



Diversity and Making: A Podcast and Video Series
A Collaboration of Purdue Libraries and School of Information Studies and
Purdue Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center (AAARCC)

Episode 4: Kadari Taylor-Watson (Release Date: February 22, 2021)

KTW: Kadari Taylor-Watson

SH: Sarah Huber

PS: Pam Sari

KTW:

It's my belief. And it's what I argue in my work that engaging with things like African print could be one of those strategies of empowerment or healing. So that's, that's sort of the work and how I see my work as craft is healing.

~Music~

SH:

Welcome to episode four of Diversity and Making. Diversity and Making is a collaboration between the Purdue libraries and School of Information Studies and the Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center also known as the AAARCC. My name is Sarah and I'm an Assistant Professor in the Libraries and I run the maker programming.

PS:

And my name is Pam Sari and I'm the director of the AAARCC.

SH:

We created this project collaboration to foster discussions and projects around the questions: who are makers and what is considered making? For African American heritage month we are thrilled. Kadari Taylor-Watson has agreed to join us for this episode. Kadari is a Material Culture historian, and a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Purdue. She has a BS in Sociology from Hampton University and an MA in Sociology from Purdue. She specialized in politics of race, gender, and beauty, healing as craft, apparel design, and technology. Thank you so much for joining us today Kadari.

KTW:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm very honored.

PS:

Kadari, I'll start our conversation. So your positionalities as a material culture historian, American studies scholar who examines race, gender, and beauty, and a maker to me are intersections that combine the theoretical foundations of our American Studies scholarship and the life-giving, life-changing practices of making. So can you tell us about these intersecting areas of study and the work that you do at Purdue and also what type of making do you do and how it relates to your scholarship and professional career?

KTW:

Definitely. So, as you mentioned, I'm a doctoral candidate in American studies and I engage identity and material cultural studies, and have expanded my work to also encompass methods of art and design. And the major research question that guides my work is why and how do Black dyes work women engage with African print. And African print, for my viewers who don't know, is also called Ankara, a Dutch Wax, and it's a global textile that is commonly used in African clothing and the focus of my work because of its use in identity politics to represent Africa and black pride more broadly. As far as what kind of maker I am. I consider myself an artist and a designer that uses textiles as my medium. While I love designing using African print, I'm currently exploring designing using my own version of what I'm going to call African American print, where it's going to have a US Black perspective using symbolism to better represent the US Black perspective. So it's going to pay homage to African print, but it's going to be culturally familiar to African Americans. And I think that this type of making relates to the work that I'm doing in my project is because I'm continuing the tradition of storytelling through textiles, which is a major theme in my work.

SH:

You're saying you're going to make these prints. Are you saying, are you submitting designs to a print maker or are you actually printing them yourself?

KTW:

I'm printing them myself. So I'm designing the stamps and, or using Adobe Photoshop to create these pieces.

SH:

And you say stamps, so you're making like- can you explain that?

KTW:

Sure. So in the research that I do in Ghana, West Africa, there's a type of printmaking, whereas an Adinkra and they use Adinkra symbols as stamps when they stamp cloth using like tie dye. And so I wanted to take that same type of, of making and create stamps that have something to do with African American heritage. So things like the pic or, um, things that you might find in African American households and create stems out of woodblocks and then stamp them onto fabric.

SH:

Okay, cool. Well, tell me if you already said this and I'm sorry, but you're saying, okay. Woodblocks and then just large sheets of plain, like a cotton fabric-

KTW:

Personally, I enjoy using things like muslin, just because I feel like it's eco-friendly and I don't think that you have to use very expensive cloth to get an expensive look. And so I'm using these big sheets of plain white muslin. I'm tie dyeing them using things like coffee, onion peels, all things that are very natural and then creating that extra text, um, extra text by using those woodblocks on top of that.

SH:

Oh, that's cool. And are you going to be selling this or is this just for your clothes that you're making or handbags or how do you see using it?

