

Blurring the Lines: James Parker Barnett, Racial Passing, and Invisible Early Black Students at Columbia University

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Discussions of racial passing have never been simple, as racial passing involves the traversing of social systems and the manipulation of power structures in a way that is often unsettling. Racial passing, according to Randall Kennedy, is a “deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct”.[1] The most typical form of passing that has historically occurred in the United States is that of a black person passing as a white person; in other words, a person who has black ancestry that would societally deem him to be black moving throughout society identifying and performing as a white person. It is important to distinguish between a passer and a person who is not aware of their racial ancestry; while a passer is actively cognizant of their background and intentionally living as another race, many individuals are simply unaware of their race and fully believe themselves to be of the race they are living as, even though the facts of their racial ancestry would classify them as a different race than the one they identify as.[2] The reasons for racial passing vary, but individuals

usually decide to pass in order to reap the benefits that come with being of the race they are passing as. For example, a person may pass in order to access better job prospects, receive a higher level of education, or to occupy any other space that was typically off limits for their race .[3]

In a society like that of the United States which exists as a social hierarchy stratified by race and class, racial passers have been considered a significant threat to the structures that uphold white supremacy. For white people in America, “the core of 'the American national character' [was] a denial of legitimacy and privilege based exclusively on descent”. [4] In other words, American society was and is inherently structured based on the hoarding of privilege by the white race and the denial of this privilege to minority groups, which above all applies to African-Americans. Therefore, minorities who pass as white pose a grave threat to the maintenance of this structure, as the act of passing blurs the barrier between the privileged elite and the oppressed. Although the infamous one-drop rule was not formally adopted until the 1920s[5], the American South’s desire to hold onto the racial caste created by slavery led the entire nation to spend the years of 1850 to 1915 “turning from a society in which some blackness in a person might be overlooked to one in which no single iota of color was excused”. [6] States like North Carolina and Virginia had laws prior to the solidification of the one-drop rule within the 18th and 19th century that defined as white those with less than one-fourth, one-eighth, or one-sixteenth African “blood”, but these rules were always overridden by rules of slavery which could deem even a person with one-sixty-fourth black “blood” to be black if their mother was a slave.[7] By time the one-drop rule was written into law, which classified a person as black if they had any hint of African “blood” no matter how small and no matter their phenotypical appearance, any advantage that Mulattos may have enjoyed post-slavery that elevated them slightly above Black people without any white “blood” had long disappeared, and Mulattoes had been solidified as indistinguishable from any other member of the black race.[8]

A classic example of an institution that was off limits to black and mulatto people and specifically reserved for the societal enjoyment and advancement of white people was the elite university. Columbia University was founded in 1754, making it the oldest

university in the state of New York and the fifth oldest college in the United States; however, the university did not graduate its “first negro” student James Priest from the School of Mines until 1877[9]. This trial run did not exactly break the glass ceiling; in 1939, there was only one black person attending Columbia School of Physicians and Scientists, even though the “first” black student Travis Johnson graduated from P&S in 1908.[10] A review of the class of 1963 shows that, within a class of 600 undergraduates at Columbia College, there were only three African-Americans and one South African student. It was not until about 1966 that Columbia College had more than twenty black undergraduates enrolled at the same time, exemplifying the slow process of opening Columbia’s doors to black students.[11]

Although Columbia was one of the later elite institutions to allow black students to graduate from the University, its competitors were not that far ahead. Yale, founded in 1701, graduated its “first African-American graduate” Edward Bouchet in 1857, one-hundred and fifty-six years after its founding, although it is often lauded for being a vanguard in the admission of black students[12]. Harvard, founded in 1636, followed about a decade after, graduating Edwin C. J. Howard (Harvard Medical School), George L. Ruffin (Harvard Law School), and Robert T. Freeman (Harvard Dental School) all in 1869[13]. Cornell University, founded in 1865, did not see its first black graduate until after Columbia did, when in 1890, ex-slave George Washington Fields received his degree from Cornell Law School.[14] All of the information provided about “first black students” or “first African-American students” is readily available on these universities’ websites, often as a symbol of pride and righteousness; the information is easily accessible, and there have been significant efforts to have these students honored for their landmark achievements despite the social climates in which they attended their alma maters. However, there lies an issue within this effort to discover and honor the “first” black student at these universities, and I argue that this issue lies within the phenomena of racial passing.

