

“Is your family ok that I’m black?” my then boyfriend, now husband, asked.

This question ached with deep-seated unfairness. Dating an African American brought the realities of racism into a closer proximity. Before, my exposure was mostly through news and literature. That spring, my experiences with social justice all compounded into one, first, when my boyfriend brought up the racial elephant, second, with the murder trial of George Floyd and, lastly, as I read Claudia Rankine’s poetry in a BYU English class.

The concurrent timing of the murder trial of George Floyd brought up many conversations with my boyfriend and in my classes. Throughout my time in the Humanities, I was inspired by social activists such as WEB Du Bois, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. And as the story of George Floyd played out, I watched the news incredulously because George Floyd’s story was, in a way, familiar to me, an echoed *deja-vu* of these authors’ writings. Even from the first book about racism I read at a young age, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he felt familiar. But instead of being shot 17 times, he had a knee on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds (although the length of time is debated). I felt like I was reading the book again, wide-eyed and not quite believing or understanding how this could happen in our society.

In my writing literary criticism class, we studied *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine. In her text, a series of interwoven mixed media and nameless fragmented voices sing experiences of daily racist microaggressions as well as historically prejudiced events including experiences from Serena Williams, Rodney King, and Hurricane Katrina. And like literature does, it made me hurt, feel, and question. I remember I asked my boyfriend to read the book with me. We sat side by side as he read the whole thing. And when he finished, I asked, “Do these

things happen to you?” His answer: “Yes.” The un-safeness of white spaces, the register shifting to belong, the intentional effort to conform, it’s all true.

Intentionally making an effort to conform is significantly different than a culture of belonging. Belonging means an integration of diversity and embracement of difference. And whether its race, religion, sexuality, etc., the key is proximity.

A culture of belonging, the Humanities, and the Gospel all exhort proximity. The idea of a culture of belonging implies a close relationship, with no one culture superseding or overshadowing, but not an erasure of individual identity either. Literature acquaints us with personal experiences and ideas. Authors who offer a different background or different beliefs than us can engender empathy and initiate productive conversations. Christ, the ultimate example of proximity, crossed cultural and social boundaries to reach out spiritually and physically to all people. He engaged with Jews and Gentiles, men and women, adults and children, high-ranking officials and social outcasts.

Deliberately choosing proximity in order to create a community of belonging takes effort. It may mean talking to someone you wouldn’t normally talk to, genuinely listening to other people’s experiences, thinking through the effect of your words before speaking, reading a book with a narrative distant from your own life story, and engaging in difficult topics with the intent to understand. As we try to unite people by crossing gaps, we will find a commonality in our proximity. But even more importantly, we will be better able to see the faces of others and recognize them as our sisters and brothers.

So, what was the answer to my husband’s question? My answer was yes *and* no. For my immediate family, it was no issue at all. But for some members of my extended family, it would

be. As we create a culture of belonging, my hope is that question will never need to be asked again.