

Mr. Gantt Modified Brings Truth Home to Liberty
by Catherine Raine with Shelton Ponder (2024)

I am a White woman who grew up in a border state¹ in the last quarter of the last century, but I did not learn my hometown's complete history until I watched a play called *Mr. Gantt Modified*² in 2022. Written and performed by African American historian and poet Shelton Ponder, the play uncovers layers of White-stifled truths that I should have known. White silence about segregation enabled my ignorance when I was in school, but responsibility for removing it lies on my adult shoulders. Learning from *Mr. Gantt Modified* has hastened a personal journey from the hometown I thought I knew to the one where "Colored Men" and "White Men" signs³ once loomed over bathrooms in the courthouse. The town where Frank Hughes Memorial Library refused service to African Americans. And the town where Garrison School pupils were given old textbooks with missing pages from the White schools.

Not long after watching *Mr. Gantt Modified*, I visited the Liberty African American Legacy Memorial with the play's author. As we sat together on a stone bench, I lamented the absence of civil rights history in my early schooling. Ponder responded, "Students are taught what people want them to know, so they won't learn what they need to learn." Although it should not fall on Ponder to tell White people truths that were buried for their comfort and convenience, he generously shared stories about my hometown's segregated past that its schools did not want me to learn. My gratitude is deep, for I needed to know what Liberty was hiding to truly understand where I come from and who I am. Because walls of silence shrouded its racist legacy, I grew up in half of Liberty, a fragmenting experience that has divided me from true community and home.

Coming of age in Liberty's White bubble meant that I emerged half-grown and carried the bubble mentality into adulthood. The psychological immaturity that has shied away from self-knowledge is contextualized by Abraham Lateiner's essay "Grieving the White Void" (2016). It describes how "the silent White acculturation process" impairs cognitive growth and self-awareness, causing Lateiner to consider himself "superior in the arts of logic and reason" yet unable to "see what was right in front of me when it implicated me in systemic oppression."⁴

Lateiner's portrait of inflated self-regard helped me identify an overestimation of proficiency in the study of Civil Rights History. Because I assigned myself *At Canaan's Edge: America in*

¹ In the context of the U.S. Civil War, border states included Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware. *The Making of America* (National Geographic Society, 2002): <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/union-confederacy>.

² S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

³ The ladies' restrooms also had signs for "Colored Women" and "White Women." S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

⁴ A. Lateiner, *Grieving the White Void* (2016), paras. 33-34. <https://abelateiner.medium.com/grieving-the-white-void-48c410fdd7f3>.

the *King Years 1965-1968*⁵ and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*⁶ as well as fiction by African American writers, I considered myself informed. In my late twenties, I volunteered for AmeriCorps in Baltimore, where I witnessed stark inequity in American education; however, racial naivety kept me from deeply connecting this learning to the place where I was raised. Though aware of Liberty's southern roots, I accepted its wholesome presentation as a little town with porch-blessed homes and an old college on a hill. Taking Liberty at surface value, I avoided thinking about realities that contradicted its image; up until recent decades, its folksy hospitality was reserved for White people and masked hostility towards sharing civic equality with Black residents. Ponder's poem, "See My Country Town," highlights this inconsistency in its portrayal of late 1940's Liberty:

When Momma and Daddy sent me/ . . . to live with Gramp, Marie, Billy & Johnny . . . /it was to a country town/called Liberty, Missouri/with all its small time ways/where colored went here/ white went over there . . . /See my country town/stronghold and southern sympathizer/segregated and stand-offish.⁷

Early White conditioning ill-prepared me to recognize the town Ponder's poem depicts, for I had never heard any adults at home, school, or church discuss segregation. Also, I had wrongly assumed that Liberty did not have Jim Crow laws because Missouri is not Deep South, and by this sleight of mind, segregation magically jumped over the town where Ponder and I grew up a generation apart.

