rise to a prominent role in his field of choice in the United States. Finally, the author concludes:

On the whole the foreign students who attend Columbia do as the Romans do. In other words, they come to America and to its colleges with a desire to absorb American life and manners, and so far are they successful that but for dark complexion and dark hair it would be impossible to distinguish them from the American students. (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University)

Obscured by language that superficially connotes equality is the idea of othering. According to the author, despite the impressive accomplishments of non-white students, they will always be defined and constricted by their race, as they could never *truly* be equal to white students. Knowing that ideals such as these were held makes it difficult to imagine that Seme did not face discrimination in some way in his daily life at Columbia although he spoke highly of the institution, saying that a “glance through the city’s records is enough to convince any mind that Columbia is a force behind the throne in the greater movements of New York life” (Every Continent Contributes to the Student Roll of Columbia University).

Just as with Zora Neale Hurston, Pixley Ka Isaka Seme is featured on Columbia's 250 Anniversary Website. He is honored for not only being the "first black South African to graduate from Columbia" but also for being a part of the creation of the African National Congress, which "has led the struggle for political, social, and economic rights for black South Africans" (Columbia 250). Columbia cites his famous words about the university's being deeply intertwined with New York City and gives further biographical information: Seme earned the George William Curtis medal, the University's highest oratorical honor, and went on to study law at Oxford (Columbia 250). Despite honoring Seme's accomplishments, the narrative Columbia showcases is still one-dimensional, as it does not accept responsibility for creating the climate that made it so momentous for a black student to be successful at Columbia. Although it does highlight Seme's achievements, when put in conversation with the article from *The New York Times*, it is clear that Columbia was not a safe haven for black students at the early twentieth century.

While Seme may not have been the very first black student at Columbia, his winning the George William Curtis oratorical prize made headlines because of his race. In a short article from May 13, 1906 in the *Idaho Daily Statesman*, Seme's accomplishment is mentioned, and he is referred to as "a full blooded Zulu" (An African Orator). The author makes mention of Seme's physical appearance, writing that "the young African is a typical Zulu in appearance" (An African Orator). The emphasis on his specific physical traits comes across as unnecessary in the context of an article about his academic accomplishments; however, Seme is appropriately given credit for his accomplishments.

In the article "Zulu Wins Medal as First Orator" published on April 6, 1906 in *The Evening Times* based out of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Seme is reported to have said that "the domination of Great Britain was an advantage to the natives on account of the commercial opportunities it afforded." The topic of his prize-winning speech was 'The Regeneration of Africa' (Zulu wins Medal as First Orator). In his speech, he said:

The races of mankind are composed of free and unique individuals. An attempt to compare them on the basis of equality can never be finally satisfactory. Each is self. My thesis stands on this truth; time has proved it. In all races, genius is like a spark, which,



concealed in the bosom of a flint, bursts forth at the summoning stroke. It may arise anywhere and in any race. (Seme)

Although he goes on to connect this to Africa and Europe as entire continents, it is undoubtedly also a statement that speaks to his experience as a black student at Columbia.

In an earlier article, "Zulu Student at Columbia: Youth Comes From Far Off Africa for Education in America" published on November 15, 1902 in the *Wichita Searchlight*, Seme also made headlines: "When Columbia university opened for the fall term there sat in the freshman class a dark skinned, rather slight and wholly modest youth who has come farther to make Columbia his alma mater than any other student there" (Zulu Student at Columbia). The author notes that he "signs his name Pixley I. Seme but if he wrote it among his own people it would be Pixley ka' Isaka Seme" (Zulu Student at Columbia). This is clear evidence of Seme's being perceived as an outsider in the Columbia community. The author continues, commenting that the Zulus fought, "never faltering and turning back till they met the white man with his machine guns and bullets that kill a mile away" (Zulu Student at Columbia).