On October 1st, 1850, a man named James Parker Barnett entered Columbia School of Physicians and Surgeons’ anatomical theater for class. He was in his third and final year at the College, on track for matriculation and to complete his goal of becoming a

Columbia-graduated physician. In the middle of the lecture, he was called outside by one of his professors, Dr. Charles E. Isaacs, and questioned by a Isaacs and several other professors about a rumor regarding his alleged African “blood”. According to Professor Willard Parker, two months prior to their meeting with him, the College had “been accused by a Southern Gentleman of receiving colored students”, which Professor Parker had denied. However, this accusation had apparently “been brought up against the college” more than once. Specifically, the gentleman mentioned the name of an individual named MacDonald, as well as Barnett’s name, accusing them of being colored students, but the College had no record of a student named MacDonald at P&S. When questioned by the professors as to whether he knew anyone by the name of MacDonald, Barnett denied being aware of any such individual. However, when asked of his own racial background, Barnett responded, “I must confess that my mother is not of the Anglo-Saxon race, but of Creole descent”. “And your father?”, they asked. “Well”, Barnett responded, “my father is neither of the Anglo-Saxon race”. When the professors inquired about his parents’ complexions, Barnett replied, “My mother is fairer than I, and my father is about of my complexion”. “I had heard that they both were of your complexion”, responded Professor Parker. The entire conversation continued for about forty-five minutes, and Barnett spent whatever remaining talking time he was given pleading his “previous attendance at the lectures of the college” and his “graduation from the University” of the City of New York in an effort to convince them to allow the continuation of his studies, but they ignored his appeals. His Professor Dr. Chandler R. Gilman, in a concluding sentiment, exclaimed to Barnett, “Do not come here again, where you are not wanted!”. Despite the results of this conversation, Barnett still applied to the College for his matriculation ticket in November but was denied both by his professors and the registrar, who said they could not matriculate Barnett as it was “contrary to their custom”, and that “they had refused repeatedly on former occasions similar applications”. [15]

What we know of the above communication comes from the singular identified account of the interaction detailed in a letter from James Parker Barnett to John Jay II, a famous abolitionist lawyer and Columbia graduate who James Barnett Sr., James Parker Barnett’s father, hired to challenge J.P. Barnett’s expulsion from the school of P&S.

According to Barnett's account, the reason for his expulsion was the College's alleged discovery of Barnett's colored "blood", meaning that it was believed by the College that Barnett was a white student when he was accepted into the University. Upon this realization, his attendance at the school was immediately terminated based on the idea that he had deceived the school by applying without disclosing his African ancestry and therefore obtaining admission through a "concealment of facts".[16] Our established definitions of racial passing reinforce that to be a passing individual, one must be cognizant of their actual racial ancestry and intentionally deceive others by purporting to be of another race; according to Kennedy, this type of deception includes "declining to disclose information that would prompt observers to think or act in ways that one wants to avoid".[17] Therefore, if Barnett was aware of having black ancestry and applied to a College that did not accept colored students without disclosing his black ancestry, Barnett passed as white as a means of gaining acceptance to and studying at P&S. However, *did* Barnett actually have any black ancestry; and if he did, was he aware of it?

