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## NSASAWA: A MIXED-MEDIA INTERACTIVE RE-ENVISIONING BLACK EXOTICISM IN GHANAIAAN SOCIO-POLITICAL ARCHIVES

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### Abstract

*This paper examines historical Black exotic imagery through Nsasawa mixed-media interactive project. In the Akan words Nsasawa represents a process of interlinking or interweaving cloths/traditions. Digital arrangements of West African Kente cloth and Wax print fabrics placed over 17th-19th century Black exoticism paintings from British art galleries attempt to establish a connection between past and present while taking back authority from these historical portraits. Through the digital collage and patching process, sensors are woven into the fabric overlay to create an interactive space where the viewers movement activates various layered responses that speak to contemporary issues of representation, memory, and the "uncanny" aspects of these exoticised depictions. The outcomes offer a critical re-envisioning that connects the exoticised subject positions directly to postcolonial theories by scholars like Frantz Fanon, Homi Bahbah, and Paul Gilroy regarding identity, cultural hybridity and the spectral remains of colonialism that linger into the present. By invoking the Akan concept of "Nsasawa," this mixed-media project aims to re-weave these archival hauntings from the past into a thoughtful, interactive experience that demands an engagement with how such fetishised representations live on to shape cultural fantasies and fears regarding Blackness today. The outcomes explore what truths may lie beneath these ghostly images through a digital patching process that creates an uncanny space of the exoticised subjects represented, reanimating them through an artist-fabric-sensor reworking to speak back from another temporal and cultural position.*

**Keywords:** black exoticism, mixed-media installation, interactive art, Nsasawa, re-envisioning archives



## **1. Introduction**

The British held visual records from colonial times that have continually created Black exotic narratives that transform African subjects into voyeuristic objects which fascinate or frighten European observers (Said, 1978). Professional artists together with ethnographers produced these illustrations between the 17th and 19th centuries as part of colonial control which maintained and strengthened racial power structures and denied representation to their subjects according to Willis (2002) and Quashie (2020). Extensive collections at British Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum included many such images which are exhibited without regard for their historical contexts as relics from a time before modernity (Hicks, 2020). The historical visual documentation continues to affect modern-day visual culture because Black imagery persists within colonial motifs of "exotic other" (Hall, 1997).

Through the Akan concept of *Nsasawa*, this research uses the traditional Ghanaian practice of interweaving cloths and traditions to create new meaning as described by Adler and Barnard (1992). Through digital augmentation *Nsasawa* places West African Kente fabric and Wax cloth patterns (Ross, 1998) over colonial artistic works to break away from their traditional context. Embedded motion-sensitive sensors in hybrid collages encourage visitors to initiate an interactive process of narrative transformation leading to active viewer participation. The project implements methods from the digital humanities which favours "remixing" colonial archives in order to make marginalised voices the center of attention (Risam, 2018).

Modern media showcases the continuing colonial perspective through fashion imagery and computer graphics which demands an immediate investigation of historical remnants (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1952). The project intervenes by transforming a threshold dimension where Freud's "uncanny" effect reveals colonial figure, *Nsasawa* is to directly confront viewers while regaining agency (Gilroy, 1993). The project establishes meaningful value because it combines Akan philosophical knowledge with decolonial methods while demonstrating how African cultural frameworks can dismantle Western-dominated record systems (Mbembe, 2015). Through participatory reintegration processes *Nsasawa* confronts the traditional view of historical trauma with a living re-presentation of Indigenous identities (Hartman, 2008).

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Akan Tradition and *Nsasawa***

Kente cloth emerged from the Akan people of Ghana through its colourful materialisation of symbolic patterns which share status messages with cultural wisdom and historical details (Ankyiah, 2024; Adler & Barnard, 1992). Royalty traditionally held the exclusive privilege to wear Kente fabric which includes the Adinkra symbols because their complex patterns resist colonial attempts to erase cultural heritage as demonstrated when Kwame Nkrumah displayed Kente attire to show pride during Ghana's independence struggles (Ross, 1998). Western Africans used the bold motifs of Wax prints that European colonisers created for Indonesian markets as expressions of unity against colonial power and personal identity (Picton, 1995). Textile is alive to Blackness according to the definition of "Black aliveness" by Quashie (2020) because it opposes lifeless artifact status.