Listening to Ponder's memories of segregated Liberty has sharpened the lens on details that accentuate both the resourceful spirit of mutual support within the Black community and the petty cruelty of exclusion from White-claimed social spaces. For example, while African Americans shopped at the three drugstores on the Liberty Square, "Beggs would not allow us to sit at the soda fountain counter. Rexall did not have a fountain nor stools. Chapplers gradually accepted us to sit at the counter."⁸ Also, the Plaza Movie Theater "refused to let us sit on the stools in the concession stand" and Black patrons were relegated to the balcony. "We actually had the best seats . . . although that was not the intention of the owner."⁹

Subjected to an oppressive system, resistance fed solidarity among the people whom segregation targeted: "I knew who I was," said Ponder. "The entire Black community was family. We looked out for each other, and this strong community gave us pride and safety."¹⁰ At the community's heart was the school at 502 North Water Street: "We had a Colored school/named Garrison School/being content cramped & crowded/with love, lessons & learning/we were taught/by wonderful colored teachers."¹¹ A dynamic hub that nurtured

⁵ T. Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (2006).

⁶ A. Haley and M. X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964).

⁷ S. Ponder, *Write Out of My Heart: A Poetry Collection* (2019), Poem 41 "See My Country Town."

⁸ S. Ponder, personal communication, April 28, 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ S. Ponder, personal communication, August 23, 2022.

¹¹ S. Ponder, *Write Out of My Heart: A Poetry Collection* (2019), Poem 41 "See My Country Town."

belonging, it delivered “a damn strong foundation in academics.”¹² Students who learned together in multi-grade classrooms made lifelong friendships across age groups, and family-like relationships with Garrison's educators fostered interpersonal learning. Ponder recalled how Principal Clarence Gantt used to say, “Put the books away!”¹³ before conducting an open discussion that interwove history, poetry, Civil Rights, and life advice. His technique modeled the critical thinking, respect, and support that were absent in society at large:

We cared for one another. The greatest thing we learned at Garrison was that somebody cared about us. Our mentors were much more than former teachers. They are a part of me. What they taught became a part of your life and remained with you. The Garrison connection is a strong continuous thread of relationships that runs through all our lives.¹⁴

Three years after the U.S. Supreme Court deemed “separate but equal”¹⁵ education unconstitutional,¹⁶ Ponder transferred to Liberty High School as a freshman and graduated in 1961. However, attendance held little appeal: “I detested the integration because I wanted to graduate from Garrison School as my ancestors had since its founding in 1877.”¹⁷ Ponder “had a smoldering inside, but . . . [he] would have to make the best of it, smoldering within, or not!”¹⁸ because his mother and aunt would not allow him to quit school. Most of the LHS teachers were “congenial, and some were genuinely fair,”¹⁹ but Spanish was the only class Ponder enjoyed.

As for freshman English, the teacher “put students down with degrading comments,”²⁰ like the time she informed 15-year-old Ponder that his way of phrasing ideas was not to her taste. Ponder's classmates feared the teacher, but he refused let her remark pass. He stated, “I do not need your English to make it in this world!”²¹ Not expecting confrontation, she tilted her head in confusion, too rattled to formulate a barb: “My words, which were not whispered, rocked her. She was quiet and the whole class was too. Then she continued with the lesson.”²² Raising a hand and curling his fingers inward to represent a crushing repressive force, Ponder observed: “The education at LHS was not enlarging. It was constricting students into shape.”²³ The English instructor failed to mold Ponder's voice to fit her

¹² S. Ponder, personal communication, April 27, 2024.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.) *Plessy v. Ferguson 1896*, para 1. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Plessy-v-Ferguson-1896>

¹⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.) *Brown v. Board of Education*, para. 1. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Brown-v-Board-of-Education-of-Topeka>.

¹⁷ S. Ponder, Introduction to manuscript, *Embrace Your Narrative as the Whirlwind* (2024), para. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

²¹ S. Ponder, personal communication, August 23, 2022.

²² S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

²³ S. Ponder, personal communication, April 27, 2024.

paradigm, but the belief that she was entitled to try revealed arrogant presumption that sabotages genuine learning.

Although integration of students proceeded in Liberty, exclusionary hiring practices signaled administrative unwillingness to disturb the status quo when threatened by the idea of Black educators teaching White children. For Garrison teachers who lost their livelihoods in 1958,²⁴ the Civil Rights Act of 1964 arrived too late for Title VII to protect them against employment discrimination. As detailed in *Mr. Gantt, Modified*, when Garrison School could no longer offer classes from first to eighth grade,

Those teachers who had been here for years, their contracts were not renewed. They were not going to go into Franklin or Ridgeview or Liberty High School They would have to go back to Kansas City and find a job if they wanted to continue teaching.²⁵

Unwelcome in Liberty's overwhelmingly White public school system, consummate educators who had devoted their talents to the Garrison community were forced to seek work elsewhere, making Liberty's loss the KC School District's gain.²⁶ This unjust decision reverberated for decades, reinforcing the White hegemony that made Liberty an attractive destination for White families in flight from Kansas City to suburban districts north of the Missouri River, where the schools were "safe" (code word for majority-White schools).