To contextualize Barnett's case, it is critical to take a look at his family history. James Barnett Sr. was a wealthy, self-made businessman born in New York City in 1801. He set up his business serving the seaport on the East River in Manhattan providing services in tin plate, copper, and sheet iron work for the packet ships of shipping companies sailing in and out of New York.[18] Barnett Sr. married Eliza Beaumont, a woman from New York City with whom he had three kids: Edmund, Malvina, and James Parker. While Edmund joined Barnett Sr. in the family seaport business, Malvina and James Parker were sent to Rutgers Female Institute and the University of the City of New York (now known as New York University) respectively to receive elite educations.[19] Shortly before graduating from Rutgers Female Institute, Malvina left to marry James McCune Smith, a prominent black physician, the first black American to hold a medical degree from a university[20], and an important voice and activist in the abolitionist movement. James Parker Barnett graduated from the University of the City of New York after studying there for his undergraduate degree, and that same year applied and was accepted to the Columbia School of P&S. Everything about the Barnett's background lends itself to that of a white family; the level of wealth, the level of

education, and the level of aspiration. During a time when slavery was still legal, wealthy black families were seldom. Neither the University of the City of New York, Rutgers Female Institute, nor the Columbia School of P&S openly admitted students of color. When Parker Barnett applied to P&S, he was technically overqualified, as an undergraduate degree was not required for acceptance to the medical school; all one needed was the ability to pay the costs associated with the College. It is clear from these details that the Barnetts were a wealthy family who valued the foundation of a thorough education and had the means to pay for it, but we can also deduce that the Barnetts had the privilege of being able to accrue the amount of wealth that they did, and to access the type of elite institutions that were typically closed off to all but white elites.[21]

From the details known to us, it appears that the Barnetts were living as a white family. Before J.P. Barnett was expelled from P&S, there are no records of the Barnetts personally identifying as black or mulatto, nor of any member of the family having African “blood”. However, a look at the Federal and State Censuses complicates this wholesome white narrative. My analysis of the census begins in 1850, the year of a major census reform mandating that all individuals receive a census entry rather than just the head of the household, and including a race option that incorporated the category of “mulatto”[22]. In 1850, the year of Barnett’s expulsion, the United States Census recorded James Barnett Sr., Eliza Barnett, James Parker Barnett, and Edmund Barnett as “M” for mulatto under the section for “Race”. On a different page of the same census, James McCune Smith (J.P. Barnett’s brother-in-law), Malvina Smith, and their children James W. Smith, Henry M. Smith, and Amy G. Smith are all labeled as “M” as well.[23] Five years later, in the New York State Census of 1855, James Barnett Sr., Eliza Barnett, James Parker Barnett, and Edmund Barnett are once again labeled as “M” for Mulatto under the section for “Race”, and on a separate page, James McCune Smith and his mother Lavinia Smith are labeled “M” as well. James W. Smith, James and Malvina’s son, is labeled “light brown”, but in this census, Malvina Smith is labeled “W” for White, the only one of her entire family.[24]

Upon first review, the census data above appears to disrupt the idea that the Barnetts were a white family, as the official Federal and State records from 1850 and 1855 categorize them as Mulatto. But once again, conclusions cannot be drawn so quickly. Unlike in the present day, censuses in the 19th century were not self-reported. Before the 1880s, U.S. Marshals were in charge of recording individuals in the census, and after 1880, specially trained census-takers would record the data. According to the United States Census Bureau, "Door-to-door census by temporary census-takers was the primary method of conducting the census until the U.S. Census Bureau began mailing questionnaires to households in 1960".[25] Therefore, it was not the Barnetts who recorded their own race in the census, but rather census enumerators who were left to determine and record a person's race.

In the censuses following 1855, however, the Barnetts are only recorded as "W" for white, with no further mention of being mulatto nor black. In the 1860[26], 1870[27], and 1880[28] United States Federal Censuses as well as the 1865[29] and 1875[30] New York State Censuses, the members of the Barnett family consistently receive a "W" for white in the "Race" section. Even James McCune Smith, who as mentioned was a famous black abolitionist in New York and had visibly darker skin, was labeled as white in the 1860 and 1865 United States Federal Censuses. An analysis of the instructions distributed to census enumerators is useful in making some sense of this seemingly inconsistent and confusing phenomenon.