*Nsasawa* (interweaving) represents more than textile production in Akan epistemology because it symbolises the healing of separated historical components. This research matches Glissant's (1997) "poetics of relation" because hybridity functions as an anti-colonial tool.



Through digital act of Nsasawa the project combines Kente textiles and Wax fabrics against colonial imagery to create a decolonialised story from scattered historical documents.

## **2.2 Postcolonial Theory**

In "Black Skin White Masks" (1952) Fanon analyses how colonial psychology damages people by viewing Black bodies both as objects of temptation and threats. This research project installation achieves this dual purpose by blending tropical paintings emphasising Black exoticism with resistive textiles which makes viewers experience "epidermalisation" as described by Fanon in 1952.

The collaborative works of Bhabha's "third space" (1994) establish a transitional area which enables cultural meaning transformations. In this project sensor systems in installation form demonstrates hybridity through their reactions to viewer movement because they disrupt colonial oppositions between elements like subject and object by enabling audience participation in meaning development. The "Black Atlantic" (1993) by Gilroy investigates the lasting effects that slavery and colonialism leave behind for a critical analysis. This project makes archival subjects alive again through digital techniques while revealing the "changing same" aspects Gilroy describes in racialised representation.

## **2.3 Decolonial Praxis**

The colonial instrument Mbembe (2015) calls archives functions to block marginal populations from speaking. The British Museum acts violently through its method of exhibiting African artifacts out of context according to Hicks (2020). The Nsasawa uses African textile traditions to reframe colonial imagery thus following the principle of "critical fabulation" as described by Hartman (2008). The installation contains fabric collages with built-in motion sensors which implement Risam's (2018) "postcolonial digital humanities theory that challenges archival dominance. Interaction with the installation enables individuals to develop joint efforts toward decolonising the gaze following hooks' (1992) proposal of "oppositional looking."

# **3. Methodology**

## **3.1 Digital Archival Research**

My research unfolds through a three-part methodological journey, digital archival exploration, technical experimentation, and critical making, each phase shaping my understanding of how historical portraits have framed Black identity and how interactive textiles can disrupt those narratives.

In this project I produced mixed-media interactive work that combines digital collage, textile arts, and sensor technology in the critique of the colonial period of Black exoticism. It relies on the Akan material culture, postcolonial theory and interacting new media to question historical representations and reclaim agency by artistic intervention in the present.

I started by exploring the online collections of archives, and trying to find historical portraits of Black people in an exoticised colonial gaze. This is followed by the digital archiving of 17th -19th century British exoticised black portraits (Fig.1-3) selected from online archives, including The National Archives (UK) - Black Presence, The National portrait Gallery (London), Art UK, The British Museum Collection Online catalogue, and The Library of Congress (Prints and photographs online archive). This was not only done as an aesthetic choice but also as an



ideological reclaim. I broke the objectifying gaze that had previously placed Black bodies in the role of primitive specimens by overlaying these fabrics (Fig.4-5) over colonial era paintings. When I dismantled these images, what they were composed of, what sort of stylistic decisions they were using, why bodies were deliberately placed where they were, I wondered to whom these images were addressed, and what went unspoken therein. In addition to this, I learned about the West African traditional textiles, especially the Kente cloth motives, and followed their elaborate designs and symbolic significance. This was not a mere aesthetic thing to do but a reclamation, a reconnection of visual languages that colonialism had attempted to bury. I also researched in socio-political backgrounds of these portraits, inquiries were: Who commissioned them? Who was permitted to look and who was coerced to act? This stage grounded my work on historical criticism and gave me the drive to act.



