

Afterword

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I keep copies of two photographs in my office. They help to keep me grounded, so I pull them from the files with some regularity. One was taken in 1939 and shows a poor black Louisiana mother home-schooling her two sons. Was there no public school for her attentive pupils? The six and seven-year-old boys sit on hard-bottom chairs (there are no desks), as their thirty-something mother sternly points a stick at the day's reading lesson white-washed on a rectangle of black fabric pinned to a wall that's been papered over in newsprint. The lesson reads in its entirety, "The rain are fallin." Below that sentence are the numerals and the alphabet—essentially a code consisting of thirty-six ciphers the boys may have a hard time cracking given the limitations of their tutor and the shortcomings of their classroom.

The other photograph shows the legendary Clemson English professor John Lane advising a uniformed cadet across his cluttered desk in 1943. The setting is most likely Tillman Hall. As Lane expounds upon honor, a word written large on the chalkboard behind them, his advisee pauses in his note taking and cocks his head to look his mentor squarely in the eye. Also on the board is a list of grammatical errors and their precise consequences: "'its' for 'it's' = 8 points. . . . 'Dear Sir,' = 10 points. . . . sentence fragment = 15 points. . . ." There's no telling what penalty the honorable professor would have imposed on "The rain are fallin." There's no telling because the two worlds, black and white seldom intersected.

When Harvey Gantt entered Clemson College in 1963, people like Professor Lane, the sons of his well-advised cadet, and people like me who entered the albescent halls of Georgia Tech in 1959, were forced to pay attention. As a college

freshman, I was so naive about race I thought college presidents were virtual gods, men and women like President Edward Everett of Harvard who with heroic virtue said in 1848, "If this boy [an African-American applicant] passes the examination, he will be admitted, and if the white students choose to withdraw, all the income of the college will be devoted to his education."

Harvey Gantt, who'd been arrested for trying to buy a soda at a whites'-only lunch counter in Charleston before he ever came to Clemson, would surely have understood how absurdly innocent I was. Gantt may also have read that John C. Calhoun, on whose former plantation Clemson University now sprawls, once wrote, "Show me a nigger who can do a problem in Euclid or parse a Greek verb, and I'll admit he's a human being." Doubtless Gantt had heard of the famed *Plessy v. Ferguson* case settled in 1896 because for nearly sixty years this had been the principal stumbling block to Gantt's ancestors coming to Clemson. "Plessy" eventually made its way to the high court because there was some doubt in the lower courts that "separate" in the real world did not mean "equal." The high court ruled 7-1 that there was no confusion at all. Mr. Plessy, who was seven-eighths of a white man himself, had purchased a ticket to ride in a Louisiana railroad car, but he was forced to take a seat in the "Jim Crow car" even if it was used to haul cattle when African-Americans didn't fill it up. Young Mr. Gantt may also have heard of *Cumming v. Board of Education of Richmond County, Georgia* (1899), another deathless decision from the country's highest court. "Cumming" ruled that separate educational facilities were permissible even when there were no facilities available to black students. One didn't need Euclid to figure that decision would not hold

water or logic much less justice. I don't know, but I like to think Gantt knew that Ben Tillman, one of Clemson's founding fathers, a former governor of the state and Clemson life trustee, once threatened, "The Negro must remain subordinate or be exterminated." And finally I feel sure Gantt knew that Strom Thurmond, a Clemson graduate, former governor and candidate for the US Presidency, had opposed federal anti-lynching legislation. Yet for all this foreknowledge present in the Zeitgeist of the 1950s and 60s, to everyone's astonishment, including Clemson President Robert Edwards and his registrar, Kenneth Vickery, Gantt felt he was entitled to pursue an education at Clemson College. What an unexpected and remarkable conclusion! Nevertheless, though Gantt's parents had faithfully paid their state taxes, a gambling man would not have granted their son very favorable odds. Despite two years worth of foot-dragging, looking the other way, occasional rudenesses, and ultimately futile legal gambits by Clemson's administration, Gantt enrolled and succeeded beyond anyone's dreams.