KTW:

I would like to eventually sell them, but right now it's really about me just trying to find my voice as an artist. I always tell people when I was in kindergarten, I always told people I wanted to be an artist. And then I really figured out that I couldn't draw. So I said, okay, well, this is my way of being an artist of, you know, using textiles, using fashion. So right now it's really it's personally for me, but if someone would like to buy it I'm open to that, if it brings them joy, then that's fine with me.

SH:

Is there a place where we can follow your work? How do we see these textiles?

KTW:

So currently I am off social media until I graduate, mainly to just focus and continue writing, but also to make sure that when I do launch my brand, that everything's very consistent and that it's outside of Purdue. Um, and so that it's my own work.

SH:

Okay. All right. So we'll be looking for you.

KTW:

Definitely.

SH:

Can you talk about how you got involved with making and your experience as an African American, who is a maker?

KTW:

My first introduction to textiles was at seven years old when my mother passed away. And as you can imagine that had a profound impact on me and my identity. So as a young girl, I would sit in her closet and try on her African dresses and imagine her in them. And so I wanted to know why she had this type of dress, how she felt about it. And so this intimacy with clothing and textiles really sparked an interest in me early on to want to design clothing and pick up the skills of sewing. And so then following her death, my father worked at Colonial Williamsburg. And because of that, I spent a lot of time as a junior interpreter there, where I learned how to spin cotton into yarn, dye it, and weave on a loom. So that really helped me kind of figure out the process of making with textiles. And then later on, in my teenage years, I used to spend my summers at Hampton University where I graduated and I was enrolled in the quilting camps where I learned the histories of Black women quilting at like places like, Gee's Bend in Alabama, or the Indigo work of women from the Gullah and the Geechee communities. And then of course, I also found out the woman of, uh, who were freedom designers, weaving quilts in the underground railroad. So all of that really helped me figure out, you know, that textiles could be communication. And that really inspired me. And then finally, I'll also say that my passion for making, using the medium of textiles in particular has evolved as I learned more about my family history and the cotton industry in the US. So my mother and my father's family is from Mississippi and my great, great grandmother on my father's side was an ex slave. And so growing up, I heard stories about them picking cotton and their fingers bleeding and them having to work long hours in the field and like making nothing doing that. And so personally, I see my making as a privilege because now I'm able to find joy from a material

that brought them, you know, so much pain and degradation during enslavement. So I'm very proud to be making with cotton in this day.

SH:

Wow, that's incredible. I love the story of the women of Gee's Bend. I saw that, I saw that exhibit at the Milwaukee Museum of Modern Art. Tears. They're so stunning for anyone listening. I highly recommend reading about these women that were on this bend, isolated and after long, hard days of working made these quilts that were so modernist. They had no connection to what was happening in Paris, what was happening in the art world. They're incredible. They're out of overalls out of, um, flour sack materials, cottons.

KTW:

No, I mean, I'll just say that, that to me also resonates with me in my making is, you know, there's a history of particularly Black women in this country, making things from what people would say, nothing, right. Using the scraps. And so that is why I try to use sustainable materials. And don't try to go out and buy the most fanciest Chanel or, you know, silk because I don't, I think that those are- and those fabrics are important, but I think that there's equally, you know, that beauty and things like burlap or like those, like you said, overalls or things that you can recycle from clothes. So I also see myself continuing that tradition.

PS:

I also like how the story, oftentimes I think our engagement with, you know, a material brings us back to a person. And in this case, you know, your mom, but also the Black woman that inspired you. I mean, I'm just curious when now you look at your students or young women, especially women of color around you, how do you explain that story and legacy?

KTW:

I'm just honestly upfront with them. I think that sometimes people, they look at me as, um, a role model and sometimes my friends at Purdue, my younger sisters would say, you just have it together. And, you know, you're so put together. And for me, it's like, I am not put together. Um, but I, you know, I've created who I am and what I would do based on where I come from. And for me, that, that dealt with a lot of grief growing up as a child and not really knowing, you know, how to, to share that or express that. And so I've found that using clothes I've found that, um, designing, I find that sewing. So I always try to share with them, you know, they may have hardships in life, but if you're able to find something that brings you joy, even within that, then that's, that's what we want. That's the path that you need to go on. So try to be inspiring in that way.