*Figure 1: The Third Duke of Richmond out Shooting with his Servant. .1765. oil on canvas. height: 1,162 mm (45.74 in); width: 1,372 mm (54.01 in). **Courtesy:** Yale Center for British Art.*





*Figure 2: Charles Seymour, 6th Duke of Somerset by John Closterman. 1702. Oil on canvas. 2075 x 1440 mm.*

*Courtesy: Art UK*

*Figure 3: Pierre Mignard. Louise de Kerouaille. 1682. Oil on canvas. 1120.7cm x 95.3cm.*

*Courtesy: national Portrait Gallery St. Martin's Place. London*





Figure 4: Kente Cloth. Abusua Ye Dom. Courtesy: Kentecloth.net



Figure 5: Africa Wax Print Design. Obatan Na Onim Dza Ne Mba Bedzi. Courtesy: FLO London

### 3.2 Technical Development

I developed digital collage techniques, overlaying archival portraits with Kente and African Wax print patterns by the use of Adobe Photoshop to create a digital collage (Fig. 6-9), just to disrupting the original compositions. This process felt like a dialogue between past and present forcing the colonial images to contend with the cultural heritage they had tried to suppress.

Following Azoulay (2019), I treated image of a fabric as a living archive, subverting the fixed colonial exhibition models as Risam (2018) criticised. The digital collage destabilised familiar patterns; Kente designs fragmented to reveal obscured images as Ghanaian portraits from postcards, stamps, and documents (Fig 10-13) were employed to visually confronting historical erasure and contemporary appropriation (Ankyiah, 2023).





Figure 6: Kente digital Portrait collage of Louise de Kerouaille (1612-1695). 2021.  
Digital Print– 21cm x 29cm. Courtesy: Francis Ankyiah



Figure 7: Francis Ankyiah. Kente digital Portrait collage of unknown man and servant. 2021.  
Digital Print– 21cm x 29cm. Courtesy: Francis Ankyiah



Figure 8: Francis Ankyiah. Africa Wax Print Digital Portrait collage of unknown-man-and-servant. 2021.  
Digital Print– 21cm x 29cm. Courtesy: Francis Ankyiah



Figure 9: Francis Ankyiah. *Africa Wax Print Digital Portrait Collage of Charles Seymour 6thDukeOfSomerset*. 2021.  
Digital Print– 21cm x 29cm. Courtesy: Francis Ankyiah

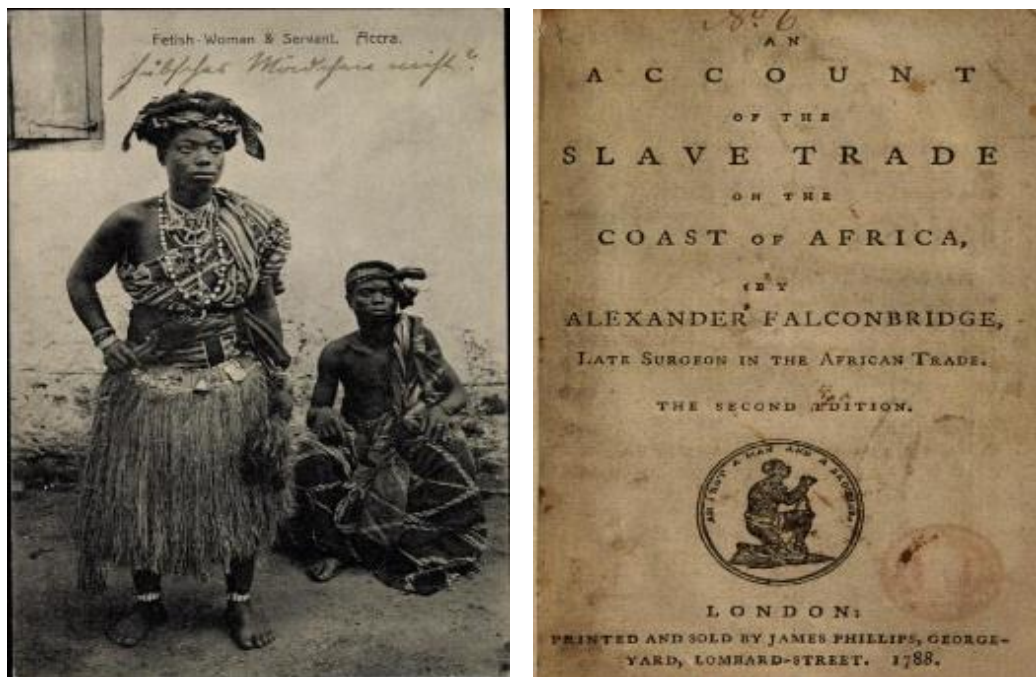


Figure 10: Colonial Ghanaian Postcard Accra Ghana, *Fetish Woman and Servant*. 1908. Courtesy: Akpool. Uk

Figure 11: Alexander Falconbridge. "An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa".  
Courtesy: Falconbridge's Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa.

