

LESSON

Reflecting on the Danger of Silence

Overview

About This Lesson

In the final moments of “As You Were,” Ebony finds the courage and agency to say “No.” No to Josiah. No to Jessie. No to the marching band. In this moment of empowerment, she “breaks rank,” even though it may mean sacrificing the friendships and the strong sense of belonging and community we saw her experience in the first part of the story. In this lesson, students will consider the power of one person’s agency and voice, in terms of how they feel about themselves and the impact they can have on others around them. In his 2017 TED@NYC Talk, writer, poet, and scholar Clint Smith reflects on the danger of silence and the ways in which his silence and complicity robbed others of their dignity and humanity. He also sheds light on the relationship between agency and voice, and the ways in which our decisions to take responsibility for and ownership over our actions and to speak up empower us to enact change in our lives, communities, and the world. Drawing inspiration from Clint Smith, students will use the transcript from his talk to create “blackout poems” that express their ideas for how they can use their own voices to empower themselves and others.

Essential Questions

- How do I empower myself to take action on behalf of myself and others?

Guiding Questions

- What does it mean to have a voice? What is the relationship between agency and voice?
- How can your voice empower you to take action on your own behalf and on behalf of others?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Recognize the power that comes with telling their own story and engaging with the stories of others.

- Recognize that their decisions matter, impact others, and shape their communities and the world.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Access materials and a lesson Plan-on-a-Page in this [Google Folder](#).

- **Plan on a Page: Reflecting on the Danger of Silence**
- **Video:** [The Danger of Silence](#) (4:18)
- **Reading: The Danger of Silence Transcript**

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Reviewing the Take Note Thinking Routine

Before teaching this lesson, preview the video and the steps of Project Zero's [Take Note Thinking Routine](#) so you are prepared to explain it to the class.

2. Learning about Blackout Poetry

Students will create blackout poems, also called erasure poems, in this lesson. You can read more about this format and see examples at the Academy of American Poets glossary of poetic terms, in the entry for [erasure poetry](#). There are also many examples online.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Warm Up with a Notable Quotable

Project the following quotation and questions one at a time. Invite students to “turn and talk” before asking if a few volunteers want to share any ideas with the class.

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.” —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

- What do you think Dr. King wants us to consider?
- Which one do you think is more powerful, the “words of enemies” or the “silence of friends”? What makes you say that? How do you think

Ebony would answer this question?

- What do you think about the relationship between agency and silence? How might one impact the other?

2. Watch a Video about the Consequences of Silence

Let students know that they will be watching a video in which award-winning writer, poet, and scholar Clint Smith reflects on the danger of silence. Share the [Take Note](#) questions and let students know that after they watch the video, they will respond in writing to ONE of the questions. They should not take notes during the video so they can fully engage with the content.

- What is the most important point?
- What are you finding challenging, puzzling, or difficult to understand?
- What question would you most like to discuss?
- What is something that you found interesting?

Show the video [The Danger of Silence](#) (4:18) and then have students respond to one of the Take Note questions in their journals. Debrief in pairs. As a class, discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the factors that contributed to whether or not Clint Smith felt like he had agency in a given moment?
- What lessons about power, agency, and voice can we take from Smith's story that we might apply to our own lives?

3. Create a Voice, Empowerment, and Action Blackout Poem

- Pass out the reading **The Danger of Silence Transcript** and project the following questions:
 - What does it mean to have a voice?
 - What is the relationship between agency and voice?
 - How do I empower myself to take action on behalf of myself and others?
- Explain to students that they will use a section of the transcript, ideally one or two paragraphs, to create a blackout poem that responds to one or more of the questions. To create their poem, they need to identify key words and short phrases from the section that they want to keep and cross out the rest. If they have never seen blackout poems, project a model of one you created or one that you find online.

- Some students may want to work on this task alone, while others might have more confidence if working with a partner or in a small group for this activity, so you can let them choose.

4. Engage in a Celebration of Learning and Creativity

After students have had time to create their blackout poems, end the class with a [gallery walk](#) so they can share their work. Encourage any volunteers to read their poems aloud and briefly explain their choices.