

Bonni: [00:00:00] On today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. number 141 Clint Smith warns us of the danger of silence.

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Bonni: [00:00:18] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:46] Hello this is Bonni Stachowiak, and I'm excited today to be welcoming Clint Smith to the Teaching in Higher Ed. podcast. Clint is a writer and doctoral candidate at Harvard University and he's received fellowships from Cave Canem, the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop and the National Science Foundation. He's a 2014 National Poetry Slam champion and was a speaker at the 2015 TED Conference. His writing has been published in The New Yorker, the American Poetry Review, the Guardian Boston Review, Harvard Educational Review and elsewhere. He's the author of Counting Descent and was born and raised in New Orleans. Clint welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Clint: [00:01:33] Thank you so much for having me.

Bonni: [00:01:35] Well I'm so honored that you took a risk on someone you have no idea who I am. Come talk on this show. And I absolutely loved watching your TED talks and reading your poetry. And speaking of your book, I wonder if you would talk a little bit about Counting Descent, how you decided to write it and I know actually even said you're willing to read one of them for us.

Clint: [00:01:57] Yes. So counting to send is my first collection of poetry was published in September 2016 and it's been an incredible experience to kind of go around the country and share the work with with people in you know for me as sort of an interesting place because I exist as sort of. Social scientists and an

artist and a writer. And so I'm a researcher and so I'm wearing these multiple hats and I think part of what this book represents is the sort of artistic manifestation of a lot of the ideas I've been thinking about over the course of the last three years.

Clint: [00:02:33] And so I began graduate school at Harvard the same week that Mike Brown was killed. And so it's impossible for me to disentangle my sort of scholarly project from my sort of political re-calibration and re-orientation I think as it's been the case for many of us the last three four or five years has forced us to sort of reconsider the ways in which we may have assumed or thought that certain institutions worked in the United States. And for me that is coincided with a sort of intellectual project of sitting in the library for you know 16 hours a day reading about the history of racial inequality in modern states and becoming privy to a lot of historical and empirical facts that I was not previously aware of that is what fundamentally recalibrated the way I understand inequality in the United States. And so poetry for me has always been the means by which I sort of process who I am in the broader context of the world.

Clint: [00:03:32] And this book was sort of written over the course of the first two years graduate school not necessarily formally aligned to any scholarly project with school but again very much shaped by those ideas and often shaped by me procrastinating on my statistics homework. But the book is sort of you know I told people that it is wrestling with what is the marathon of cognitive dissonance that it is to grow up as a young black person in this country.

Clint: [00:04:01] And how does one reconcile that ever present touch between growing up in a home in which you feel loved affirmed and celebrated and then going out into a world in which you are constantly rendered a caricature of fear. And how does one hold those sort of complicated dualities at once and recognize that neither is singularly definitive of one's experience. But both are important both to the joy that that community experiences and the violence that it is subjected to.

Clint: [00:04:30] And so the book is kind of moving back and forth between those spaces. So I'll read a poem from the book called What the cicada said to the blackboard. It's a one of several poems in which I have these sort of nonhuman one on living or inanimate objects speaking to black boys in the same vein that my parents did right. So part of what I'm thinking about in the book is the ways in which black parents have to categorically raise their children in different ways than their white counterparts in an effort to make sure that their children are safe. And you know for me I grew up in a very mixed race mixed

income community. I had black friends, white friends, Asian friends. It was wonderful it was like the Disney Channel. And my dad would always say I really appreciate and love that you have such a diverse group of friends. I love that you have such a beautifully reflective community of the American tapestry.

Clint: [00:05:23] But part of what you have to understand is that the implications for the decisions that you make might be very different for you than me or for your other friends when you're a kid you don't understand it. It's kind of like you're the mean Dad, you're the strict dad. Why can't you be more like Tommy's dad? And it's not until something like Tamir Rice happens the young boy who was killed the 12 year old boy was killed in Cleveland Ohio for playing with the gun in a park in an open carry state when no one else was around him.

Clint: [00:05:49] So obviously in layers and layers of issues of test case and that's all to say that I was thinking a lot about the fear that that black parents sort of carry with them and learn the ways in which that fear shapes the sort of pedagogy of their parenting. And so is it a sort of artistic endeavor. I imagine what these other objects might say in the sort of proverbial talk to young black boys and this is one of those poems.