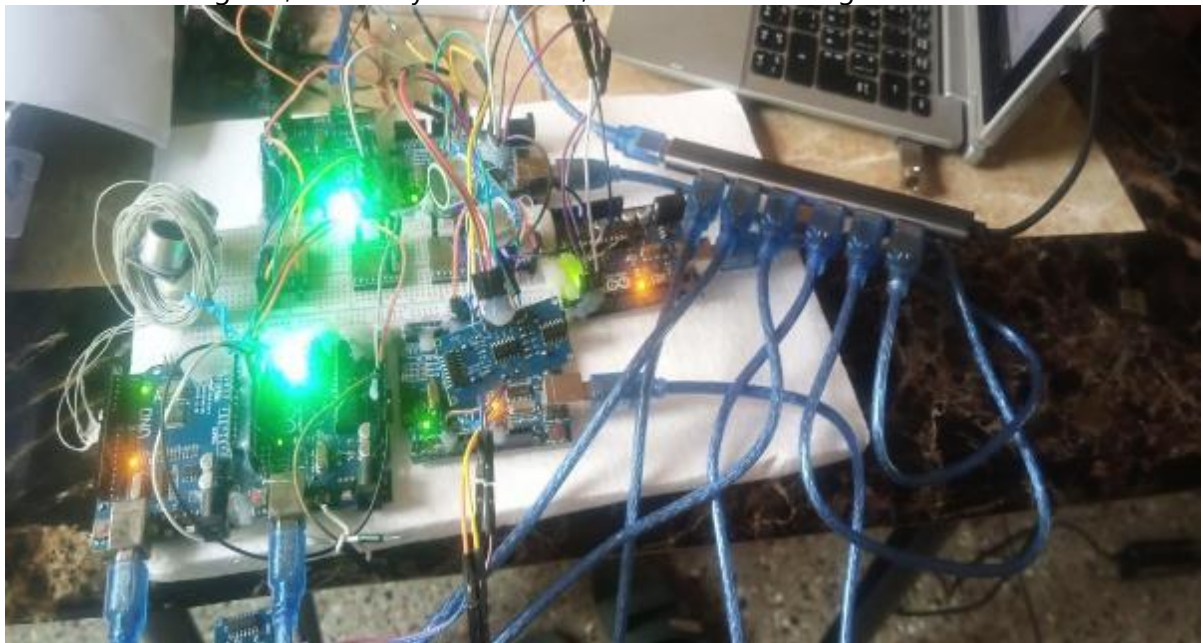




*Figure 12: Francis Ankyiah. Kente digital Portrait collage of unknown-man-and-servant mounted on Document Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa. Digital Print– 50 cm x 39cm Courtesy: Francis Ankyiah*

*Figure 13: Francis Ankyiah. Africa Wax Print Digital Portrait Collage of unknown-man-and-servant mounted on Gold Coast Map. Digital Print– 26cm x 25cm. Courtesy: Francis Ankyiah*

These archival insights got me out of the theoretical realm of the technology and history relationship into the actual practice of it. I also explored the idea of integrating pressure sensors and motion sensors into cloths, and I was interested in how cloth could be so much connected to culture and the body at times, yet made to respond. I wrote interactive programs with the help of Arduino processing (Fig:14) where touch could provide a sound, a light, or something motion. There were glitches, some would not work, circuits would short, the code would glitch, and every time I did it, I learned something.



*Figure 14: Francis Ankyiah Arduino Community (ultrasonic HC-SR04, Arduino, SD card, led-light, etc) Circuit Board. Photo: Francis Ankyiah*

I created interactive cloth surfaces, which I fitted with electronics to make the artworks react to different touches or movements of viewers; in other cases, it reacted by making a sound (Fig:15), in other times by distorted images of the original portraits. These archive pictures were digitally subverted by me by cutting and distorting them and rejoining them with textile patterns. Every chop was rebellious. The way it was installed was essential; I wanted individuals to feel physical and touch and ask themselves how they have been part of seeing these histories. Prototyping and reflection helped me understand that material practice can be used to disrupt the fixed representations of the world, transforming passive spectatorship into an active one.