Although the 1850 United States Census Instructions do not give explicit directions for filling out the census sections beyond giving the categories of White, Black, and Mulatto, the 1860 Census Instructions are much more elaborate. Under the section labeled "Race" within the Census Instructions distributed to census enumerators for the 1860 United States Census, enumerators were educated as follows: "Under heading 6, entitled "Color", in all cases where the person is White leave the space blank; in all cases where the person is black without admixture insert the letter "B"; if a Mulatto or of mixed-blood, write "M"; if an Indian, write "Ind." It is very desirable to have these directions carefully observed".[31] With every year, the instructions involving racial determination became more specific and the need to identify and separate people with

black ancestry became further emphasized. In 1880, enumerators were told to “Be particularly careful in reporting the class mulatto. The word is here generic, and includes quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood”.[32] The language here is evocative of the one-drop rule, which would be officially written into law twenty years later, but encourages the same conclusion: any individual having any black blood was to be labeled as Mulatto, and it was up to the census enumerators to decide what that looked like. By 1910, an enumerator was to label as Mulatto “all persons having some proportion of perceptible trace of negro blood”[33], and by the 1930s, the category of Mulatto had been scrapped all together, with the census instructions telling census enumerators that “a person of mixed white and negro blood should be returned as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood”.[34]

The point here is to highlight that, no matter how specific the census instructions were, it was ultimately up to the census enumerators to determine who was black, white, or mulatto- and with the amount of racial mixing happening within the United States and no foolproof way to visually determine a person’s race, a census enumerator’s decision was random and arbitrary. It can be argued, then, that the census enumerator’s decision on a person’s race was based on a combination of their phenotypical appearance, behavior, and associations.[35] Therefore, the fact that the Barnetts are labeled in the Federal and State censuses as Mulatto in 1850 and 1855 respectively does not definitively tell us that they were in fact Mulatto, and the censuses from 1860-1880 do not prove that the Barnett’s were *trying* to pass as white; however, it *does* indicate that something about the way they looked, behaved, or associated motivated the census enumerators to record them in the ways they did. Furthermore, if the census enumerator was able to identify something about the Barnetts that caused him to label them as Mulatto in 1850 and 1855, it makes it less surprising that the trustees of P&S were so quick to decide on J.P. Barnett’s expulsion, as whatever flagged the attention of the census enumerator may have been noticeable to P&S or the person who reported J.P. Barnett to the College as well.

All this being said, the Trustees and professors of P&S did not have access to the census, and instead had other reasons to believe that J.P. Barnett was indeed of colored blood. In the account of J.P. Barnett being confronted by professors outside the anatomical theatre, it is important to notice that never once does J.P. Barnett deny having African ancestry. Rather than vehemently refuting the idea of having black “blood” when his professors tell him about the accusations, Barnett responds, “I must confess that my mother is not of the Anglo-Saxon race, but of Creole descent”. “And your father?”, they asked. “Well”, Barnett responded, “my father is neither of the Anglo-Saxon race”. Barnett’s diction here is important; he uses the word “confess”, suggesting that his response is an admittance and acknowledgment of the violation he is being accused of. His response in this interaction is later used against him in a resolution by the Trustees, who collectively state, “That [Barnett] has been refused admission and matriculation at the present session, the true facts of the case having only been recently brought to the knowledge of the Faculty by his own admission of his African descent”.^[36] However, once again, further information complicates J.P. Barnett’s case. Barnett Sr. was aware that the Trustees were trying to expel his son on the assumption that he had black ancestry, but argues that any “complexion of colour” that might be observed in J.P. Barnett was a reflection of J.P. Barnett’s Native American ancestry from his paternal Canadian great grandmother, Barnett Sr.’s grandmother, and from his maternal Canadian great grandmother, Barnett Sr.’s grandmother. He goes on to assert that Eliza Barnett, J.P. Barnett’s mother, was “a white woman and is the child out of a French Creole lady who was born in the island of Guadalupe, one of the French West Indian islands, and her father was a white French gentleman from Paris”. According to Barnett Sr., then, James Parker Barnett was not black, but rather, of mixed Native-American and White ancestry.^[37]

