AN EXPLORATION OF MY AMERICAN DREAM STORY THROUGH KENTE CLOTH

by

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A THESIS

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Primary Thesis Advisor

For as long as time can remember, the Ewe and the Asante of West Africa have woven kente cloth. Although colonization, the slave trade, and artificial geopolitical boundaries have all disrupted the region, kente cloth has remained a constant and reassuring presence. In American culture, kente cloth most often appears in the form of graduation stoles for Black Americans who want to celebrate our heritage. Kente, which is produced all over West Africa, represents the ambiguity that we come from as descendants of enslaved people because, for the most part, we don't know where in Africa we come from. As Black Americans, we gird ourselves with a generic idea of Africa forged by our Eurocentric upbringing that stems entirely from our relationship to whiteness or lack of it. Many Americans have millennia-long histories traced by the rise and fall of empires, whereas the story for Black people begins and ends with American oppression. Our story is made up of enslavement and subordination, or inhumanity.

This thesis is my effort to regain the parts of my story that were stolen by American slavery. My family descends from the Ewe people of Togo, so our connection to kente is known. My work combines my lifelong love for fibers and my ancestral relationship with kente cloth; the final kente piece uses color to explore the challenges of my reconciliation with my family's history.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor John Arndt, Professor Akwasi B. Assensoh, and Professor Casey Shoop for serving on my committee and helping me navigate this year. Jovencio de la Paz, you were an invaluable resource – you taught me to weave and enabled me to initialize my first kente pieces. Thank you, Jyhreh, for answering all my questions about the thesis process in much more detail and with greater patience than I thought possible. Jonah, thank you for putting together my video presentation and for keeping me grounded and on task in the later months of the project. To my parents, Adolph and Carolyn, and my siblings Gabe and Grace, thank you for being a sounding board for my thoughts during the initial stages.

I would like to give thanks to God and my ancestor Marie Thérèse Coin Coin. Her fight out of slavery and constant battle throughout her life for our family directly led to my work. Thank you, Cousin Eva! Without you, my family and I would still struggle to have a complete understanding of our past and always wonder where we come from.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

American Identity Roots

American melting pot myth

From Schoolhouse Rock[i] to stories of an Ellis Island arrival, Americans are obsessed with our identity as a 'melting pot.' We allow this myth to prop up America as a land of freedom and escape from our pasts. The idea is that anyone can bring themselves to America, maintain their ethnic origins, but still participate wholly in America as Chinese Americans, Italian Americans, or others. Americans whose families have lived in this country for generations still carry pride for their former nationalities. Irish Americans, as an example, assume an abundance of pride for a nation many have never visited. This is the case for everyone but Black Americans, like me, who come from enslaved African people.[1] Black Americans are typically called African Americans to explain our ethnic origins. But the epithet 'African' does not have room to accurately describe the continent's diversity containing over 1 billion people. Additionally, the use of this term has been widely contested and often feels ironic as Black Americans have no tangible connection to Africa.[ii,2]

[1] Many Black Americans did not descend from enslaved people. For this paper, I will refer to Black people or Black Americans as those who have descended from enslaved people in the United States and use American Africans or Caribbean-Americans to describe other Black people living in America who have not descended from enslaved Americans.

[2] I do not want to omit native Americans from this narrative as well. To be clear, I am specifically referring to those whose ancestors immigrated to America. While the ancestors of Native Americans also migrated to this land, they have been in this land for so long they are considered indigenous to America and not transplants

Enslavement in the United States was cruel in many ways, and it needed to strip black people of their humanity to make them into slaves. Humans are allowed to have backgrounds, names, cultures, and families; slaves cannot. So, one of the methods of enslavement to maintain control was to strip people of their languages, cultural practices, and identities to make them better slaves.

Figure 1: Map of Slave Trade Routes

When African people were brought to America as slaves, they were forced to adopt European names, dress, languages, and practices. So, while records were kept remembering how many people were taken from each region in Africa, those records were not tied to individuals.[iii] Since most enslaved people were not allowed to read or write, there was no way to keep physical written records of themselves or their families. The only history of where an individual enslaved person came from was from their memory. As enslaved people were not typically allowed to maintain a singular family unit, children were not raised by their parents or relatives. Families were divvied up and bought and sold ruthlessly and regularly to support the psychological trauma. This means that those who knew their ethnic or cultural backgrounds would not have the opportunity to pass their stories onto their children through word of mouth. Much of Black American culture has roots in West Africanisms. Surviving forms of art such as music and dance evolved into what we have now. But the connection, history, and meaning behind traditions have widely been lost.[iv] A mass cultural genocide was performed. As a result, Black Americans lost

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that clear connection to specific ethnic origins but are expected to maintain a general relationship to the entire continent of Africa.