Figure 15: *Body sensor Installed art works.2023. Photograph: Nelson Yaw*

I was interested in questioning the spectator's passivity when witnessing the visual images displayed in the museums and this encouraged me to install pieces of fabric with motion sensors and thus turned the sightseeing into a physical dialogic one. The digital fabric collage was responsive to touch by using bare-capacitive sensors attached to an Arduino, where the sensor had audiovisual responses to it. The ultrasonic HC-SR04 sensors were linked to conductive thread, whereby movement was identified, and when the viewers moved or touched the textile image. The artwork was receptive and the process of observation that was previously not interactive was transformed into an interactive process.

I used Bhabha's Third Space (1994) as my inspiration to make the crossing between the colonial and the postcolonial story through the surfaces of Kente and Wax prints that became my haptic visuality that alters textiles and makes them a place of embodied memory.

I incorporated the words of Frantz Fanon, "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952) and Gilroy, "The Black Atlantic" (1993) which enabled the sensory experience to be based on the postcolonial discourse. The piece required the involvement of the viewers, because it found itself in a decolonising narrative where their movement was dismantling exoticising facades. In contrast to the cold colonial gaze of the old gallery, this was an accidental form of resistance, and it reminds Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961) when decolonisation breaks history, violently.

The sensors were not only reacting to the moved or touched viewers but it demanded confrontation. There was neither impartiality in the experience of these archival spectres. I made the colonial archive a contested space, not a passive recollection, but a reckoning space, by eliminating the distinction between performer and audience. The past was not dead here in this project but turns instead hot and body became the scene on which the tensions that it had not resolved were played out, which had to make the viewers face the ways these visualisations continue to manifest Blackness nowadays.

The combination of archival research, technical experimentation, and making allows my methodology to enhance critique of historical imagery, and also to rewire it as well. It raises the question: What would become of the subjects of these portraits speaking back?



When/How would the fabric, itself resists the frame? This is more than analysis; it's an intervention, stitching new possibilities into the past.

### **3.3 Critical Making**

I also was inspired by the aesthetics of decolonisation (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013), where the textiles were used as the means of resistance. Kente cloth, whose origins go back to Asante and Ewe royalty, became a visual statement against historical extinction (Ross, 1998). Equally, Dutch wax prints that used to be recognised as colonial trade items were used differently as the representations of African intrusion (Sylvanus, 2016). The name Nsasawa (interweaving) indicated the process of sewing up the broken histories to create new stories regarding Black identity.

This intervention established a sensory collision when the African self-representation confronted European fantasy of colonialism. I have extended the concept of Bhabha (1994) of the third space, an intercultural territory where the colonial images become unbundled so that they can be redefined. The superimposition of fabric into the still portraits turned into a disputed space, with the postcolonial reclamation replacing exoticisation.

My approach was consistent with the theory of Camp (2017) of turning an archival work into a silent photography, which is a form of oppositional practice. The project was not only denying the images of colonialism but its re-centered African visual culture as a crucial movement in identity formation. I used these overlaid textiles to put the past into a conversation with the present and it demonstrated that material culture could act as a way to rewrite history.

In the last installations of my Nsasawa series, I challenged the audience to reconsider the set identities digitally animating the colonial period portraits and superimposing them with West African Kente and Wax print patterns. I was able to instil life into still images with the help of looping GIFs (16-18) and thus went against the concept of natural, non-changeable identity, as Nakajima et al. (2008) did by introducing fluidity into animation and creating new, shifting selves (p. 54).

I drove the fabrics, causing them to lacerate and move about, and animated characters with cultural fabrics in them were used as an embodiment of the shifting, unstable identities that Bhabha (1994) theorised (p. 186). This was a kinetic performance that reflected postcolonial opposition to strict classification. This is further supported by animation, which Said (1978) stated in his argument, identity is not intrinsic as discussed by him but a performance since it was motion, my graphics were telling stories of stacked, stratified histories (p. 232).