SH:

Do you make your own patterns or do you use software?

KTW:

I make my own patterns sometimes, but I often, I actually worked part-time at Joanne's here as well. And I'll go in and I'll look at the 99 cent patterns and I'll say, okay, I really liked this, but it would look a little better for me if I could add something to it. So I'm kind of someone who will kind of reinvent something, which it was so interesting because when I would travel to Ghana, which I can talk to you all about, that's what women were doing, right. They were using these old patterns that they would find, and then they were making them their own. And so it made me feel really, um, connected within. That I was doing that same type of making, and I had no idea, um, that I was doing that. So it's a little bit of both.

PS:

I understand that you curated an exhibition called African Prints in Conversation. And I believe the word was first exhibited at the Black Cultural Center at Purdue. So I want to acknowledge the work that the BCC has done in supporting this project as well. It is now traveling across the country. Kadari can you walk us through this exhibition? So if we are walking into the room, what would we see and what is the inspiration behind this work?

KT:

Okay. So I guess I can start with the inspiration and first, just let me start out by saying that space matters. And, uh, so creating a space that could highlight what black women found valuable, um, was definitely a goal of mine. And if, if you don't mind, I just want to take just a second to just give some shout outs to some people who made it possible. Um, of course I want to, uh, give a shout out to Purdue University and thank them for the Global Synergy Grant that made the funding possible. The university at Legon, um, for partnering with me and especially Rose and Abby Wells, who were my family who helped me navigate Ghana while I was there. My committee, of course, Dr. Kim Gallon, Dr. Shannon McMullen, Dr. Marlo David, Dr. Mangala Subramaniam, and Dr. Monica Trieu, a group of women who really supported me expressing my research in this way, because, you know, some advisors are like, why don't you just write and be done with it? But they knew that it was very important to me to be able to curate a space. So I want to thank them personally. I also want to thank all the women in Ghana who gave me access to their shops, their customers, and their seamstresses cause I was pestering them, trying to find out, you know, what this cloth meant to them, what it meant to their customers, how they designed with it. And they also helped me create the fashion that I'll talk about in a little bit. I want to thank Nana Brew-Hammond, who was the guest speaker at the exhibition. And she was really special because she is from Ghana. She lives in New York, she's a brilliant writer, but she also developed a brand with her sister called 'Exit 14' that highlights the fabric from Northern

regions of Ghana. Oftentimes we only hear about Accra, which is the capital of Ghana, but she sought to really expand the way that people see Africa and Ghana more particularly by looking at the Northern textiles there. And then of course you mentioned Purdue Black Cultural Center. I have to thank Ms. Renee Thomas who gave me the space to put all my exhibition. She had no idea what it was going to look like. And she just was like, "You know what? I trust you. I trust your artistic abilities. So do it." And the assistant director, Bill Caise, I also want to thank Boyd Smith who was a curator at the Purdue Black Cultural Center when I was there. And he helped me hang everything. Angel Upshaw, who helped me put an amazing video together. Ariel Smith who helped me pass out surveys, and everyone else who just showed up to support my, my vision, because I think it's important. I mean, I could have put on an exhibition and have no one show, but it was, it was well attended and people were interested. So I just want to say thank you to all those people who made it possible to make that, um, to really see what I had to say in that space.

So I'll say, after my shout outs, it was my intention to create an artistic space that would inspire and inspire joy and conversation between different viewers. Also engage my audience with my research and dissertation beyond the text and visually display the textiles that I was studying and spending so much time with. The colors of African print like, like you can't see the one behind me, but they're so vibrant and they communicate for themselves. So there's nothing that I could have said besides just show them to the community and let people read them for themselves. And, you know, it was also important for me to share the stories of the women that I interviewed. You know, it's, the research was about me getting a degree, but it was also about sharing the stories of the women in Ghana who make with this cloth and who have lived with this cloth their whole life. And so that allowed me to show them in a way that a written report wouldn't allow. And so by creating an exhibition, I was able to amplify their voices and share their personal experiences. And then I would say, finally, I really wanted to show my perspective of what research looks like as a scholar and a maker. Oftentimes as doctoral students, especially in Liberal Arts, we are told that writing is what matters. And of course it is, but I just wanted to show the doctoral students who come behind me that there are other mediums to share our work. And that exhibition was one of the ways that I could do that.