Access to the American Dream

Because American identity is so heavily based on national origins, Black Americans miss participating in that part of America. At the same time, the Melting Pot story presents America to escape famine, poverty, and persecution when for Black Americans, America was our source of famine, poverty, and persecution. The Melting Pot omits the horrors of American Slavery, Jim Crow, and its continued aftermath and presents a story of American that excludes us entirely. Furthermore, the history curriculum in the primary education system of the United States focuses on European history and values. Mentions of Africa are limited to its natural resources and colonial history – that is to say – Africa is still only mentioned when relevant to white western history. So once again. Black Americans are denied a connection to our past. Fortunately, efforts, such as the 1619 project, represent American history and fact-check myths accurately. Nevertheless, ultimately these efforts will not be able to give back to Black Americans our story.

Many Americans look back on their heritage and get centuries-long histories with a wide range of fables, triumphs, and failures that go along with their country of origin. Black Americans can only look back and see a single story of victimhood, enslavement, and living as subservient. While there are examples of triumphs and success, most of our history is defined in the eyes of whiteness or, rather, our lack of it.

My Personal History

Tracing family roots back

In 1990 my cousin, Eva Brignac, wanted to know our family history. She compiled oral family stories, written accounts of her ancestors, and local newspaper clippings to document our family tree. Though she set out initially to verify her immediate family, she was shocked to discover the ease at which the information fit together to form a large, complicated tree spanning back two centuries. The abundance of information was startling. As she continued, she soon mapped out our family from the enslavement of our first ancestor to the babies being born that year. What started as a side project, meant for a weekend or two, spilled into a decades-long journey that continues today. New books are printed with updates every few years. New recipes and clippings are added, names are corrected as more information comes out, and documents are translated from their original creole into English. Initially, around 50 books were given to families to document their connection to our common ancestor, Marie Thérèse Coin Coin, and her African-born parents. When Eva researched Coin Coin, the story that unfolded explained why our family's story is so well documented and how she escaped a fate most Black Americans of the time suffered.

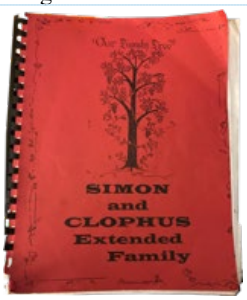

Figure 2: The Book

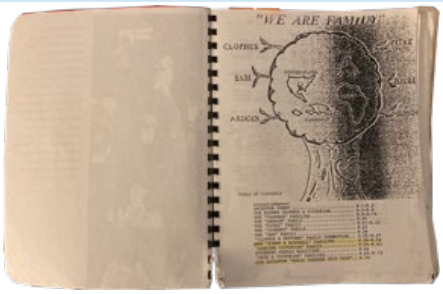

Figure 3: The Book Interior

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Origin of the Louisiana Creoles

In 1742, my ancestor Marie Thérèse Métoyer (née Coin Coin) was born in Natchitoches, a French trade outpost in Louisiana. She was born enslaved. Her parents, Francoise and Marie Francoise, who were owned by an outpost officer, named her according to Togolese Ewe tradition as the second-born daughter. So, while no official records exist to prove so, it is assumed that one or both parents were Togolese. Her husband, Charles Métoyer, later manumitted Coin Coin and some of their children. Once freed, she became an avid businesswoman in the community. She used the skills she had gained in her youth to grow and sell medicinal herbs on her farmstead and used the profit to purchase other victims of the slave trade to protect them from other slaveholders. Coin Coin traded indigo, trapped bears, ran cattle, and founded a church. For much of her life, she tracked down and manumitted many of her children and grandchildren with the profits of her labor. She owned the first plantation, now named Melrose Plantation, owned and ran by a freed Black woman. Her tireless work led to the rigorous records and stories about my family that allowed my cousin Eva to trace our history.v