Clint: [00:06:17] What the Cicada Said to the Black Boy.

Clint: [00:06:19] I've seen what they make of you how they render you a multiplicity of mistakes. They have undone me as well. Pulled back my shell and feasted on my last claimed it was for their survival. And they wonder why I only show my face every 17 years. But you you're lucky if they let you live that long. I can teach you some things you know. I've been playing this game since before you knew what Bret was. This here is prehistoric. Why you think we fly. Why you think we role impacts you think these swarms are for the fun of it. I would tell you that you don't roll deep enough. But every time you swarm they shoot. Get you some wings son, get you some wings.

Bonni: [00:07:11] That was beautiful, Thank you.

Bonni: [00:07:14] Thank you for sharing that with me. I've read. And yet it's not anywhere near as powerful as getting to hear you read them and the cadence in your voice. Thank you.

Clint: [00:07:23] I appreciate it very much.

Bonni: [00:07:25] One of the things I know that you've had the opportunity to do in your life is give a couple of Ted talks and a lot of people are curious about what that looks like and how that does or doesn't develop you as a presenter does it change your mind about what effective influence looks like in a means of some sort of presentation like that so I wonder if you would share a little bit about your experience and if anything changed your mind about how we might better influence on a stage like that.

Clint: [00:07:54] Yes so my experience is interesting. And so I should back up before I get to how the experience itself. So I got the opportunity because I applied to do a 10 x 10 x Manhattan in 2013 I believe and it was about food justice and I'd written a poem that was about food deserts in the community where I taught so I taught.

Clint: [00:08:21] So I taught high school English in Prince George's County Maryland Prince George's County Maryland it's classified by the USDA as a food desert.

Clint: [00:08:27] And for those who don't know food deserts are specific locales or regions in which there is not access to healthy foods or you know fruits and vegetables and things like that. The spaces that would present you know a family with the opportunity for a well-balanced guy. And I began thinking about that and thinking about the ways in which that was influencing what was happening with my students academic ability right because so often what happens in the context of education specifically K-12 education is that we tend to speak of it as if it exists in this silo apart from the rest of the socio political realities that affect our students lives.

Clint: [00:09:03] And so we speak of education as if it's not impacted by housing segregation as if it's not impacted by mass incarceration as if it's not impacted by food insecurity as if it's not impacted by immigration policy and the myriad of things that affect all of our young people's lives every single day. And so food insecurity is one of the things that I began to think about and I presented a TED talk in March of 2014 on that phenomenon and it did pretty well didn't go viral online or anything but it was an exciting incredible opportunity.

Clint: [00:09:33] And then somebody sent me an opportunity to apply for a TED Salon event and so a Ted Salon is the sort of thing where they present it to you as a sort of speaker search and they say these are sort of mini talks like four to six minutes in which you go and present an idea in a in a sort of quicker format than the traditional maybe 18 minute Ted talk is more popular. And then those

who have participated in that event might be invited to participate in the sort of larger Ted.

Clint: [00:10:05] So I went and didn't anticipate that anything would be put online and I shared a poem that I was thinking about this idea of silence and thinking about what it meant to be silent with regard to injustices that you maybe didn't directly or don't directly experience yourself. And that was sort of catalyzed by an anti-bullying initiative that we had at my school when we were you know telling students that it was essential that they should speak up when they saw somebody being verbally or physically abused that they shouldn't be silent when when these things were happening and I was telling my students this we had this sort of moment where I realized that I was asking my students to do something that I wasn't always following through upon myself.

Clint: [00:10:45] And there were many times in my whole life when when I was failing to speak up on behalf of issues that didn't directly affect me and that caused me a deep amount of shame and sort of served as a catalyst to a lot of self-reflection about what does it look like to be more proactive in being the sort of person that I'm asking my students to be. So I wrote this poem kind of reflecting on that. And as a means to hold myself accountable I shared the poem and sort of contextualize the poem and I thought it went well. I got offstage and I was like Well that was exciting. What a great opportunity.