Indeed, it's a wonder that Gantt ever arrived on Tillman's granite steps. Between 1882 and 1952 an estimated 2000 African Americans were lynched in the South. In 1949 South Carolina spent an average of \$148 per white student and \$70 per black student. In 1940, South Carolina awarded 10,717 diplomas to whites and 1,009 to blacks when the population was 57% white, 43% black. (Where is Euclid when you need him?) In Gantt's hometown, a black nanny could push her precious white charge through the park, but she was not permitted to take a seat on a park bench. Indeed the Battery was off-limits to African Americans every day except the Fourth of July when blacks were invited into the city's "salon" to celebrate

independence. They just couldn't sit down; Harry Golden called it "vertical integration." Up in Winston-Salem, Wake Forest admitted their first black student in 1962. Because of a "shortage" of black students in North Carolina, however, Wake's board of trustees chose a Baptist from Ghana to break the color barrier. In South Carolina's capital, the police stretched chains down the middle of some inner-city streets to keep the races apart. Over in Lake City, Ronald McNair, the future American astronaut with a Ph. D. in physics, was denied access to the town's library. Today the same building is a museum in McNair's honor. The next time Greenville County builds a library they ought to name it after their native son Jesse Jackson, who was likewise denied access to books and magazines. He and his civilly disobedient cohorts were repaid for their attempts to educate themselves by having their names and addresses printed in the *Greenville News*. Surely the KKK appreciated the secretarial assistance. Indeed, every African American of Gantt's era has a sheaf of Jim Crow stories. Appalled by tales such as these, Bill Mauldin, the famed political cartoonist, sketched a black character carrying a shotgun-toting white man on his shoulders through a swamp. Says the soaked black man to his wet white burden: "You ain't gaining much altitude holding me down."

There's a story of an anonymous Jewish rabbi telling an anonymous African American during the Civil Rights Era, "Don't wait for people to love you." Harvey Gantt seems to have taken that advice to heart when he entered Clemson. Wisely, he realized that he wasn't in a popularity contest. Once he was admitted, he buckled down to his studies and graduated with honors within two years. From here, he went to MIT to earn a Masters in architecture. After graduation, he

returned to the South and established his own business while teaching part-time at Clemson. Fortunately, there were no hard feelings. Ultimately he rose to become mayor of one of the most progressive cities in the South—Charlotte, North Carolina, and to make a run for the US Senate. No one will be surprised if he makes another bid for the legislature sometime in the future.

In 1993, on the thirtieth anniversary of his admission to Clemson, Harvey Gantt told a considerable audience gathered in Littlejohn Coliseum, “In 1963, Clemson was a large salt shaker with a single fleck of pepper; that was me. Tonight it is a pleasure to look out over this salt-and-pepper audience. There has been progress!” He was especially thankful, he said, for the cafeteria line workers, custodians, gardeners, indeed, the entire black community of Clemson who at the time gave him “daily courage.” It is a shame that it took courage for anyone to matriculate at this institution, but it did. It’s a shame Clemson’s registrar didn’t welcome Gantt’s application to Clemson, but he didn’t. It’s a shame that admitting Gantt in 1961 would have broken a state law, but it would. It’s a shame that President Edwards and Dean Vickery didn’t become advocates for Gantt, but they didn’t. And it’s a shame that it took five court cases to allow Gantt to continue his education, but it did. “Human history is a race between education and catastrophe,” wrote H. G. Wells. On January 28, 1963, in Harvey Gantt’s preliminary contest at least, education won. It wasn’t “ebony and ivory... in perfect harmony,” à la Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder. It was something far more complex: a paradox. Had Clemson won its appeal to the Supreme Court, it would have lost; but in losing, it won. To his credit,

President Edwards saw Clemson’s loss as an opportunity to begin anew, and we did.