I reconstructed the colonial subjects as social beings by treating them as dynamic instead of fixed, and made them the active participants of the transformation of their self-perception. This was in line with what Lowe (2015) urges to break the ossified history using imaginative, metabiological creative acts (p. 97). The liquid digital actions did not simply refresh the portraiture; it tore colonial structures which were constructed upon the exoticising gaze.

Finally, my animated interventions compelled the imperial imagery to become inverted creating syncretic identities that moved independently. It was not only visual but also tectonic that destabilised the very structure of colonial representation.



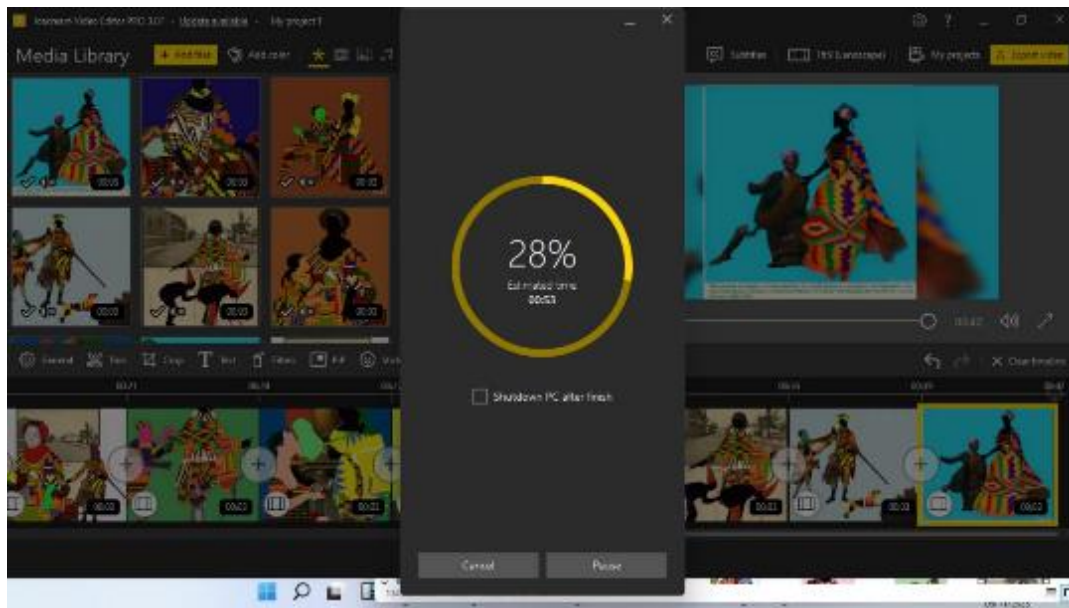


Figure 16: Screen Shot of Animated Gifs into Video (Kente Portrait)