Clint: [00:11:18] And that was July of 2014 about a month later they emailed me and they said we're going to put your TED talk on Ted.com in about 72 hours please prepare your online presence. You know I was like I don't have an online presence. And so I quickly made a web site. I had a Twitter but I only got tweeting for like two years later. I said racism is bad. You know.

[00:11:43] And and in 72 hours they they put the talk up and again. So it was a fascinating week because the same week the talk went up the same week. Mike Brown was killed was the same week that I began in graduate school. And so through life both on a micro and macro level was changing very quickly. But I think the talk in part about the danger of silence went viral in the way that day because it also went online in a sort of political moment in which people were thinking about what is the what is their role in what is clearly becoming a sort of burgeoning social movement and what is one's responsibility in the context of their own lives in participating in such a movement.

[00:12:31] And so that kind of took on a life of its own. And funnily enough in October I sent an email to Ted a and by this time that dangerous silence had

gotten you know over like a million a million and a half News. So I e-mailed Ted and said hey I hope you all are well. You know I was just e-mailing to see if there were some tickets available to come to the TED conference. It's at the same time as my spring break from graduate school. It will be great. And as a former speaker I was wondering if there might be some sort of discount because the thing about Ted is that it could be you know tickets are absurd. I mean they are they're almost \$10,000 to attend the conference and that's not including flights and hotels.

Clint: [00:13:14] And so I was clearly as a graduate student do and I couldn't afford that. But my mom always taught me that a closed mouth never gets fed. So I was no procrastinating again probably on statistics homework. I just sent an email and then they responded and they were like actually when you're talking done really well and we would love if you came and we'll give you a ticket for free. I was like well that's amazing.

Clint: [00:13:34] And then a few weeks later they e-mailed me and they said actually would you consider speaking at a Ted you which was a sort of Ted's side event for audience members to do a sort of mini talk on something that's of interest to them. And this was right after Tamir Rice was killed. And so I was thinking a lot about kind of what you alluded to before what is the sort of role and responsibility of someone given access to to a platform of potential power potential influence. And I thought a lot about what sorts of things I might be able to say and what sort of things in that you're against would have like social and political moment needed to be said that weren't being said in spaces like Ted.

Clint: [00:14:17] So it's not that these things weren't being said at all because there are many activists and organizers and writers thinkers and journalists were talking about these things all the time. The question is in which spaces are these conversations happening and which places are they now.

Clint: [00:14:30] And I responded and I said thank you so much for inviting me. I would like to talk about how black parents have to raise their children categorically different ways than white parents just to make sure that they stay alive. Thank you so much. I didn't hear back from them for about a month. I was like well you know I maybe that was not what they were expecting then I did hear back from them and they said actually we think that's really important and we want to put you on the main stage and you'll speak right after Monica Lewinsky.

Clint: [00:15:00] And so I went and I went to the third conference and shared what would become the TED Talk how to raise a black son in America which I should also say Ted comes up with the headlines and titles for all of these. It is not you know was not my name for for the talk or for the prom but I shared that and again I think it was you know unfortunately speaking to a phenomenon that was especially relevant in that in that moment and that that talk also got a lot of traction.

Clint: [00:15:29] So you know Ted has been an incredible opportunity for me to share my ideas with an audience far beyond anything I could have ever imagined. You know I have. People who e-mail me from all across the world sending feedback or thanks or asking questions that are sort of stemming from the talk. And it was an experience that I'm incredibly grateful for. I.

Clint: [00:15:50] 'm I'm sad that I had to and that we continue to have to write and talk about the things that I sort of wrote about in both of those pieces. But again I think you know Nina Simone the great incredible black artists always said that the artist's responsibility is to reflect the times. Right and so I think you see that across the board. The role and responsibility of an artist is not to shy away from that which is political but to engage it head on to engage it directly. And my hope is that the talks for some people maybe for people who look like me who grew up like me for that that those columns and those talks make them feel seen.

Clint: [00:16:31] And for those who grew up in a very different context then maybe it's illuminating and conveys something about the nature of how even though we maybe all grow up in the same world in the same country maybe even attend the same school as a result of different you know phenotypical facets of our identity we can experience the same world very differently. And so it's been fascinating and heartening to see much of the feedback from it and I'm grateful for the opportunity and my hope is that anyone who gets an opportunity to have a platform such as Ted or something like that just thinks about what is it that needs to be said in that moment. What is something you can say that is going to speak to your values that is going to reflect your personal and political commitments.