In a virtually identical but more expansive article entitled "Students From Over Seas" published in the *Cleveland Gazette* in December 26, 1903, describes Seme and reports that there are "three more of his countrymen elsewhere in this country, a brother and two others," all "with the same end in view – the ultimate bettering of the condition of their fellows in South Africa" (Students From Over Seas). Again, the idea of coming to the United States to gain an education or some set of particular skills in order to return to South Africa to improve the lives is brought up. The author tells the story behind these four men, calling it "almost a romance" (Students From Over Seas). When Britain was first colonizing Africa, there was an Englishman who settled there and founded a school "in which he taught the children that there were things worth doing besides fighting the king's battles in the king's regiments and adding new conquered peoples to the many already under his thumb" (Students From Over Seas). His presence made it so when "the American board of foreign missions sent its first missionaries among the Zulus in 1852, the way was already prepared for them to some extent," so the king

allowed them to carry out their work and establish further schools (Students from Overseas). It appears that these four men attended one of those schools, which prompted them to come to the United States when they grew older.

Further commentary about the presence of a black student at Columbia is seen in an article published by *The Boston Herald* on June 13, 1906, "Conspicuous in the graduation exercises tomorrow will be Ken Soshino, a Japanese, and Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, a full-blooded African prince" (Divide Harvard). Although nothing about either of these students beyond this single sentence, both the use of the word "conspicuous" and the prominence of the sentence itself speak volumes about the public perception of these non-white students and the way they were inevitably seen and treated on campus.

In another article, "A Zulu Beau Brummel: A Type of People England is Trying to Control in Africa," published on August 15, 1906 in the *Patriot*, which is based out of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the author writes:

Young men of the Zulu race have graduated from British and American college, and one, Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, is now a student at Columbia university, where he recently won a prize for oratory. In an essay on 'The Regeneration of Africa' he declared his belief that British control of the government was best for the progress of his race" (A Zulu Beau Brummel). Despite noting these accomplishments, the author writes on, making racist generalizations: "The wilder and more ignorant of the Zulus are, like most savage or semi-savage peoples, of a childlike simplicity of character in many respects" (A Zulu Beau Brummel). A condescending attitude toward Zulus, such as the one shown here, would not cease simply because an individual, such as Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, was able to enter a university like Columbia. Rather, those who are able to achieve such success are considered exceptions and are written off, at times, even making it easier for those with racist views to other of the same race who have not had similar successes. This mentality was unquestionably present at Columbia during Seme's time as a student, and although he would be applauded for his accomplishments, much like Zora Neale Hurston expressed, there was an element of condescension attached.

On June 1, 1906, *The Colored American Magazine* of Boston, Massachusetts, wrote about Seme as well. In talking about his winning the oration honor, the author states that it “has given a new stimulus to the old question in regard to the ability of the native African to master the fundamental ideas of Western civilization and use them” (*The Colored American Magazine*). The author expands this point to talk about how blacks are proving themselves to be just as capable as whites in many different spheres. The piece also includes reference to the piece written about Seme in *The New York Times*, and details his plans to study at Oxford and return home. In contrast to some of the other pieces that talk about Seme, this one approaches his accomplishments without a patronizing tone. Instead, the author portrays it not as something unexpected because Seme is black but just one example of exceptional work, and there is no mention of his being the first South African to do so at Columbia.

Making headlines not only in the United States but also in South Africa, Seme is mentioned on September 26, 1922 in an article in *Imvo Zabantsundu*, a publication based out of King William's Town, South Africa. Although not profiled as he was in the articles from the United States, he is noted as having graduated from Columbia University.

On April 6, 1906, Seme was profiled in a short article entitled “A Literary Surprise” in *The News and Courier*, a publication from Charleston, South Carolina. As seen in prior articles of the same kind, the author refers to Seme as “the only full blooded Zulu who ever entered Columbia University” (*Literary Surprise*). Seme’s uncle had been educated in the United States and encouraged Seme to do the same. Although Seme planned to become a missionary after graduation, he changed his mind and decided to go to Oxford and then return home to become “a native attorney general” to “represent the interests of his people before the British government” (*Literary Surprise*).