The exhibition was- it consisted of five major components. So the first one was a 27-piece grid of African prints with names and stories to tell. And so these are prints that have names, not all the prints in Ghana, for example, that I've visited and some that I've worked with had names, but I wanted to show and display the prints that had a story to tell on their own. And one of my favorites was called 'pepper' and it was a picture. It was a, it was a fabric that had green peppers on it. And the story was that all peppers don't ripe at the same time. And for me, that was really special because, you know, as someone who has decided to change programs, add apparel design and technology, do international research,

I saw people who were entering my department before me leaving before me. And so it really made me feel like, what am I doing? Why not just do something a little bit more simpler? But it made me say, 'Hey, you know, our peppers don't ripe at the same time and I'm not ready to leave.' And if I didn't- if I left early, I wouldn't be able to put on this exhibition. So it really gave me a sense of comfort as I worked. So that was really special- the 20 piece grid.

I also displayed something called high grade fabric. And this was fabric that Ghanaian women shared with me that couldn't be used. Like you couldn't just go to a seamstress and use high grade cloth to make a dress because it had too much value. And they told me that it would spoil the cloth. So for this cloth, I put it inside of glass cases so that people couldn't touch it so they could understand the importance of it. And one particular brand that is highly valued in Ghana is Vlisco and Vlisco is interesting because it's a Dutch company and it's been around since about 1846 and is almost a leading seller in African print. And so learning and researching about how Vlisco was able to, um, if you will, infiltrate the culture market, uh, places like Ghana was very interesting to me in my work, because I wanted to talk about European colonization and how African print is a way for us to dive deeper into that conversation about the history of European colonization in Africa. But it also is about the collaboration and empowerment that Ghanaian women who sell this Dutch cloth get from it. Right? So I want it to be able to share that story too, and create a space where I could say, okay, this is a high-grade fabric that has its own story, its own messages.

And the next piece, or collection, was a five piece fashion collection. And it was designed by myself and women in Ghana who were seamstresses, who I built relationships with. One seamstress that I spent a lot of time with her name was Alemi. And she became, you know, more than just a research confidante, she became a really good friend and she would teach me the names of the cloth and not only the names in the language that I was familiar with, which was Twi, but how certain fabrics that could be the same fabric, but they had different names depending on the tribe you were talking to. So I didn't even know that until I went to her and she is... . And I said, 'Oh, this is, I think that I thought this is the...' and she goes, 'no, we don't call it that. Right. We call it something else.' And so I said, 'Oh, so depending on your tribe, you call it something different.' So I learned that. So that was important. And I use all of that fabric in fashion collections as part of the exhibition.

Across from the wall of the 27 piece grid I juxtapose that to indigenous textiles that, um, I wanted to share because when I first started this research and I was so confident that African print was made in Africa. And then I realized that all, most of these prints were actually exported by Europe and brought into Africa. And that wasn't necessarily indigenously theirs. I kind of felt duped a little bit. And so for me, a lot of my friends who are doing that research, they would say, 'Well, if African print isn't African, which I now

argue that it is, but if it's not where else and what other textiles are African.' So I wanted to include a wall of indigenous textiles to put in conversation with them. So these are textiles that have been around for a very long time. They have a deep history within African society that are untouched by European colonialism in particular.