Clint: [00:17:16] And I think if you can stay true to that rather than writing the sort of talk or writing the sort of speech or article that you think people want to hear and instead writing the thing that you think is necessary for people to hear then I don't think you'll ever be disappointed in yourself.

Bonni: [00:17:33] I was thinking about that there have been a number of syllabi that have been posted online for people to peruse and sometimes they are fictitious ones like I saw one recently I'll put a link in the show notes to it of a class to fight against bullshit.

Bonni: [00:17:51] And I thought man I want to take this class I don't I don't think it exists but it was proposed as a possible one unit class. But whoever was the author of it hadn't actually taught this class anywhere and there are a number of people trying to fight against a lack of digital literacy and writing some syllabi around that.

Bonni: [00:18:08] And so I think so much about what you share about in your work and your talks and your poetry. And one of the things really struck me in both a negative and a positive way at the same time a negative azen telling myself I know that I do this sometimes I know that I am weak in this area. You say just because you watched one episode of The Wire doesn't mean you know a thing about my kids. And in my head I was laughing because I was thinking. But wait. I watched every season every episode. I must of course I'm. That's why you do your work is to bend us inside and to challenge us and stretch us.

Bonni: [00:18:48] And I wonder if you might share some thoughts for people who want so much to be advocates and for whom your message of not being silent or the danger of silence but sometimes I think that as advocates we very much should be as silence. I heard a wonderful talk from which I could darn it if I can't remember the guy's name but I will totally totally to it but he hosts a very popular storytelling podcast who's African-American and I went to see him at a podcasting conference and he was talking about his anger. When people hear something such as poetry like you just read or someone shares just phenomenal story of their lives and then whoever the interviewer is or whoever is opening the opportunity for them to tell their story starts to then contextualize it for the mobile. You meant here and what you said. He's like No no you don't. You do not have the right to do that you've taken away their stories. I wrestle with this and I wonder if you have any feedback on how we might think about this.

Clint: [00:19:57] That's great question. I think that there is a difference between a sort of silence of complicity and then a silence of listening. And I think it's important that we sort of differentiate and disentangle the two. I mean I think it is absolutely essential. You know the part where I was talking about is Kimberle Crenshaw writes a lot about this she is a scholar who coined the term intersectionality and so thinking about the ways in which the different parts of our identity exist as oppressed and oppressor. Right.

Clint: [00:20:26] And so in each of us that we are carrying different elements and facets of who we are in any sort of a socio historical context of the world. Each of those things represent a group that is marginalized or a group that has done more to. And so within me you know I as a black American I am part of a group that has been historically marginalized and historically oppressed as a man. I am certainly a part of a group that has historically and in a contemporary context does the oppressing because patriarchy and sexism are profound operating functions of the way that the world works and it is essential for me to recognize those and to recognize the ways in which how I navigate the world as a man might necessitate that I maybe step back sometimes and that I'm not taking up space that is so often taken up by men that I don't think my voice or fall.

Bonni: [00:21:24] You know unconsciously come to believe that my voice is more legitimate or more worthy of being heard. Whether that's you sitting at a meeting or whether that's you are engaging in a conversation with someone and there's a black person. Maybe that means that I need to think about what it means for my voice to be heard more explicitly than one might otherwise consider because of the historical nature of whose voices have been included or whose voices have been stifled and widened. And that's hard right. And I think that that depends so much on the context of the moment.

Clint: [00:21:52] I think there are moments in which we need to think about the ways in which our identities shape whether or not we should be speaking or listening. And I think in this political moment that we're entering you know I mentioned before holding these sort of complicated duality together I think we're going to need the skills of both empathy and resistance more than ever and recognizing that both of those things can be held at once.