In 1977, my parents moved from Kansas City's Brookside neighborhood to a Victorian house in Liberty. Our suburban relocation was part of a massive demographic shift that caused schools to re-segregate in the Greater KC area.²⁷ In Brookside, my kindergarten and first grade teachers at Border Star Elementary were African American women, but once I was enrolled in the Liberty School District, I never had another Black teacher. Nor did I have a non-White principal or vice-principal throughout my time at Franklin Elementary, Liberty Junior High School, and Liberty High School from 1977-1987. I loved my teachers, but commitment to building a diverse team of school personnel seemed as lacking in 1987 as it did in 1957.

²⁴ "1958 was the last year of Garrison School." S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), YouTube, 1hr:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

²⁵ Ibid. 1hr:45.

²⁶ However, the KC School District also mistreated job-seeking Black educators. As Bradley Poos explains in *Desegregation at Kansas City's Central High School: Illuminating the African American Student Experience Through Oral History* (2014, PhD dissertation), "Following the Brown decision, black teachers across the country lost their jobs. Many of these teachers were better educated and more experienced than their white counterparts, yet black teachers were the first to be dismissed and the last to be hired. This was most certainly true in Kansas City" (p. 97).

²⁷ Ibid. "Between 1967 and 1977 is . . . when the KC, Missouri School District's overall student population fell by nearly thirty thousand students, and the majority went from white to black. Many of the departing students and their families were leaving the KC, Missouri School District for the surrounding metropolitan suburbs" (p. 174).

In 1958, Principal Gantt was "the only person retained"²⁸ from Garrison School by the Liberty School District, but his contract contained an insult. A beloved educator with bachelor's and master's degrees in math and education, Mr. Gantt was offered the job of study hall monitor at Liberty High School. Racism's tainted vision insisted that his place was keeping teenagers quiet for an hour instead of cultivating young minds and inspiring excellence. Administrative failure to recognize Mr. Gantt's gifts cost LHS students the chance to be guided by an educator in a role commensurate with his quarter-century of service to "the best school for African American students in the state of Missouri."²⁹ Furthermore, the shabby treatment Garrison's last principal received was thrown in sharp contrast by his motivation for accepting the position: he wanted to be on site to watch over his former students as they navigated the uncharted territory of integrated education.

Revealing no outward resentment over the change in professional title, Mr. Gantt chose to protect the young people in his care because their welfare mattered more to him than ego. Ponder explained:

Black folks in the community were pissed about Mr. Gantt accepting what was perceived as a demotion. But there was no difference from what Mr. Gantt had been when he was Principal of Garrison. He had the same demeanor at Garrison as he did at Liberty High School.³⁰

When Mr. Gantt presided over study hall at LHS, he "had a message for us in his eyes, which was, 'You're the person you're supposed to be by doing what you're supposed to do.'" The message was no different from what he taught as instructor and Principal at Garrison:

We learned who to be. We were representing something more than ourselves. We weren't saints by any means, but we came from Garrison School, and we knew how to conduct ourselves . . . because that's what we did all the time.³¹

Mr. Gantt's selfless choice to prioritize students over professional disappointment "showed us and Liberty High School that this is how we are, not how racism makes us out to be."³² The decision also reflected his striking character as a person and educator, for he lived the caring philosophy that made Garrison special. Mr. Gantt's mentor, Professor James Gay, had counseled him to respond to "things you cannot control" with "a firm sound decision to do the best you can."³³ With this spirit in mind, Mr. Gantt performed his duties at LHS with customary poise and classiness: "I did not walk with my shoulders drooped. I was not angry.

²⁸ S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), YouTube, 1hr:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

²⁹ Clay County African American Legacy Inc, *Garrison History*, para. 3. <https://ccaal-garrisonschool.org/history>.