And finally, the last part of my exhibition was a 60,000 hand knotted wall hanging that I created as a piece to express my relationship and journey through the dissertation work and with the project at large. I named the piece, 'Tying your own knots' to speak to the mental work that I had to accomplish as a researcher. And as an African American traveling to Africa, learning about African culture, which means I was learning about myself as well. And you know, when you learn about yourself, you have to grapple with truth and sometimes the truth can be ugly. And so, you know, that really helped me work through, um, some of the feelings of like, uh, abandonment and that harsh reality that you are disconnected from Africa as an African American. And also, you know, the reality that it's not Africa's job or African's job to fix how you feel about that. And so for me, tying those knots was the time that I got to sit and kind of think about what I was doing in my work, you know, and really say, you know, I don't need anybody to validate who I am. I have an American culture, I pay homage to African culture. And so that really was a special piece for me.

SH:

Can you tell us about the indigenous fabric? I'm imagining this as quite expensive and rare and hard to get, how did you get it?

KTW:

You're absolutely right. So I'll tell you about one piece in particular that I got, um, was kente cloth. And I went to a village in Kumasi called Bonwire which is where they weave all the kente. And I, of course, with my expensive tastes, chose the queen mother fabric that no one's supposed to have except for the queen mother. And it's like this- it's been around for maybe 200 years. And I was like, 'Oh, I would like this one for my exhibition' and the man goes, 'but that's the queen mother cloth' and I said 'uh, okay. Um, so is there any way that I can get it to put on display? I really want to share with people about the kente cloth' and he goes, 'well, you're your own queen mother, so you can take it with you.' And they gave it to me and they had to ask permission from the queen mother in that village to see if I could take it home with me. And she granted me the opportunity to take it. So that was you're right. It's very difficult to get. And I can't believe that I got it, but I do. And it's valued very much.

SH:

You're showing the sacredness of it. I don't get to have that conversation all the time. And I'm just really appreciative.

KTW:

Me too! Thank you. And, you know, I really just want to say thank you all for allowing me to have this conversation, because I will tell you, I really struggled with myself, wanting to study material culture and, and take it seriously. I took it seriously, but trying to figure out if other people would take it seriously. Um, so the fact that I can sit here and talk to you all about an exhibition that I envisioned and was able to organize and then install, it's just very special. So I appreciate it.

SH:

I'm also feeling grateful for you talking about different types of scholarship, especially on the campus we're on, which has such a strong engineering focus, such a strong research, written research focus. I was gonna say the artist, but all different types of people being innovative and creative. Why limit ourselves to just written words, if we really want to be innovative, or you really want to be creative, if we want new things to come forward, it's so important to be open to different types of scholarship. And so that work you're doing, I think, is so valuable in bringing so much to Purdue in the larger community.

KTW:

Thank you. And I, you know, I will say even for myself as an American Studies scholar, you know, I was, I felt like something was missing, um, because I am a creative. And so while I was writing, I've always known how to sew and I've known how to put things together. And so that's why I chose to go back and get that concentration in Apparel Design and Technology at Purdue with our amazing Apparel Design and Technology teachers. Um, because I wanted to be able to not only talk about the fabric, but engage with it. I wanted to, so it, I wanted to see how it worked, which is why using the fabric in my exhibition and actually designing some of those pieces was really special because it wasn't about, 'Oh, I just know this cloth is called, you know,..... I understand that. But I also know how you have to line the patterns up to be like a dress so that it doesn't look crazy. And so that gives me, gave me a better understanding and a better, um, respect for the women who were working with this fabric as well. Because they have to be design geniuses to work with these prints. Cause they're, they're not, you know, they're not uniform. You have to really have imaginative design skills to do this.

PS:

So I'm curious when you talk with these people, right about the queen mother, um, and the other fabric as well, what was their perhaps message or this is something that you need to absolutely do. And so what was their message for you?

KTW:

They told me specifically, the queen mother told me that I needed to cherish it. I needed to make sure that people didn't touch it because it's so easily- um, the oils from our fingers and the soap that they use and materials that they use to weave kente is so fragile. So she told me to make sure that people didn't touch it. So I'm not sure if people actually didn't touch it. I put a sign up on the, in the exhibition, um, which for me as a maker, I want people to touch stuff, you know? So that was difficult. But to honor their culture I've said, please do not touch this fabric. So that was one of the things, don't touch the indigenous fabrics, which is different from touching the African print. Right? So to me, it showed me that there is a hierarchy when it comes to cloth.