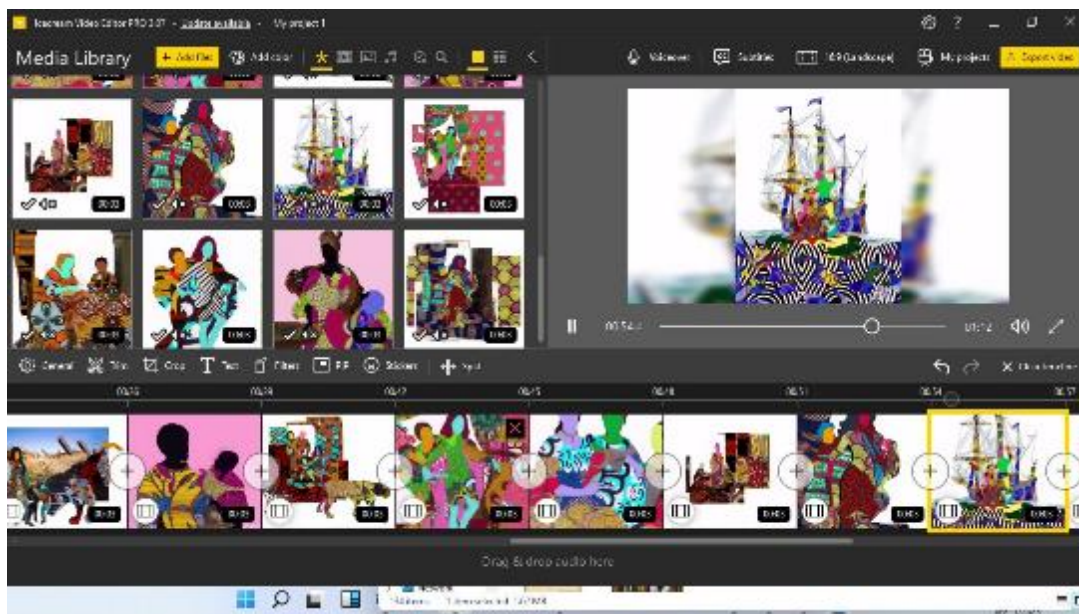


Figure 17: Screen Shot of Animated Gifs into Video (Wax Portrait)





Figure 18: Francis Ankyiah. *Still Gif animation Bricolage*. 2023. Photo: Francis Ankyiah.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Cultural Hybridity

Through the installation's combination of African textiles with Eurocentric exotic elements the artwork brings to life the "third space" idea (1994) proposed by Homi Bhabha who describes how cultural identities form through hybrid transformations. The project creates disruption in traditional binary thinking by using Kente cloth and Wax prints as representations of Akan strength (Ross, 1998) on colonial-era portraits to challenge the exotic logic of "Self" and "Other". The installation (Figure: 19) displays Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity which he describes as a "production" developed by historical disjuncture and remixed elements (Hall, 2015). The interactive collages become dynamic sites of cross-cultural dialogue when viewers move through them because Glissant (1997) describes this process as creolisation which both suggest cultural entanglement while stopping assimilation.





*Figure 19: Exhibition Space of School of Medical Sciences (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology). 2024. Photograph: Francis Ankyiah*

## **4.2 Memory and Archive**

Through digital fragmentation combined with sensor-based interaction Nsasawa disrupts the fixed authoritarian position of the colonial archive by reviving its archival contents. The project uses Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" approach (2008) to provide speculative content like Arduino, and Bare board Capacity touch -linked oral history recordings from Ghanaian elders into archival voids. According to Achille Mbembe (2015) the colonial archive uses its power to create dehumanising captives from human subjects. Through its dynamic re-presentation the installation performs as Ariella Azoulay's "potential history" (2019) which lets viewers work together to reconstruct the past. The applied glitches to colonial images create instabilities that reflect the natural fragility of archived materials.

## **4.3 The Uncanny and Spectrality**

The installation produces an uncanny effect (Freud, 1919) because it animates colonial-era subjects using digital overlays and unsettling sound effects while their images flicker through time. The concept of spectrality links to Paul Gilroy's "changing same" theory (1993) mostly through its presentation of colonial violence as a hidden spirit within contemporary media forms. According to Avery Gordon in 'Ghostly Matters' (2008) social events between history and society become visible through the return of unhealed past conflicts. When viewers touch the digital fabric collages (Figure: 20) their physical actions trigger distorted images of Black bodies that produce disorienting feelings between their recognition and their detachment from these figures in a powerful demonstration of exoticism's long-lived power.





*Figure 20: Exhibition Space of School of Medical Sciences (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology).2024. Photograph: Adjo Daiki Apodey Kisser*

#### **4.4 Reclamation of Agency**

Through the interactive reanimation of archival subjects, viewers obtain a decolonial speaking power that Frantz Fanon proposed in his theory about resisting colonial perceptions during 1952. Through motion sensor technology participants become able to break the exoticised landscape of static images according to bell hooks' idea of "oppositional looking" (1992) which allows marginalised viewers to take control through critical study. Nsasawa follows Tina Campt's 'Listening to Images' (2017) approach in developing this work because the project reveals hidden rebellious elements that reside in historical images. Through uniting postcolonial digital methods (Risam, 2018) with Akan textile heritage Nsasawa enables audience members to co-produce art that challenges colonial collection authority.

#### **4.5 Participant Interaction**

Movements of viewers can be considered a fundamental aspect of receiving counter-narratives founded on the decolonial practices as described by Nsasawa. The digital facade of technology digital fabrics movement enables the notion of cultural meaning co-development through the application of the third space practices as explained by Homi Bhabha (1994). The movements of people in the space trigger audiovisual effects that replace the colonial portraits with the Kente patterns and Wax prints to construct an experience of the oppositional looking (hooks 1992) in which a marginalised viewer disrupts the systems of dominant visibility, there. The participative quality of the piece of art enables viewers to unite with the artist and fight colonial binaries as per the definition of Claire Bishop (2012).