Connection to kente cloth

Because most Black Americans do not get to know where specifically in Africa, their family comes from, we often celebrate a mixed match of practices from all over west Africa. We cling to what pieces of Africa we do have, such as kente and braiding, because we could not hold onto so much of it. One of the most recognizable traditions is kente cloth. It is nearly impossible to go to graduation or ceremony of sorts without seeing a Black person adorned in colorful kente, typically in the form of a stole or

headwrap. For many of them, it is likely they have no connection to kente except as a method of celebration. For my family, it is different. Because we know that Coin Coin was Ewe, at least partially, we have a clear connection to the textile and its millennia-long history. Weaving kente is a way for me to reclaim a part of my family's story. The goal of slavery was to destroy our past, and my goal is the steal back a piece of it.

Weaving Intro

Definitions:

The *warp* is a group of threads that define the length of a textile, but it also limits the width. Before weaving, the correct number and length of threads are measured out to the desired length, and the number of warp threads will ultimately decide the width of the overall piece. The warp resides on and is controlled by the loom for the duration of the weave.

The *weft* is the thread controlled by the weaver. They are held in a shuttle or the hands of the weaver and passed through the *warp* threads. That is the process of weaving. While the *weft* can easily be changed or undone during weaving, it cannot be removed or replaced once the *warp* is on the loom.

Dressing the loom is when the weaver prepares the loom for weaving by placing the warp onto it. Once the *warp* is wound out to the required length, it must be wrapped around the point of tension, whether it be a rock or a beam on the loom. It also needs to go through the heddles and the comb as individual threads. Eventually, the warp is tied to the front of the loom.

As mentioned, the process of weaving is simply layering the weft threads in-between the warp threads. The *heddles* control the warp *threads*, moving them up and down. The heddles also group the threads to create the pattern. For my purposes, as I am weaving plain weave, only two groups are needed, odds and evens. While weaving, one will be moved up or down to separate its threads from the others. The weaver then uses this gap to throw the *weft* into its place.

A *comb* on a loom looks much like the typical comb used for hair. It has teeth just like a hair comb, but both sides are enclosed. There is one gap between teeth per one *warp* thread. While missing one gap is not a huge deal, crossing the thread would compromise the structure.

While not all looms have one, a *beater* sits in between the comb and the weaver, and it is used to maintain the tension of the *weft* threads. The threads should sit compactly next to each other, with only the thickness of the warp thread in between them. Alternatively, this is possible to achieve without a beater, but it is beneficial to ensure a consistent result.

Treadles are foot pedals at the bottom of the loom used to maneuver the heddles up and down. While two heddle looms only need two treadles, as soon as a third heddle is added, there may be more treadles than heddles. This is because specific structures require triggering two heddles at once, so it can be convenient to have one treadle control two heddles instead of manipulating two at a time.

Loom anatomy

To weave, every weaver needs a loom. The main goal for looms is to provide the tension necessary to weave and hold and organize the warp threads to prevent tangling. A weaver will need a mechanism to maintain the tension of the warp threads that they can easily access. On western looms, a back beam provides this structure. In the beginning, the warp is rolled, with paper or fabric in between each layer, onto the beam. The weaver lessens the tension and pulls forward a length of the warp to then weave incrementally. Kente looms do not have this mechanism as part of the loom. Instead, the warp may be tied to a large rock a distance from the loom's back when

weaving kente. The rock must be heavy enough to straighten and hold the warp while not in use but light enough for the weaver to pull some of the warp forward. Once woven, on both western and kente looms, the textile is coiled onto the front beam of the loom. The process of weaving involves placing a weft thread in between the warp. The weaver maneuvers the heddles to separate warp threads, odds from evens in a plain weave, and then manually places a warp thread in the gap. This process is repeated, alternating the threads at the top and the bottom of the gap until the entire length of warp is filled with weft.[3]