And I say it like that because it was very clear about some cloth, even monetarily costs three cedi's (GHC), which is maybe a dollar for us, but then some cloth costs 450 cedi's (GHC), you know, which is like \$180 for us. So that lets you know, that there's more value for that \$180 or 450 cedi (GHC) cloth. And so teaching people that it's just not just cloth, there's so much more to it. It's wealth, right? The women who I interviewed who were makers, so seamstresses and the women who were, are, uh, the cloth woman is what they are referred to. Uh, the cloth woman shared with me that if you are a cloth woman, you are a woman of wealth, of importance, of status. And so the fact that I was coming into their space as an outsider, asking questions about something that they valued so much. I think the fact that I was African American granted me a form of sistership that I'm grateful for it. But I also say that my American is definitely put up a wall because I think they were used to people coming in and maybe taking and not listening. And so I would just, before I bought anything from them, I would- I sat in there probably two or three weeks and just listened to what they thought was important about the cloth, how they interacted with their clients. And so just really seeing that the women who engaged with cloth are valued in Ghana, they're, they're important. And, um, people look up to them. So I will say that just sharing that story was very important in my exhibitions, sharing that it's more than this cloth. It's about the women who make the cloth, who sell the cloth, who buy the cloth, it's a community. And so I wanted to create that space, um, using the exhibition and also just doing the work that I'm doing with my dissertation.

~Music~

PS:

Can you tell us about ways in which, and I quoted here from the description of your exhibit "material culture and preserving history, challenging negative assumptions about Africa and promoting cross cultural dialogues".

KTW:

Yeah. So when I say that I, um, material culture, preserves history, I'm speaking to the long history of understanding that African textiles are a form of communication tied to culture and tradition, not only in African society, but globally. I mean, there's so much research on the importance of textiles as, as wealth, as status, as tradition. And so I believe that by using material culture, you are not only, uh, preserving the history of the actual material, but also the stories that come along with them that are tied to those people who tell those stories.

And then of course, you know, I like to add that you said challenging negative assumptions about Africa. I'll just tell you a quick story about, you know, I told you I'm teaching at a charter school and I'm teaching a cultural competency class and life skills class to fifth graders. And we're learning about diversity, and we're learning about diversity through studying the different cultures of the continents and for their major projects, they have to select the continent that they found interesting, and they wanted to travel to, they have to create a whole 10 day itinerary, staying places, traveling to landmarks. And none of my students chose to travel to Africa, none of them. And so of course this broke my heart, but you know, when I asked them why they said, they didn't think the culture was interesting, they said, you know, what, what comes out of Africa?

And so while, you know, it was, it's kind of shocking at first value, it also was kind of no surprise to me given the work that I do, because this is consistent with scholars who have argued that out of all the reasons in our world Africa is the least understood and valued by Americans. And that's because oftentimes in the public eye, Africa is seen as a continent that is poverty stricken, war stricken and famine stricken. And so for my fifth grader's point of view, why would I want to travel there? So for me, it was important and it's my intention with the work that I continue to do is to help showcase Africa as it is, a continent that has everything it needs to be successful, but it's haunted by the history of colonialism and neocolonialism and globalism in the ways that don't allow Africa to speak for itself.

So for me, I wanted to put textiles, in particular African textiles, at the forefront because I wanted Africans to tell their own story. I also didn't want to be one of those Americans that said, Oh, well, because of my research, Africa is now on the map. No Africa has always been on the map, but I wanted to showcase it and highlight it for African women in particular to show, to share their own stories. And as far as engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, I would say a major focus of my work and goal is to bring continental Africans and African Americans together in courageous conversations using African print. And the reason I'm using African print is because I don't remember when this was, I can't remember when the movie came out, but I was so inspired by the excitement in the conversations around Black Panther, when the Black Panther came out, the release, I mean, as someone whose art was always wearing this fabric and was engaging in it because of my parents, you know, to see a

global excitement around this fabric for my research, it was like the best thing that could happen to me. The buzz from social media, but also locally at Purdue at the Black Cultural Center, like allowed me to see the African print and African clothing was something that all black people could get excited about. They were rallying around it as a source of pride.