Although Barnett Sr. may have been telling the truth, it is critical to acknowledge the impact of his statement and how it highlights the distinctions between the experiences of oppressed minorities in the United States. Whereas black people have historically been segregated from the white race to prevent racial mixing and a tainting of white “purity”, the assimilation of Native Americans into white society was encouraged under the idea of “peaceful amalgamation” which advocated for a full assimilation and

absorption of what was left of the Native American population in the United States.[38] The reason for this distinction lies not in any racial difference or white preference regarding black and native peoples, but rather, in the difference resources that white people wanted from each of these two groups. White people wanted land from Native Americans, and upon European arrival, Natives occupied most of what is now the United States; therefore, policies regarding Native Americans were more favorable to assimilation, as assimilation was a way of eliminating the “Indian Problem” and absorbing Native Americans into white capitalistic society, therefore freeing up Native land for white consumption.[39] However, whereas white Americans wanted land from Native Americans, it was black people’s *labor* and *bodies* that they desired[40], a desire that depended on locking black people within a caste at the lowest level of society. Any racial integration was considered a threat to this social order, and as racial mixing and miscegenation became more and more prevalent throughout society, so did white passers, making it increasingly difficult for white people to maintain a racialized social hierarchy.

With this in mind, one can understand Barnett Sr.’s adamancy about explaining his son’s slight “colour of complexion” to be a result of a history of Native American ancestry rather than African ancestry. Regardless of whether the Barnetts actually had black ancestry, Barnett was aware of what a determination of black ancestry by the Board of Trustees would mean for his son’s future at the school. In this sense, I argue that the University potentially encouraged a different, less common sort of passing in which Barnett Sr. may have tried to pass as a different minority race. In response to his son’s expulsion, Barnett Sr. claimed Native American ancestry, believing that this explanation would make the University reconsider their decision. Barnett Sr. was aware that to be Native American was to not face the same segregation that black people did in society for the reasons explained above, and his genealogical explanations to the University are proof of his understanding of these distinctions. If Barnett Sr. was telling the truth, why was James Parker at twenty-one years old not aware of his Native American descent?[41] J.P. Barnett’s ignorance to his alleged Native American descent raises red flags in terms of the trustworthiness of Barnett Sr.’s genealogical clarifications. Regardless, Barnett Sr.’s explanations made no difference in the case; the

University had already made up their minds about J.P. Barnett being an individual of colored “blood”.

The information that a black student had been studying in the midst unbeknownst to them left the College’s professors and Trustees startled. The fear of black people passing as white had already become a severe anxiety amongst white society, especially in the post-slavery era, and continued miscegenation between white and black individuals, especially in the North where there were no anti-miscegenation laws, increased the number of people who phenotypically possessed passing potential. This fear pervaded multiple spaces of society, from diners to hotels to universities; whether this was subconscious or realized, it was becoming much more difficult for white people to ensure that black people occupied the most inferior ranks of society as they did during the times of slavery. To help explain the measures taken to emphasize the distinction between blacks and whites and to observe the place these divisions had in the rule of law, it is useful to observe a case in which an individual’s race was in dispute.

In the famous *Rhineland v. Rhineland* court case of 1925, a rich elite white man named Leonard Rhineland sought to have his marriage to black woman Alice Rhineland annulled after he allegedly found out that she was black two weeks into the marriage. Even though New York did not have anti-miscegenation laws, Leonard argued that Alice had lied to him by misrepresenting her race, and had therefore committed fraud which would deem Leonard eligible for an annulment should he win the case[42]. Alice’s father was indeed of mixed black-white background, and though she did not herself identify as black, her lawyers took the approach of arguing that there was no way in which Leonard could not have known that Alice was black based on her phenotypical appearance. Her lawyers had the all-white jury look at Alice with and without clothes, and brought in doctors and genetic specialists to further confirm by giving their “expert” advice on her obvious blackness[43]. Alice’s lawyers understood that there was a consistent fear within the court and amongst white people at the time in general surrounding the ability of black people to engage in “racial deception”.