Clint: [00:22:19] And you know for me recognizing that there is a large swath of people in this country who voted in a way that is fundamentally difficult for me to come to terms with and that for me is aligned with a very specific set of values in my mind that run counter to any notion of the type of world or the type of country I want to live in. I don't think that that in and of itself means that you don't. Continue to seek to understand why someone makes the decision that they do. And that doesn't mean that you endorse those decisions. That doesn't mean you are acquiescing to those decisions. That doesn't mean one is seemingly like compromising their political or ideological integrity. But but I think that the act of empathy and the act of listening which is going to be necessary going both ways is going to be more important now than ever.

Clint: [00:23:15] And in my mind that is not mutually exclusive from acts of resistance acts of a political resistance social resistance and refusing to again sort of acquiesce to a type of world that is misaligned with the things that we value and care about.

Bonni: [00:23:34] There are four things that you write on the board as you start each of your classes read critically write to consciously speak clearly and tell your truth which is share a bit about why you do that and and how that sort of transformed to talk back to you as well to teach yourself.

Clint: [00:23:50] Yes so I'm someone who takes history very seriously and I'm a big sort of history buff and I think that exists both in my artistic work and my scholarly work and in my pedagogical practice as well. So I'm interested in this idea of like social contracts that like bind communities together. I mean you think about the Constitution as the sort of American social contract you think of implicit social contracts that are assigned within families and guard like expectation of what is or should be done. Social contracts that exist in the county neighborhoods municipalities states and so I wanted a sort of SUNO document if you will or statement on motto or mission statement that would reflect the social contract that I want my students to be signatories to.

Clint: [00:24:34] And so we came up with you know came up with this motto read critically, write consciously, speak clearly, tell your truth. And that was on a board at the beginning of my first year teaching and I had those four things written down and the first thing I did when I started class was I was like you know to be a student in this class you are saying that you are going to abide by and Leetch toward these goals because these goals represent the sort of culture that we are seeking to create in the classroom and these represent the sort of like aspirational direction that each of us are moving toward right and that that again that to read critically, write, consciously, speak clearly, and tell your truth is not a you don't think we crossed a threshold and then you are like you do those things those are things that you have to be proactive in doing and practicing every day.

Clint: [00:25:25] And these are habits that one develops and in many ways it's not simply learning to do these things but it's unlearning to do other things that might not be aligned with what that's like. What does it mean to be you know a 15 year old to who has been sort of you know either explicitly or implicitly told that their voice doesn't matter or that what it means to be a student is to be quiet and to be a passive recipient of someone else's knowledge or ideas and instead to have a teacher come in and say actually I want you to you know

when you have something to say you should say it when you obviously were always going to be respectful and kind and empathic.

Clint: [00:26:03] But if you disagree with something that I say is teacher you shouldn't feel as if you can't say something because that is not aligned with the sort of intellectual community that we're seeking to create in this classroom work I believe deeply in the fact that. I am I'm a partner in my students academic and intellectual journey more so than I am someone like bestowing things onto them and that I've I've learned as much from my students and my students.

Clint: [00:26:28] I would hope I've learned as much from one another about themselves about the world about the subjects we're engaging in as they have myself. And so I think that's to say that that demands a sort of recalibration of what you know a young person may have understood education to be. And so having this at front of the classroom having their signatures on it and having it be the first thing they see every day is hopefully a reminder to them to sort of aspire toward those four core principles that if this were a driving force of of the work that we do in our class.

Bonni: [00:27:01] Thanks for sharing that powerful part of your pedagogy. This is the part of the show where we each get to recommend something. And I would like to recommend that people pick up your book and I wanted to actually read just one of the hate calling them blurbs. That's what they call testimonials is that a better word than that. Yes.

Bonni: [00:27:21] And I actually I'm not sure I'm going to pronounce her last name. Elizabeth Acevedo maybe. That's right yes. OK. She says counting dissent is a tightly woven collection of poems whose pages act like an invitation. The invitation is intimate and generous and also a challenge. Are you apt to asking what is blackness? What is black joy? How is black life loved and lived? To whom do we look to for answers. This invitation is not a narrow street or a shallow lake but to a vast exploration of life. And you're invited.

Bonni: [00:27:54] And that's exactly why I think people should pick up your book and have a read and be challenged and be filled with joy and sorrow along with you it's just a beautiful work.

Clint: [00:28:04] Thank you so much.