I mean, if you walked into the Black Cultural Center, the day of Black Panther, everyone had some sort of African medallion, African print clothing. It was just very beautiful to see whether they were from Jamaica, if they were from Nigeria or if they were from New York, they all were wearing this fabric. And so that to me was like, I need to figure out how to make this work, right. How to bring African diasporic, African people together using this. But as a researcher, I was asking questions of course. And the things that stood out to me was my conversations with African women and African American women. The African women that I spoke to, many of them expressed that they felt like African Americans were using African clothing and African print as a costume during this time. And they were very offended by it because they felt like it was something that was deeply rooted in their culture, tied to their family and cultural heritage and African Americans saw a movie of a fictional place in Africa, and then chose to buy into that by wearing African print.

And then, you know, I spoke to African American women and they're saying, no, I love wearing African print because it's a way for me to demonstrate my pride and respect for Africa and its culture. And so after having these like fractured conversations, I wanted to figure out how to create a space, literally through the exhibition, but also, you know, figuratively through the research project and my theories that I'm working on to kind of gain insights on these comments and figure out where like, where's this disconnect and how can African design be a space, be material, but also create a space where we can engage in that, uh, those conversations.

SH:

I was wondering when you said your mom had African prints, now I'm assuming you're about 30 ish. I won't say or ask your age, but your mom must've been pretty cool and forward-thinking to have African prints 30 years. So I was wondering what her story was...

KTW:

Yeah. My, my mother and my father were very, well, I would say they were students of Africa. I mean they grew up in the sixties during the Black Power Movement. My Dad is a History professor at university, and I told you, he worked at Colonial Williamsburg. So he traveled to Africa multiple times, taking trips with students and also his colleagues to show them firsthand what Africa looked like, because it's, it's one thing to study Africa in a book, um, particularly in the way that America writes about Africa, but it's another way another thing to go and visit. So I'll say that my mother and my father were very much so at the

forefront of making sure that we understood that we were both African and American and understanding our history, the history of enslavement of African people and also getting history right.

My dad, I laugh because we used to go on trips and he would quiz us. I mean, he would say what famous African or person is from here or what famous African American person did this. And when I was younger, I would be so annoyed because I would be just trying to like listen to music in the car, but he would be quizzing me. And you know, now that I'm older and a researcher and a scholar, I realized that, you know, history is everywhere. And if you don't know your history, then you're going to be lost. And so seeing the fact that my mother had African clothing and any time she would come to my school for field trips, she would wear African clothing. And my friends for a long time did not believe that we were born in America. They were like, where are your parents from? And I'm like, my dad's from Mississippi. My mom's from St. Louis, and they're like, no, there's no way. Cause they always had these African clothes on and they thought we were like royalty. They did. And so that was something that really struck me in grade school where I realized that African clothing on my parents demanded some type of respect and power, and I was like, this is, you know, this is great, but also isolating because we were the only kind of kids experiencing that. But I'm grateful for it. Now that I look back and realize what they were doing and how they were not only talking the talk, but wearing the talk and walking it by supporting black businesses.

SH:

So on your Purdue webpage, under specialization is listed craft as healing. Can you tell us about that?