Commented [JE4]: my loom, rigid heddle loom

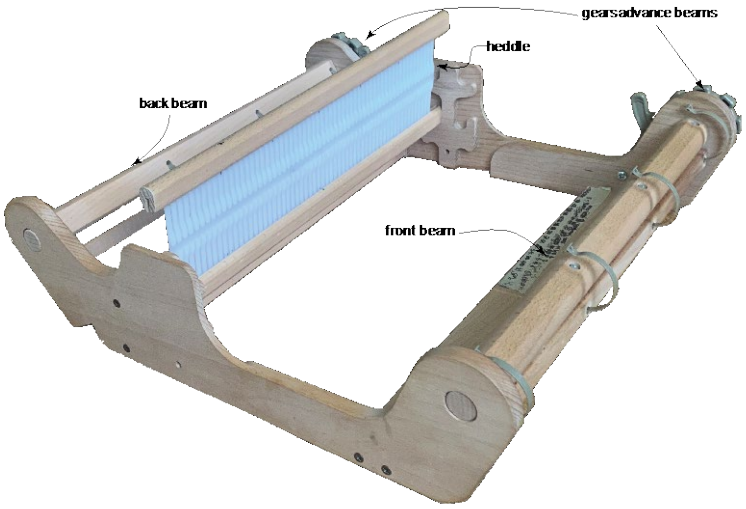

Figure 4: My loom – a 16inch wide rigid heddle loom

[3] This process, of course, describes manual looms. Automatic or computer-automated looms exist and are regularly used for commercial purposes.

Kente History

Legend of kente

According to Ewe legend, a tired hunter took a break when he observed Ayiyi, the spider also known to some as Anansi, weaving her web. He then built a loom to replicate her work, and kente cloth was born from this process. While no one truly knows when or where kente originated, both the Ewe and the Asante people have been weaving kente for as long as time can remember. Though Ghana may be known for its kente, people from Togo and Benin are also part of this shared culture. The colonial lines that separate these countries do not represent the historical and ethnic boundaries. While there are differences in kente made by Ewe and Asante weavers, both groups have passed trends back and forth between one another over the years while maintaining relatively distinct styles. For example, the Asante uses geometric and abstract forms, whereas the Ewe, when they used forms, prefer figurative and concrete shapes. This does not mean that kente cloth made by Asante weavers holds more abstract meanings but that with Asante symbolism, the viewer must have a greater understanding of the context of the work. [vi]

Figure 5: Map of Ewe & Asante

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Women and kente

I could not talk about making kente cloth and its history without talking about the myths surrounding women. Historically, kente has been designed and produced by

men. Even subsidiary roles such as dressing the loom and winding the warp and weft threads were performed by men or boys in training. Because of the superstitions surrounding women and their menstrual cycles, we were forbidden from participating. Women, in general, were prohibited from weaving, and a menstruating woman could not be in the same room as a loom for fear of damaging it.[4] The loom was seen in a sacred light. Weaving was "a God-given practice." There were even specific ways to get rid of a loom. A broken loom must have a fowl sacrificed on it, and the pieces of a loom cannot be used for firewood. Instead, they must be thrown into a river. Although colonization has westernized kente weaving, "the act of strip weaving continues to be an all-male preserve."[vii]

[4] Needless to say, I broke tradition and wove the entire project on my own without the aid of a man. Despite this practice, when I spoke with master kente weavers such as Bob Dennis Ahiagble, there was no opposition to my work as a woman.

How Kente is Made

What makes kente?

Kente cloth is not made like a typical textile. In both commercial and craft settings, the weaver will usually designate the width and length of a piece, set up the loom to weave at that width, and then work until the desired length is achieved. Textiles are often woven on a loom as one piece. Kente, however, is made up of various strips, typically 4 to 8 inches wide. Once removed from the loom, the strips are sewn together to make the final work. This construction strategy reduces the amount of waste – the only scraps are the ends and loose threads cut from the loom. So, a kente weaver designates the final width and length of a piece but then sets out to weave strips at a fraction of the width at various lengths. The strips are then cut to the desired length and then assembled into one piece.

Colors, symbols, and weaves

Throughout its history, kente cloth has been used for all purposes. Traditionally, kente is woven by men for both men's and woman's dress. The fabric must be properly wrapped around the body so that the strips are straight both horizontally and vertically, and the hem at the bottom needs to be even around the body. Where the bottom edge hits the wearer's legs will affect the message given. Today, kente is used as a typical fabric, cut into patterns, and sewn into clothing, pillows, furniture, bags, and more. The 'kente' aesthetic has also been transformed printed onto other materials. Now, kente is everywhere.[viii] In its woven form, the colors, symbols, and weaves give meaning to the textile. Some pieces are appropriate for celebratory events, others for spiritual

ceremonies, and others are meant to morn. While commercial kente today may not maintain the historical meaning implied by the design choices, traditional kente assigns a more significant value to these choices.

