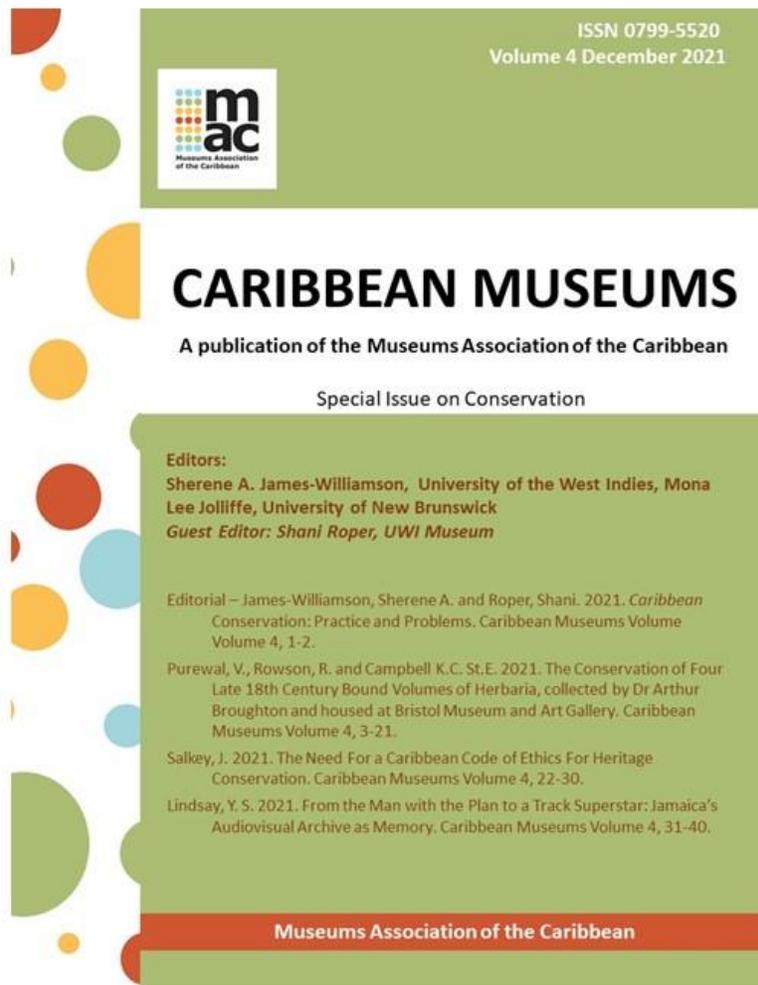


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## Living History: The Audiovisual Collection of the National Library of Jamaica

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**ABSTRACT.** The Audiovisual Archive of the National Library of Jamaica consists of a variety of formats including: phonodiscs, music and spoken-word audiocassettes, CDs, DVDs, videocassettes and films. Exploring the role of the audio visual archive as memory, this paper focuses on the following sub collections – The Jamaica Film Unit, digital video collections and the Usain Bolt Collection. Each of these sub-collections represent the past, present and future of how archives such as the one housed at the National Library are built and maintained and how these processes have evolved over time to suit the needs of the users and the organization, ensuring that the nation’s truest memory is not lost to future generations.

In this paper, it is argued that Audiovisual archives are integral to our understanding of post-independence Jamaican society and reveals the ways in which an archive can be decolonized. In conclusion, financial and infrastructural insecurity as well as the quick evolution of technology threatens the development of audiovisual collections in developing countries.

**Keywords:** Audio-visual collections, conservation, digital archives, decolonization, preservation, archives

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### 1. Introduction

In October of 1980, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images. These recommendations concluded *that moving images are an expression of the cultural identification of peoples, and because of their educational, cultural, artistic, scientific and historical value, form an integral part of a nation’s cultural heritage.* While the recommendation is specific to ‘moving images’, the statement can be applied to all formats included in a description of audiovisual materials. UNESCO, therefore, defines an audiovisual archive as an organization which is focused on collecting, managing, preserving and providing access to audiovisual collection. These collections include moving images

(film and digital), slides, PowerPoint presentations, radio and television broadcasts, still photographs and graphics, phonodiscs, videocassettes, CDs, DVDs, audio reel-to-reel tapes, audiocassettes.

This paper explores the audiovisual archive of the National Library of Jamaica (hereafter NLJ). Established initially as the West India Reference Library in 1879 and a National library in 1979, it houses a comprehensive collection which aims to cover every aspect of Jamaican life and society. The collection includes books, pamphlets, maps, photographs, prints, calendars, film and sound, microfilms, postcards, periodicals, manuscripts, newspapers, posters and digital collections. I argue that audiovisual archives are integral to our understanding of post-

independence Jamaican society and reveals the ways in which an archive can be decolonized. Key to this discussion on audiovisual collections is understanding the threats that these collections face in developing countries and explore the initiatives undertaken by the NLJ to preserve these collections for posterity.