³⁰ S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), YouTube, 1hr:46 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

I did not carry displeasure on my sleeves nor on my shoulder. I stood as I had always stood. I was an educator."³⁴

Reflecting on Mr. Gantt's sacrifices, Ponder said: "I've often thought what a burden it must have been to constantly contain his feelings."³⁵ Although he had every reason to lash out against the abusive treatment he experienced, "Mr. Gantt was always in control of himself. He never cursed, and he never had an outburst."³⁶ When some White students started acting up in LHS study hall, testing him with "various pranks,"³⁷ their attempts to provoke his temper fell flat.³⁸

Mr. Gantt's unflappable dignity also informed teachable moments in the staff lunchroom, like when a White teacher asked, "Clarence, what do you think about all these demonstrations and boycotts?"³⁹ Paraphrasing Booker T. Washington,⁴⁰ he replied, "If I'm standing in a ditch, and you're standing on my shoulders, we're in the same ditch."⁴¹ In other words, perpetrators of injustice mire themselves in a system that demeans *them* as much as their victims. In fact, when oppressors push others down, they dig themselves a hole that shrouds them in moral isolation.

The best lesson Ponder absorbed was the profound care that Garrison educators imparted, and the worst lesson I never learned was that Liberty had cared so little for children in Ponder's community. On a walk from the Legacy Memorial to the Liberty Square in 2023, we passed Franklin Elementary School, heading north on Gallatin Street. At that point, Ponder said,

I don't like to dwell on the disparities, but we had to go down from the North End to Franklin to play basketball after hours because the Liberty School Board did not give us basketball goals or other playground equipment. They didn't want us to have anything.⁴²

The contrast between outdoor amenities for Garrison School and Franklin Elementary School was glaring: "Franklin was given basketball goals, swing sets, a softball pitch, a merry-go-round, and even tennis courts."⁴³ Franklin's grounds had (and still has) plenty of space for wide-ranging recess games, whereas Garrison's playground consisted of a stretch of tarmac squeezed between the school building and Water Street. A glance at both sites

³⁴ Ibid. 1hr:47 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

³⁵ S. Ponder, personal communication, August 23, 2022.

³⁶ S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

³⁷ S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), 1hr:47, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

³⁸ The pranks did not continue after Student Council members told disruptive students that they must respect Mr. Gantt. S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

³⁹ S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), 1hr:47, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

⁴⁰ "It is not possible to for one man to hold another man down in the ditch without staying down there with him." Washington, B. *The Story of the Negro, the Rise of the Race from Slavery*, 1909, p. 124.

⁴¹ S. Ponder, *Mr. Gantt Modified* (1987), YouTube, 1hr:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8Zcs4eMdU>.

⁴² S. Ponder, personal communication, September 4, 2023.

⁴³ S. Ponder, personal communication, June 23, 2024.

today shows Liberty's blatantly inequitable investment in the buildings, grounds, and facilities for White schoolchildren and African American schoolchildren prior to integration.

When I attended Franklin Elementary School from 1977-1981, I enjoyed the same recreation facilities that Ponder described, and it never occurred to me that this largess had originally been reserved for White children and denied to Black children, turning the provision of playground fun into a racist swindle. As a Franklin pupil, I was also unaware that African American children from the nearby South End neighborhood had been barred from learning at my school due to their race until 1958.⁴⁴ Instead, they had to walk nearly a mile across town to Garrison School, a journey that necessitated crossing the Liberty Square, where White adults posed a constant threat. As Garrison alum Ms. Theresa Byrd recollected, "In my route, I went up through town and frequently I was ridiculed, or relegated off the sidewalk, told to get in the street, called the N-word, was spat at."⁴⁵

Just as Franklin staff in the late 1970's never spoke about the school having been a Whites-only institution from 1938 to 1958, Liberty Junior High School kept its secrets too. Built in 1923, the edifice initially accommodated White high school students until 1954, and then it served as an integrated high school until 1972, when a new LHS complex was completed further west of town. From 1972-2013, the former high school building was Liberty Junior High School, and since 2013 it has been Heritage Middle School.⁴⁶

From 1958 to 1963, Mr. Clarence Gantt worked in the very same building where I attended seventh to ninth grade from 1981 to 1984. However, I did not know his name then. Nobody told us about the last principal of Garrison School who was offered a job as study hall monitor at LHS. Nor did we know that he took the position because it would situate him to support Black students learning with White students for the first time in Liberty's history. Instead of celebrating Mr. Gantt's expert stewardship of Garrison School and steadfast dedication to young people in wake of integration, White school administrators controlled the narrative of his success by never telling it.