An investigation of Pixley Ka Isaka Seme’s press coverage lends itself as a case study to better understand the climate of Columbia University for early black students. Depending on the particular news outlet, Seme’s accomplishments were approached with a variety of different tones and perceptions, some exceedingly racist and some truly positive. In exploring his time at Columbia, just as with the news articles about him,

much is gray as opposed to white or black, as articles commending him at times come across as patronizing. Not only was Seme seen during his time at Columbia as a symbol of Columbia's widespread prestige, but much of this legacy remains.

In 2018 just as in 1904, Columbia flaunts its widespread appeal: "Columbia has the 4th largest international student population of any U.S. university and 100+ countries are represented amongst undergraduates" (Columbia by the Numbers). This progressive description, however, comes in stark contrast with student sentiment voiced in an article published in the *Columbia Spectator* on April 26, 1967, entitled "Number of Negro Students Increased Slowly Since 1877." The author, Peter A. Greene, writes about James R. Priest who, in 1877, graduated from the School of Mines (which would later become the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science), referring to him as "the first Negro to enter Columbia" (Greene). Greene shows that Columbia lagged far behind its peer institutions in its admission of black students.

James Priest was mentioned yet again in a 1984 *Spectator* article about the issues black students face on campus entitled, "Blacks at Columbia: A Separate Piece" published on October 11th. The author, Irene Tucker, writes that since "first admitting black students in 1877, Columbia seems to have changed a good deal. Blacks, once excluded from living with white students, have moved into Columbia housing. And the fewer than 20 undergraduates who used to attend the College at any given time have increased to about six percent of the total undergraduate population" (Tucker). In 2018, this percent has more than doubled. Yet issues, such as tokenism, have persisted from Zora Neale Hurston's experience to that of the black students interviewed for this article to the present day. In 1984, however, the impacted black students had more of an opportunity to voice their sentiments than did those early black students at Columbia. Although only a small percentage of the Columbia community was black in the 1980s, it still allowed for a much greater community than black students had when there were only a handful of them in existence.

Much like Zora Neale Hurston and Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, James Priest has been featured in Columbia's promotional materials as a point of pride for the university. In the

official materials of the 2014 celebration of 150 years of engineering at Columbia, the following image was highlighted for the year 1877 in a timeline of key years:

“Columbia has an early history of attracting and educating international students. Liberian-born James R. Priest (front, center), thought to be the first black student at Columbia, graduates from the School of Mines” (Columbia Engineering). Luiz de Souza Barros, a student from São Paulo, Brazil, is also mentioned, as he graduated alongside Priest in the School of Mines in the class of 1877” (Columbia Engineering). Once more, students of underrepresented backgrounds are used to demonstrate Columbia’s appeal to international students. Furthermore, it is worth noting that two of the earliest black students at Columbia, Priest and Seme, were both international students. Perhaps being from a remote area made Columbia more inclined to accept them. The overarching notion seen throughout the cases of Zora Neale Hurston, Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, and James Priest is that while Columbia and Barnard may have been progressive to a certain extent in accepting black students, especially in the cases of Seme and Priest, a true desire and effort to benefit the individual student appears to be lacking; instead, it appears that the university predominantly was interested in being able to proclaim that it attracted such a wide array of students. Although the admission and treatment of black students on campus has drastically improved, this mentality still remains to the present day, as the way in which these early black students are celebrated tends to honor the university for accepting them more than it honors the students themselves when, although not common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, simply admitting a black student is not an accomplishment in itself for the university. To more accurately represent the experiences of early black students at Columbia, the university could be more transparent about the racism that these students faced while on campus. Although Hurston, Seme, and Priest did not write about specific traumatic incidents, an unwelcoming atmosphere undoubtedly existed for them on campus. For instance, in 1924, there was a cross burning on campus in response to the first black student to live in Columbia’s on-campus dormitories – Frederick W. Wells (Bright Spots Giving Sign in A Dark Sky). This occurred after Hurston, Seme, and Priest had graduated, meaning that racial tensions certainly were present at Columbia during their time on campus. Being transparent about such events

would provide a more holistic understanding to the general public of the relationship between Columbia University and black students.

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