Therefore, by presenting Alice’s black race as “obvious” and “easily recognizable”, her lawyers sought to avoid the possibility of the jurors seeing Alice as a threat to the purity

of whiteness or the stability of white supremacy[44]. Ultimately, Alice likely won because the all-white jury assigned to her trial needed to believe in race as “a pure biological construct with distinct physical markers”; because Alice physically appeared to have “black blood”, the jurors needed to believe that there was no way that a sane white person like Leonard Rhinelander could’ve been fooled into believing she was white.[45]

Although the Rhinelander case was many years after Barnett’s expulsion, it is a vivid, powerful example of the fear that racial passers have the ability to conjure, and the lengths to which white people in the United States have gone motivated by this fear in order to uphold systems of white supremacy and purity and to keep the black and white races separate. Barnett was not visibly black (if black at all), as proven by his attendance at P&S for two years without any suspicion of his racial ancestry. When Barnett appealed to his professors to allow him to continue his studies, their response was that, despite his impressive educational history, they “had a rule binding upon them not to admit colored students”, and had “repeatedly refused former applications [from colored students] and that they saw no reason why they should make an exception in [Barnett’s] favor”[46]. In other words, Barnett’s professors admit that his expulsion from the university is not based on his lack of ability, but rather based on a purely racist precedent that bars colored students from the university for no reason other than their race.

To provide further evidence of the racist reasoning behind J.P. Barnett’s expulsion, it should be noted that a decision was made in September of 1852 to allow J.P. Barnett to be “examined” by a committee of trustees and professors of the College to determine whether he was academically qualified to obtain a degree in Medicine from P&S and as a means of settling with Barnett Sr.. J.P. Barnett was examined and he performed satisfactorily; the committee accordingly submitted a signed statement to the Board of Trustees following the examination, stating that they “do hereby certify that we have duly examined the following named Gentleman and found him qualified for the practice of Medicine and Surgery-- James Parker Barnett of Kings Co. N.Y.”.[47] However, despite Barnett proving that he was indeed qualified to earn a degree, the examination only resulted in the Trustees offering Barnett an honorary degree[48]. Indeed, the

Trustees had submitted a request to the Regents of the University to have a medical degree bestowed upon J.P. Barnett, but the Regents refused to fulfill the request on account of the fact that J.P. Barnett had not finished his two full lecture courses[49]; however, the Trustees would not allow J.P. Barnett to finish his two remaining lectures at the university, essentially ending Barnett's career at P&S.

If Barnett appeared white enough that he was able to attend P&S for two years without any suspecting that he was black, why could he not continue this way? Why could the University not just leave well enough alone if Barnett was a good student, well-liked by his peers and, most importantly, could pass as white (if he was indeed black)? In response to these questions, I contend that it is clear from above occurrence that the issue was *not* about an opposition to bestowing the *degree* onto James Parker Barnett, but rather, about the Trustees' aversion to allowing a colored person to occupy the same *spaces* as College students and professors of P&S, especially a student that posed such a threat to the strength of the color lines dividing the black and white races. It was not so much a monopoly on education that the college desired as a monopoly on space. It was the anxiety induced by what they believed to be J.P. Barnett's passing, and how his passing raised questions of the security of spaces that has been historically built for white elite, yet were suddenly being breached by those who were never meant to "pass" through their ivory gates. According to the Trustees' lawyer Crosby, "[Barnett] continuing to attend the lectures of the said college would prevent the attendance of other students for whose instruction the said College was instituted and would be injurious to the usefulness of the said College and to the accomplishment and fulfillment of its purposes by preventing numerous students from attending its instructions and lectures"[50]. In fewer words, black people can have education- just not here. Separate, but "equal".