Silence about Mr. Gantt's exemplary courage has deprived three generations of Liberty's children of a storied role model⁴⁷ and erased civil rights history that unfolded in the very classrooms they inhabited. Official neglect of his story remains unamended to this day, as can be seen (or rather, not seen) in a recent video celebrating Heritage Middle School building's Centennial (1923-2023). The congratulatory clip neither refers to the building as the site of pivotal social change nor includes interviews with residents who transferred from

⁴⁴ Garrison School students in ninth to twelfth grades transferred to Liberty High School in 1954, and first to eighth graders stayed at Garrison until 1958. S. Ponder, personal communication August 24, 2024.

⁴⁵ Adler, E. *Confederate Statue Haunts Blacks in Missouri Town* (2021).

<https://www.startribune.com/confederate-statue-haunts-blacks-in-mo-town/600031559>.

⁴⁶ *Liberty Public Schools, 100 Years of Heritage* (2024). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyNxnFbTrUw>.

⁴⁷ For example, when I was 13, I witnessed how differently people treated my father after he lost his hair and gained a prominent scar on his forehead due to brain cancer surgeries. If I had heard Mr. Gantt's story of strength in the face of prejudice, I would have felt comforted.

Garrison to LHS in 1954.⁴⁸ Both then and now, storylines dictated by systemic racism have excluded African American leaders like Mr. Gantt, creating a loss for children and adults of all backgrounds.

When I advanced to Liberty High School in 1984,⁴⁹ racial justice curriculum did not meet me there. Civics class never alluded to Liberty's school integration story despite its relevance to American history and rich oral history resources available in town. A cursory paragraph in our textbook touched on *Brown Versus the Board of Education*, but if African American and White students who graduated in 1958 had visited our class, listening to their lived experience as teenagers would have brought the 1954 ruling home and sparked meaningful learning.

Just as my high school didn't invite its alums to teach us history, it also let the 30-year anniversary of school integration pass without comment or tribute. I was fifteen years old in 1984 and honoring the *Brown Versus the Board of Education* victory might have encouraged me to reflect that thirty years of integrated education comprises a shockingly short time compared to 125 years of segregation,⁵⁰ including when it was illegal to teach enslaved African Americans in Missouri.⁵¹ Instead, LHS closed the door to historical reflection in 1984, possibly because the system wanted to deflect attention from past wrongs, such as cheating Garrison School of resources, refusing to hire teachers from Garrison after integration, and exiling Mr. Gantt from the principal's office and classroom. By opting to save face for the White community, my school missed the chance to acknowledge, apologize, and make reparations for treating African Americans like second-class citizens.

It has been thirty-seven years since I graduated from Liberty High School, and it has taken me almost as long to learn lessons close to home about neglected heroes like Mr. Gantt, whose story has lifted my understanding from a ditch of buried truths. When I was a child and teenager, White silence isolated me from the larger and epically more truthful history of my own hometown. As an adult, I believed myself knowledgeable about social justice, all the while failing to notice the Confederate statue that still looks down on the South End district where Mr. Gantt lived. Breaking silence to confront systemic racism goes against my early training as a White Southern Baptist girl, which is why I must practice speaking out. My sense of wholeness as a human being calls for honestly facing difficult truths that Liberty's White institutions have preferred to keep hidden. Knowing only half of Liberty's history has been like only knowing half of myself.

⁴⁸ *Liberty Public Schools, 100 Years of Heritage* (2024). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyNxnFbTrUw>.

⁴⁹ Liberty High School moved to a new building in 1972. *Liberty Public Schools, 100 Years of Heritage* (2024). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyNxnFbTrUw>.

⁵⁰ According to Liberty's official website, Liberty became an incorporated town in 1829 (para. 2). <https://www.libertymissouri.gov/2120/History-of-Liberty>.

⁵¹ L. Greene, G. Kremer, & A. Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage: Revised Edition* (1993), p. 98.