Colors across kente, both Ewe and Asante, have the same meanings. Black represents maturity and intense spiritual energy. Blues represent harmony and peace. Green is for medicine and physical health, the harvest, and fertility, and physical prosperity. Grey comes from ash, so it invokes spiritual healing and cleansing. Maroon, a shade of red, represents earth or healing. Pure red, specifically shades lighter than maroon, is multifaceted. Bright reds can be symbolic of specific political or religious movements but, they can also represent bloodshed, sacrifice, warfare, and death. Pink represents life, precisely the female essence. It is associated with stereotypically female traits such as tenderness and sweetness. Silver is also associated with the female spirit and is often used for spiritual purification during ceremonies to represent joy and serenity. White is for purification and festive occasions. Yellow is meant to represent ripeness, referring to the yoke of an egg. It can also represent gold and, therefore, wealth and financial prosperity. As Kofi Antubam, a Ghanaian artist and designer, explained:

> "The use of certain dominant colors can reflect the moods and aspirations of the wearer. The use of gold, for instance, denotes warmth, long life, prosperity, and so on. A Chief might wear gold while the Queen Mother or even a more humble woman might wear silver, white or blue to signify purity, virtue, or joy. White is usually worn by priestesses to symbolize deities or the spirits of the ancestors. Green may be worn by young girls to suggest newness, freshness, and puberty. Black can stand for melancholy, loss, sadness, death, or dissatisfaction. Sometimes red is worn at political meetings to indicate anger."[ix]

The weave also holds great significance. In this context, weave refers to the balance of warp and weft, and how the textile is woven. Ewe kente will likely be weft-faced, meaning that more of the weft is visible because it covers up the warp or tweed-like that has an even balance or warp and weft but that uses stripes of color in the warp to create a pattern. The ratio of warp and weft combined with the use of colors in the warp and any sort of weft patterns make up a specific weave. In Figure 6, the blue and teal pattern section is warp-faced this means that the dominant visual comes from the warp – it overwhelms the weft. The red and yellow area is weft-faced. The weft overwhelms the ward and is more visible than the warp. Plain weave, the simplest form, is an over one, under one warp and weft alternation; this is present in most kente and is the basis for all woven structures.

Figure 6: kente strip sample

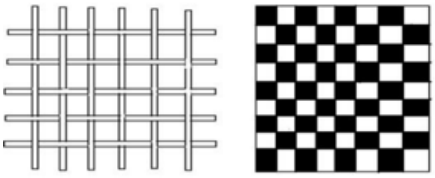

Figure 7: Plain Weave Structure

Commented [JE6]: weave examples

Kente Loom vs. my Loom

The small, rigid heddle loom I used can only weave plain weave and combines the best of the western floor loom with a kente loom. Kente looms can be folded down and placed on wheels; they are light and constructed simply. So, they can easily be replicated and transported. Western floor looms are very heavy and not easily moved. They are larger and have room for more heddles and therefore can create more complex woven structures. A floor loom could easily weave kente, but a kente loom, with a paddle-style heddle, cannot weave all the structures that a floor loom can. My loom has a back beam, like a floor loom and a paddle-style heddle, like a kente loom. However, I move the heddle with my hands, manually moving it into its upright, down, or neutral position. Floor and kente loom both use foot pedals and suspension mechanisms to lift and lower heddles.

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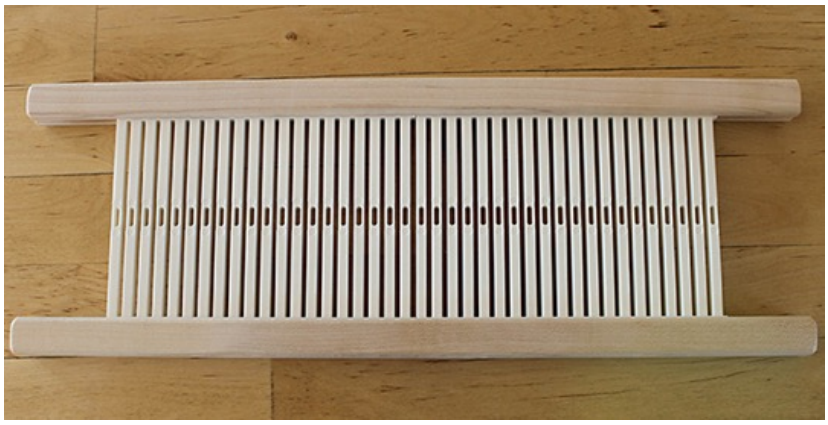

Figure 8: Rigid heddle – one group (odds or evens) goes into the eyes, the other into the slots.