There appears to be an unavoidable irony that would not have occurred to the Trustees of the University (nor to white society at large) that ties this narrative together almost too neatly. I argue that, through an intense fear of racial passing and an aversion to racial integration within its hallowed halls, the university fostered an atmosphere that encouraged racial passing and may have led directly to the acceptance and eventual

expulsion of James Parker Barnett. In the resolution from the “Special Joint Meeting of Trustees and Faculty” that occurred on October 30, 1850 about a month after J.P. Barnett’s expulsion, the Trustees note that “application was made to one of the Professors to admit a colored student without naming him, the applicant being the brother-in-law of Mr. Barnett, and that said application was refused as contrary to the usages of the college”. They go on to mention that, “at the time of his matriculation at a former session soon after the above application it was not known that Mr. Barnett had African Blood in his veins, nor was it known that he was the person in whose behalf the above application had been made”.^[51] J.P. Barnett’s only brother-in-law was James McCune Smith, the husband of his only sister Malvina Smith, so we can be certain that the trustees are referring to James McCune Smith in their resolution. Assuming that the person Smith inquired about was J.P. Barnett, this new information allows for a new potential narrative regarding J.P. Barnett’s acceptance into P&S. According to this narrative, J.P. Barnett had his brother-in-law inquire about the possibility of his attending P&S as a colored student, which allowed him to make this inquiry without exposing his identity. When Smith was told that colored students were not allowed to study at the College, J.P. Barnett applied to the College passing as white and continued his education there for two years until being outed as a colored student and consequently expelled. This narrative suggests that J.P. Barnett felt forced into racially passing as white after facing barriers when he tried to receive an education as a colored person; passing was not his first option, but faced with the prospect of not being able to attend his elite university of choice, J.P. Barnett chose what he saw as his only option- to pass as a white person as a means of circumventing the racial barriers in his way. I argue, then, that because Columbia School of P&S would not allow black students to attend the University lawfully, fair-skinned black students (potentially like Barnett) were systematically *encouraged* to pass as white as a means of beating the system and accessing levels of education that would otherwise be off-limits to them.

The extent to which elite universities like Columbia worked to keep black students outside their walls makes the accomplishments of Columbia’s hailed “first” black graduates even more impressive, as these students existed within institutions that found identity through racialized exclusivity. That being said, James Parker Barnett’s story

highlights a problem with these narratives of “firsts”, not only within Columbia University, but at historically white institutions across the United States. As mentioned above, Columbia’s refusal to admit black students into the University created the conditions that encouraged black students to pass as white, and James Parker Barnett may be a case of just that. However, the only reason we know about James Parker Barnett was because he was *caught*. There were high levels of racial mixing occurring in the United States through the 1850s when Barnett was expelled from P&S, and estimates about the frequency of racial passing are contentious. Walter White, a famous fair-skinned black man who passed as white while doing investigative work for the NAACP, estimated that “approximately 12,000 white-skinned Negroes disappear” into white society every year”.^[52] Roi Ottley, a famous African-American journalist in the early 1900s, claimed that there were approximately five million white-passing black people with forty to fifty thousand passing into whiteness every year.^[53] While these men lived in the early to mid-1900’s, well past Barnett’s time, their research proves that racial passing had become increasingly common as African descendants continued to mix with those of white ancestry. I argue that this information lends itself to the idea that it was highly unlikely that Barnett, if indeed passing, was the first nor the last black individual to pass as white at Columbia University before it officially began accepting black students. How then, can the university endeavor to honor the “first black” students at Columbia if it has no way of knowing the identities of black passers who, by racial standards of the time, were the first graduating students of African “blood”?

It is essential to emphasize that my point here is not to undermine the accomplishments of the students who elite universities like Columbia laud as their “first” black graduates; these black students’ courage and tenacity allowed them to make it through a system meant to keep them out, which was undoubtedly made clear to them through racist and discriminatory interactions with students and professors during their time at university. Being an “out” and openly acknowledged black student at an all-white elite institution in America would come with extraordinary challenges that black students passing as white would not experience due to the privilege of their fair skin, and it is crucial that these openly black students are remembered as part of these universities’ histories, as well as the history of our nation. My aim, rather, is to complicate the ways in which we