KTW:

Sure, so I guess I'll just say that before I was in American Studies, I was in Sociology at Purdue and I worked trying to understand the connection between experience and stress for African American men and women by investigating the physical health impacts of race-related stress on high blood pressure. For me, it was about knowing people in my community that were stressed and because of the fact that they were stressed, were having terrible health outcomes. So I wanted to see if there was a correlation between that. But then as I finished up with my masters, I realized that although I valued those numbers and realizing that, okay, the numbers do tell a story, I wanted to talk to people. I wanted to tell, ask people, their story, because it's one thing to say I'm stressed because of a race-related event, but it's another thing to ask someone, well, what happened? And although that can be triggering, you gain a lot of information from that. And so the work that I'm doing now is really my passion, being able to talk to people and do just that, particularly Black women. And so, as far as craft is healing, the review of the literature has found that engagement

with creative activities has the potential to contribute toward reducing stress and depression and conserve as a vehicle for alleviating the burden of chronic disease. And so I can't think of a more deserving group of candidates than Black women to help alleviate mental and physical health disparities. For example, one of the reasons I got into my Master's program was because I mentioned my mom died of breast cancer. And so I found that Black women and white women are diagnosed at the same rate, but Black women are three times more likely to die from it as a researcher. And, you know, personally as a daughter of someone who passed away from that, I wanted to figure out how or what strategies we can implement to help Black women heal themselves, given the fact that they're not being healed in our medical institutions. And so it's my belief. And it's what I argue in my work that engaging with things like African print could be one of those strategies of empowerment or, um, or healing. So that's, that's sort of the work and how I see my work of craft as healing.

SH:

What are some areas of growth you see within the maker community and fostering engagement of difference, particularly the intersectionality of making and racial justice.

KTW:

So I will say that as an active participant in racial justice activities, not only at a very big macro level but micro level of just like talking to people about, um, the importance of Black lives and Black history, I'll say that you can see it in social media. You can see it in the businesses that we have, of the businesses that are now creating space for Black makers, which should I have always been there, but I'm thinking of places like Target, I'm thinking of places like this makeup brand, these makeup companies that I work with that are now creating space for black women, as beauty makers, as engineers, as tech makers, as art makers to be in these more, um, mainstream spaces. So I will say that I do see that there is a highlight or a spotlight on Black makers during this time, because I think that people realize that racial justice is not only about talking about racial justice, it's also about economic stability in the black community. And so Black makers now have the opportunity to say, Hey, not only listen to us and what we've been saying for forever, but also buy my product to say that you actually believe in what I'm saying and you're behind it in terms of working for these big companies.

I also will say from a research perspective, it is good to see that there's an increase in studies about Black women makers. I am seeing that, especially in design and art, engineering, but I also would say that I don't see Black women represented in national museums like maker museums, which is something that I feel like it needs to change. Um, so I will say that there's more progress... being with that, but on a more practical level as a maker and the community that I live in here, I work with local women who are textile

artists, specifically quilters. And what I'll say is that there's a lot of conversation about using diverse textiles in projects. And I'm trying to be careful. So like for example, I'll see predominantly white quilters buying African prints or buying Asian batik prints, but not engaging with the people or the textile itself or the history of that print. And so as a maker and the maker that I want to be, I think it's important not only to just make with something, but to know what, what you're making with. I mean, that's the whole, that's the whole thing. You have to understand where this textile came from, how many threads per inches in it, right? Because that shows you how much work was put in it, what you can do with it. So I will say that I appreciate that there is a space being carved out, I think that it was carved out because of a lot of tragic loss of Black lives, but nevertheless, it's carved out and I see Black makers stepping up and stepping into those spaces.

SH:

Well, thank you for joining us today Kadari. We so appreciate you taking the time to teach us about African print fabrics and sharing stories about how you learned about it. We look forward to following your scholarships so we can continue to learn more. We also look forward to seeing the prints, fabrics, and clothing that you make. So thank you again. It's been a real honor.

All right. Boilermakers, Kadari has put together a maker project for you and it's called a heart warmer. We will have the material kits available to you at the WALC and AAARCC, and just check out this podcast on our website for when those kits will be available. And you'll be using African print fabric to make a little heart, you'll sew it. So the kit will have everything you need, like, you know, needle and thread and the fabric, and also flax and lavender to give it a little weight, but you can also pop it in the microwave and warm it up. You can just have it in your pocket or your bag, or wear it close to your heart and the pocket. So check out those details and thank you for joining us. And until next time, keep on making and Boiler Up!