#### **4.6 Multisensory Experience**

Through the installation audiovisual components which merge Akan proverbs with drum music alongside present-day images of Ghanaian society the installation offers a direct experiential



evaluation of foreign detachment. According to Marks (2000), the installation implements digital fabric system interfaces and fluctuating projections to establish 'haptic visibility' between sensory perception and memory recollection. Steven Feld's exploration into sound as social communication (1996) has guided the striking of diasporic memory through audio components simultaneously Tina Camp's 'Listening to Images' (2017) establishes that low-frequency hums with fragmented speech create distance for perceiving subversive colonial imagery. The sensory combination undermines colonial viewing patterns because sensory engagement surpasses solely intellectual questioning.

## **5. Critical Contributions**

This project implemented Walter D. Mignolo's 'Decolonial Aesthetics' (2011) to develop art methods that eliminate Western-centered knowledge frameworks through Indigenous perspective-centered practices. The installation achieves this goal by combining Nsasawa with digital patching techniques which connect disparate colonial records into whole counter-narratives like Gloria Anzaldúa's 'Borderlands' theory (1987) about hybrid resistance. Through this approach the researchers combat the fragmented perspective of colonial domination which Achille Mbembe (2015) analysed by establishing African epistemological frameworks as primary sources. Through the combination of Kente textile elements and Wax print signs representing Ghanaian defiance (Ross, 1998) and digital glitch art and motion tracking sensors artists promote Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience to create artwork that serves as an instrument for gaining personal authority.

### **5.1 Re-envisioning Archives**

Through this work Nsasawa challenges Jacques Derrida's archive theory of institutional power calling for institutional authority (Archive Fever, 1995) by converting institutional imagery into sensor-based collaborative spaces. The project utilises 'critical fabulation' as proposed by Saidiya Hartman (2008) to create speculative narratives embedded with music, sounds and oral histories which support collaborative past redefinitions following Ariella Azoulay's 'potential history' (2019). The interactive displayed digital collages react to viewer motion which gives all individuals equal access to the archive while relocating power from colonial exhibition managers to their participants. According to Michelle Caswell's 'liberatory archives' framework (2016) communities should have power to fight against the historical removal of their histories.

### **5.2 Bridging Past and Present to Confront Enduring Stereotypes**

The series showcases Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' model (1993) through its dual display of traditional British colonial paintings combined with modern local Ghanaian archival photographic records. Through its contrasting method of showing antique paintings against contemporary Kente and Wax prints the project shows Stuart Hall's "spectacle of the Other" (1997) to reveal how stereotypes evolve in a continuous loop rather than remaining fixed. The concept of temporal displacement according to Homi Bhabha (1994) appears in the project through continuous image transitions which diminish historical gaps to make viewers experience racial stereotyping as an unchanged phenomenon (Gilroy 1993). The dialogue breaks down colonial explanations while showing identity continues to evolve between individuals rather than staying in static categories (Hall, 2025).



## 6. Conclusion

This Nsasawa project confronts the colonial heritage in visual collections by using digital media and cultural symbols and interactive technology to present new interpretations of historical Black exoticism. The work challenges historical static tales by uniting traditional African design language of Kente and Wax prints with Eurocentric exoticised visual elements to reclaim power over marginalised stories. When viewers engage with sensor-equipped fabrics in the installation it evokes an active dialogue between participants and the artwork which reveals how colonial imagination and panic have strangely survived to this day. The artistic project embodies postcolonial theories created by Fanon, Bhabha and Gilroy to explore cultural blending while demonstrating how colonial remnants can affect us today through Nsasawa's weaving strategy as a way to practice decolonisation. Through this new configuration the project restores historical ghosts from the past while giving voice to previous silenced cultures so they can actively challenge our understanding of how Blackness has evolved throughout time. Nsasawa uses art to unite technology and tradition in a space that disrupts existing inequalities while stitching together fractured historical events into shared public memory.

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