understand the history of blackness at within elite white institutions and to propose what I believe is a fuller understanding of the circumstances in which individuals negotiated blackness in response to a society based on white superiority and black exclusion. Passing, after all, was not an “automatic response to racial proscription”, but rather a “crucial channel leading to physical and personal freedom” for those light enough to traverse the color line.[54] For individuals who passed, passing was not a light choice; it often meant breaking ties with family members and entire communities, denying one’s ancestry, and dealing with the psychological consequences that come with this loss[55]. According to Allyson Vanessa Hobbs, “The core issue of passing is not becoming what you pass for, but losing what you pass away from”[56]. In lauding openly black graduates as the “first”, we overlook an entire set of white passing black individuals whose memory is at risk of slipping away, and we dangerously simplify our understandings of the nuanced existences and manifestations of black bodies in the United States. Even a step as simple as honoring a first openly black graduate as the “first ‘recognized’ black graduate” would make a difference in incorporating passing history into our remembrance of the past. Further, I believe that it is the responsibility of universities like Columbia to acknowledge their role in the institutional violence not only against openly black individuals, but also against white-passing black individuals, potentially like Barnett, who felt obligated to alter their entire identities in traumatic ways in order to get an education that would help release them from a racial caste system that trapped them at the lowest rungs of society.

In our attempts to understand slavery in America, we must come to terms with the fact that slavery has an afterlife; it’s lasting effects are visible and palpable in our past, our present, and our future. The idea of a “post-racial” America denies the realities of our nation’s founding and the legacy of slavery, an institution that has ordered race and class relations since the inception of this country. James Parker Barnett’s story helps to shed light on just a few of the many ways in which the aftereffects of slavery have manifested and continue to induce generational trauma on black individuals. Although university acknowledgment of the racial passers who walked through its doors will not undo the damage faced by these people and their families, university acknowledgment is a step in the right direction in terms of building a fuller, more complete understanding

of our country's racial history, and remembering those whose narratives often remain unacknowledged even in our attempts to more responsibly rewrite history.

Endnotes

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[3]*Id.*, 2

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[5] Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*, at 10 (1923)

[6] Joel Williamson, "New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United states", 11 (1980)

[7] Daniel Sharfstein, "Crossing the Color Line: Racial Migration and the One-Drop Rule, 1600–1860",

[8] *Id.*

[9] Peter Greene, "Number of Negro Students Increased Slowly Since 1877," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, *The Supplement: The Negro at Columbia*, 26 April 1967

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[12]*Id.*

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[17] Randall Kennedy, “Racial Passing”.

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[21] Vietrogoski, “The Case of Mr. J.P. Barnett”

[22] Christine B. Hickman, “The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census”, *Michigan Law Review* 95, no.5(March 1997): 1161-1265.

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[25] United States Census Bureau, “Census Instructions”, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/census_instructions/

[26] National Archives and Records Administration, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Distributed by <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

[27]*Id.*, 1870

[28]*Id.*, 1880

[29] New York State Archives. *New York State Census, 1865.*, Distributed by <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

[30]*Id.*, 1875

[31] United States Census Bureau, *Eighth Census, United States- 1860: Instructions to US Marshals*, Census Office, Department of the Interior. Distributed by <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/1860instructions.pdf>

[32] Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000), 188

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[37] J. Barnett to A. H. Stevens, October 16, 1850. College of Physicians and Surgeons Manuscript Collection, "James Parker Barnett" folder, Archives and Special Collections, Columbia University Health Sciences Library.

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[39]*Id.*

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[41] Vietrogoski, "The Case of Mr. J.P. Barnett"

[42] Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "A Beautiful Lie: Exploring Rhinelander v. Rhinelander as a Formative Lesson on Race, Identity, Marriage, and Family." *California Law Review* (2007): 2396. JSTOR

[43]*Id.*, at 2428

[44]*Id.*, at 2448

[45]*Id.*, at 2440

[46] James Parker Barnett, "Letter to John Jay II"

[47] P&S Trustees minutes, October 13, 1852, pp. 574-575

[48] P&S Trustees minutes, October 22, 1852, pp. 578, 580.

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