Figure 9: Left – heddle in the up position | Right – heddle in the down position

Kente colors bright and bold:
red, yellow, blue—
black and gold.
Emerald kente for harvest time.
Indigo blue for African Skies.
Yellow kente for pineapples sweet.
Sunset kente red and deep.
Mud pie kente rich and brown.
Gold dust in a kente crown.
Kente colors silver and black,
swirling around dancers' backs.
Ivory kente for dark young brides.
Kente for a newborn child.
Kente colors in bright silk robes—
For generations young and old.

Figure 10: *Kente Colors* by Debbi Chocolate

My Work

Process & design choices

I chose to use 100% wool roving yarn typically used for felting because of its tensile strength, natural and neutral color options, and the depth it added to each strip. Though the roving caught very quickly onto the edge of the eyes of the heddles, once woven and bound the other fibers, it became smooth. To achieve the richer and brighter colors that appear, I used acrylic yarn which was also slightly thinner than the wool roving. Lastly, I occasionally used a natural 100% cotton warp thread to have a more dynamic texture.

Earlier, Ewe kente did not use any symbols. All the meaning for a piece would have been derived from its color scheme and weave pattern. For my final textile, I decided to use the traditional method of making Ewe kente. I did not use any symbolism and instead relied on the color and my chosen weave to imprint meaning. I used a 'Sasa' or patchwork pattern in plain weave. Sasa is kente made up of strips woven with different warps. The colors I chose to use were black, white, grey, maroon, blue, and bits of yellow.

I used black, white, and grey to represent the spiritual renewal and the intense energy it takes to reconcile my perceived history with my actual past. The process of restructuring the narrative of my family history that I had held throughout my life was complicated, and I wanted the piece to reflect that. Black, white, and grey are dominant in the work because much of this process was emotional. Maroon also refers to the brutality of enslavement and to the cultural genocide perpetrated by the United States. The American Slave trade severed my family's ties to kente and to our people. Although

Coin Coin and her descendants mostly lived free, not all her siblings and family were. The people that were manumitted or otherwise freed still lived in a country set on suppressing blackness. Although Coin Coin and others created their own black communities, they still resided in a greater, white supremacist country. The blue on my work embodies being at peace with my past and with Black America's history. As blue can represent harmony, I used to address the reunification of my family tree with our past. Lastly, I used yellow to denote prosperity and a bright new future. Together, red, white, and blue in the context of present-day America also represent buying into the American dream and its irony. Even though I know where I come from, and the African American epithet makes more sense, the American Dream story is still not for me. The United States was never a path for escape for my family; its white supremacist structure has remained a source of torment. The red, white, and blue illustrate this tension.

Figure 11 & Figure 12: Weaving process

Figure 13: Once cut, I then laid out the strips to determine their order.

Figure 14: A finished strip

Figure 15 & Figure 16 (left): I then sewed the strips together using a zig-zag stitch and 100% polyester thread

Figure 17 (bottom): Close up of the seam

Figure 18: final textile

Figure 19: Final Textile

Figure 20: Final Textile

Analysis

It is in our nature as humans to want to connect to our roots. Today, many Black Americans can fill in gaps with new technologies such as mail-in DNA tests and online ancestry sites. My family was fortunate to have been able to maintain written records and oral histories from before the Civil War that tied us to our Togolese roots. While it may not seem significant, the ability to have a history beyond enslavement, beyond oppression, is meaningful to my life. A person's past feeds directly into who they are today. So, when Black Americans look back on a history that is solely filled with victimhood and inferiority, it feels impossible to imagine a future filled with something different. Although I don't know whether any of my ancestors ever made kente cloth, their Ewe ancestry gives them an inalienable connection to the textile. This means that I now have a story that is not related to persecution, that has nothing to do with my lack of whiteness, and that can be shared generationally from this point forward.

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