



Casey Jex Smith  
Nauvoo  
colored pencil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 2006  
11" x 8.5"

## LISTENING FOR A CHANGE

Déborah Aléxis

“Rèv mwen pou demen”

Douvanjou n se rèv demen  
ki dwe plòtonnen nan konbit tèt ansanm  
Mizè ayè n va sèvi fèy papye listwa  
pou korije devwa demen  
Nawè n va sèvi plim ak lank  
pou kouche sou papye  
zègrè n nan manje ayè  
pou jenerasyon k tou piti  
ak sa k gen pou wè premye solèy lavi  
apre bonnèt ventyèm syèk chavire  
N a kontinye met angrè ak fimye  
nan pepinyè Ginen yo  
pou kontinye bay bon rekòt  
N a sekle raje zigzani, lògèy ak egoyis  
nan jaden nou  
pou n simen plan lanmou  
dekwa pou rebwaze lakay ak bèl flè peyi.

This week, my introduction to Africana studies class explored what it means to speak, and we concluded that to speak is to be understood. When I opened with this poem in Haitian Creole, I am sure many of you wondered, “What’s going on?” I’m sure that some of you leaned in, squinted, strained your neck hoping to catch the words falling from my lips. Try as you might, if you don’t speak Haitian Creole, you didn’t understand me. So, did I really speak if you did not understand me? Or, as it happens frequently in this distracted world, did I really speak if you didn’t listen to me? At this conference, commemorating forty years

since the release of Official Declaration 2, you have listened to many presentations and many stories. As we near the end of this conference, I ask: did you lean in, squint, strain your neck in hopes of catching the words that fell from our lips? We used a common language to share research, experiences, and deeply held thoughts about the Church's racial restrictions, their meanings and legacies. I ask: did you listen? Did you understand? And if not, did we really speak?

The dialectical process necessary in speaking, understanding, and healing was apparent when the nation confronted Colin Kaepernick's choice to sit during the national anthem as a protest against police brutality. When US Army veteran Nate Boyer saw Kaepernick's actions, he initially responded with anger. Upon further reflection, however, and as Boyer began to acknowledge their very different lived experiences, he chose to lean in, to strain his neck, to listen—to try to understand what Kaepernick wanted and needed to say through his actions. Boyer wrote a letter—he spoke—to Kaepernick and Kaepernick also listened; he reached back. It was this Army veteran who suggested that Kaepernick take a knee rather than sit, as a sign of respect. Although our current political climate has encouraged us to draw deeper into our camps and engage in trench warfare, I know we can do better. Like Boyer and Kaepernick, we ought to hear with the intent to listen. I love the words of a dear and brilliant friend of mine who said, "One of the most important words in English and in scripture is 'Remember.' I imagine that the world is chaotic and wicked because we forget too soon. We forget patience. We forget love. We forget compassion. We forget that no man is an island—that we are all connected through life." We were never meant to do this alone. That is why we come down to families, why we seek community.

How will you change after today? Will you remember? Will you forget? I ask this because it's disheartening to attend events like this, rife with hope for a better future, only to be thrown back into an ignorant and unchanging environment. Will you correct false justifications for the

priesthood ban in the classroom? In conversations with your friends? At the dinner table with family members, long after this conference ends? I know some of you may be thinking, “Do I really need to correct Aunt Gertrude?” And the answer is a resounding yes! Because if you don’t, when I’m at the temple, Aunt Gertrude will lean over and tell me, “Just think! When you get to heaven, you’ll be white just like me!”

Passive approaches will not dismantle the lingering problems of racism in the Church either. One of the most common passive approaches I see members espouse is the idea of “colorblindness.” (Of course, somehow people seem to forget that they are colorblind when discussing my admission to BYU, but that conversation is for another day.) An American political sociologist, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, explains that “colorblindness” is often used to dismiss the plight of people of color. High-sounding ideals get used to erase real issues. And when you don’t have the words to communicate problems, or they get replaced with abstract values, they go unresolved. In sociology courses, we learn that race is a social construct, developed to justify the abhorrent subordination of groups of people. Yet if men define a situation as real, if society creates and codifies and institutionalizes particular understandings of skin color and blood lineage, there are real consequences. H. Richard Milner, director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh, said it best: “I’m someone’s father. I’m someone’s husband. I’m someone’s friend. I’m someone’s son, but I’m also a black man. And my being black shapes my experiences, and so if you are not attuned to the part of my being that is race, then it’s very difficult for you to understand and respond to my humanity.” People who attempt to absolve themselves from the very real problems created by our all-too-real constructions of race are complicit with the structures of racism of our past that continue to shape our present. To those who say, “I don’t see color,” I counter: “How can you embrace someone fully if you disregard an integral part of their identity and lived experience, like their skin color?” Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches us that we are spiritual beings.

But we very much dwell in the physical space of our physical bodies and this temporal world. We cannot simply disregard skin color; it affects how we interact with the world and how the world interacts with us. My dear friend said: "I believe that Christ tells us to remember quite often in the scriptures because in that remembrance we push ourselves beyond this fallen world and into a life once lived with God and deity, where we [knew] each other's worth and divinity." Our task is to push ourselves to remember our shared worth and divinity without denying the ways this fallen world shapes our individual earthly journeys.

I am not a follower of Christ first, or black first, or woman first; these are all things that I am simultaneously. I cannot be in alliance with people who do not acknowledge all of me. My multiple identities are constantly informing each other. BYU is not yet my dream school, but I would like it to be. There are some promising changes, including some attempts to increase the admissions of students of color. Yet retention of students of color is just as vital. And I would say that the same goes for the larger Church. I want people of color who attend this school, and who join the Church, to feel empowered, valued, and supported. I do not want people of color to have to carry this load alone. It's disappointing to watch people lose interest or roll their eyes when I mention these issues in class and during Church discussions. It starkly reminds me that I am alone when it comes to this. I am expected to ally myself with BYU and the Church, to demonstrate my unfailing commitment to them while there are few who believe they have any responsibility to mourn with me, to take on the burden of societal and religious racism I disproportionately carry as a woman of color.

I can see the tides changing slowly but surely. We are having forums about race on campus, important discussions in courses, department- and student-group-sponsored panels and talks that address racial issues, and cultural celebrations that highlight the perspectives and experiences of students of color. And I know there is more in the works. It gives me hope that when we graduate, we will leave BYU as better friends, spouses,

employers and employees, leaders, and disciples of Christ because we took the time to be uncomfortable, to learn, to grow—to speak, to listen. Maybe one day BYU will be my dream school.

I hope you leaned in today, I hope that you gave us the chance to speak, by listening.

In closing, I invite you to hear the English translation of the Haitian Creole poem I read at the beginning.

“Dream for Tomorrow”

Dawn is tomorrow’s dream  
imagined in togetherness.  
Pages of history will bear yesterday’s misery,  
correcting tomorrow’s path.  
Ink will like heavy on paper  
for the growing generation  
for the ones seeking first light.  
With the turn of the century,  
we continue to nourish the nursery  
we continue to yield good crop.  
Let us uproot the weeds of pride  
and of selfishness from our garden,  
so that we may sow love  
so that the flowers of this land  
make this house a home.