Bonni: [00:28:06] Quickly I wanted to recommend is a series of videos that I came across the last couple of weeks from the Learning Scientists and they came out with Six Strategies for Effective Learning.

Bonni: [00:28:17] And these are videos that can be watched by students or teachers and their whole aim with their site is to motivate students to study to increase the use of effective study and teaching strategies that are backed by research and to decrease negative use of testing. And I've come across their work before but this was the first time I saw these videos. They were funded by a grant and I just think they're wonderful to watch and potentially even to use in one's own teaching to help our students be able to do this. It's great for teachers and students and I recommend people go and check them out. What do you have to recommend today Clint?

Clint: [00:28:53] I would recommend or for the people who are interested in again sort of reorienting their understanding of history. Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror* which is a sort of seminal text in American history for me. Very similar for those who may have heard of or read Howard Zinn's *A People's History* but in some ways I think is potentially more comprehensive and illuminates the stories of things that aren't as fleshed out in Howard Zinn's book.

Clint: [00:29:20] I'd also say reading Ira Katznelson's book (who is a Columbia Historian) *When Affirmative Action Was White*. With that book I think is incredibly important in understanding the ways in which we sort of misunderstand the purpose of affirmative action in the ways in which we fail to recognize how the very nature of the contemporary white middle class in this country was itself an act of affirmative action that was subsidized through the federal government through the G.I. Bill social security minimum wage protection mortgage opportunities in the myriad of things that created the intergenerational wealth and social bedrock upon which this country in its contemporary context was founded. And how many of those things that are the very things that created the contemporary middle class weren't given to black people when those bills were signed. And so I think that that's an important text to help us understand how racial inequality exists in this sort of context that it does in this moment.

Clint: [00:30:17] I would also say that an important book to read would be *American Apartheid*. It's a little bit old and a little bit outdated but I think is another seminal text you know understanding the ways in which housing segregation in this country has shaped the way in which he and equality specifically along lines of race has come to manifest itself in how black people for for decades and decades in the 20th century were prevented from buying

homes and developing the assets that that one gains from from owning a home because they either were denied a loan outright or to not allow them into because they were aspiring to purchase a home minister.

Clint: [00:30:57] So I think all of those those texts are important to understanding inequality and pushing back against the sort of false pathologies of of why certain communities and us why certain students in certain schools are experiencing. Maybe some of the big gaps that we're experiencing today.

Bonni: [00:31:18] I'll be candid with you Clint. I read Howard Zinn's A People's History a couple of years ago and I feel like I still haven't recovered it. Oh my gosh I just felt that my whole education had been a lie and that it scared me so much in this sense I still don't know what to do with everything it uncovered in me.

Bonni: [00:31:36] But I suppose that doesn't mean we shouldn't read things like that it just means we have to keep going and continue to ask questions. There is no easy answer to any of this but just the struggle of not not ever giving up I guess but you're scaring me with your description of a different mirror but also intrigued me at the same time because I know it's just important work for all of us to be studying and preparing ourselves for what is in store.

Clint: [00:32:01] Yeah. Well thank you so much for your time today it really truly is an honor to talk to you and I'm just excited to see what's next for you. I wish you the best as you finish your dissertation and just looking forward to following your work.

Clint: [00:32:15] I appreciate it very much thank you for having me.

Bonni: [00:32:18] Thanks once again to Clint Smith for joining me on today's episode of Teaching and Higher Ed. If you'd like to make comments on today's episode or access all of the links to the things that we talked about you can do that at teachinginhighered.com/141.

Bonni: [00:32:35] And if you'd like to avoid having to remember to go look at the show notes to see the resources that are mentioned on each episode you can receive just a single email each week with those show notes along with an article about teaching or productivity. I mean you can subscribe at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe and if you'd like to access today's show notes we'll be at teachinginhighered.com/141. Thanks to Clint for challenging us

today for inspiring us and for such wonderful resources there at the end. I really am going to look forward to diving into some of those.

Bonni: [00:33:12] And thanks to all of you for listening. As always if you have ideas for the show topics or future guests you can get in touch with me at teaching and hire red dot com slash feedback. Thanks so much for listening. I'll see you next time.

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