**“Audiovisual archives tell us stories about people’s lives and cultures from all over the world. They represent a priceless heritage which is an affirmation of our collective memory and a valuable source of knowledge since they reflect the cultural, social and linguistic diversity of our communities... Conserving this heritage and ensuring it remains accessible to the public and future generations is a vital goal for all memory institutions as well as the public at large.”**  
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What role do archives play in the preservation of Jamaican history? Cook and Schwartz (2002) posit the idea that archives wield real power over the accountability of governments, engaging in public policy debates which argue such issues as the right to know, freedom information, privacy and it is protection thereof, copyright and intellectual property. The ways in which an archive is constructed wield considerable amount of influence over the direction of “historical scholarship, collective memory, national identity” as well as socio-cultural identity.” Archivists as keepers of records similarly influence how narratives are constructed” through their roles as managers, acquirers, appraisers and selectors, cataloguing the content and often directing its usage (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). While archivists often consider themselves neutral, impartial and objective, records often mirror the needs of its creator and those who access it. Neither the social, cultural and intellectual context within which an archive is created

can be ignored nor its impact be underestimated. Acceptance of this provides insight into how certain histories are silenced. Not only do the victors claim the spoils, they also dictate and preserve the history. Consequently, how would we decolonize the archive and by extension reclaim histories of the ‘ordinary Jamaican?

Bastian et al., 2018) defines decolonization not only as the physical removal of the colonizer but also the inculcation of a mindset that rejects domination and cultural assimilation and repudiates colonial ideologies in favor of community affirmation and identity. This changing in perspective has allowed Caribbean societies to gain control of their own narratives. It is this dismantling of the colonial ideologies and narratives that is integral to the decolonization of the archive. Essential to this process is the idea of a ‘community of records’ wherein the community is not only the entity responsible for the collection and maintenance of records but provides the contextual memory, a frame of reference essential for the understanding and accuracy of the content provided. Audiovisual archives are an essential component of this decolonization process.

Audiovisual archives originated as an offshoot of larger organizations such as libraries, museums and their role and direction often relate directly to the purpose, priorities and collections of these institutions. The national archives of a given country maintain the records of the government, part of which may include sound and audiovisual material. A national audiovisual archive, for example, may have the role of acquiring and maintaining the output of the commercial recording industry. Such an archive may have legal status in some form, such as being a repository for legal deposit for audiovisual material produced within the country. A broadcast archive may be part of a

government funded broadcaster or part of a commercial broadcasters' asset management team. A research archive may be part of a government funded initiative or may exist within the faculty of a university department. Many archives and collections have some or all of these roles and may occasionally need to expand their roles into other areas. There is no uniform standard governing audiovisual archives/archiving, but recommendations are often made by organizations such as The International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). Policies governing how audiovisual archives are managed often originate from the organizations under which they fall.

Jamaica has a diverse collection of these types of audiovisual archives that date as far back as the 1950s. Broadcasting archives contain radio and/or television programs as well as commercial recordings. For example, Radio Jamaica, now the RJR/Gleaner Group, whose holdings date back to the 1950s. Studio archives are maintained by production houses within the film industry. Audiovisual museums often specialize in the preservation and display of artifacts, e.g. cameras, projectors, phonographs, posters, musical instruments etc. The Jamaica Music Museum is an example of this type of museum. Thematic and specialized archives opt for clear and often highly focused specializations. They tend to focus on a theme or a subject, a particular place, a historical period etc. Oral history collections such as the one that resides at the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, are an example of this kind of archive. National audiovisual archives are usually government funded and operate under a mandate to document, preserve and make publicly

accessible the country's audiovisual heritage. The National Library of Jamaica is one such institution.

## **2. National Library of Jamaica's Audiovisual Archives**

How is the National Library of Jamaica's audiovisual collection created? There are four main approaches to collecting and expanding the audiovisual archive. Under the Legal Deposit Act which requires that at least one (1) copy of a published document, that is, a CD or DVD be deposited in the collection. The library also accepts donations from individuals who wish to contribute to the archive. For example, one of the library's more extensive collections was donated by noted theatre and broadcast icon Wycliffe Bennett. The collection includes interviews with personalities such as Michael Manley, Sheila Carter, Dorothy Cunningham, Amina Blackwood Meeks and Don Bucknor. National Library also engages in partnerships with other institutions such as the Jamaica Information Service (JIS), a government agency who is mandated to disseminate information that serves to increase public awareness of the policies and programmes of the administration, entrusted to their film collection dating from 1952 – 1985 to the institution. The Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC), an agency of the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment whose primary responsibility it is to promote the government's cultural programmes and initiatives, also entered into an agreement with the Library to digitize their videocassette collection in exchange for copies to be placed in our archive. Downloading from a variety of sources on the internet, primarily YouTube is yet another method of adding to the archive.

The Audiovisual and Micrographic Services Department was created in 1998 and caters to and maintains a collection of approximately

twenty-thousand audio and visual items. The content of the audiovisual collections features aspects of Jamaica’s culture and history and includes archival footage of historic events and noteworthy places, consists of interviews with outstanding Jamaicans including educators, authors and artists. There are documentaries on political and social issues and the environment, literary readings and oral and musical performances. It also includes a very large collection of musical recordings. The collection consists of several formats as seen here in Table 1.

**Table 1. Table showing the composition of the audio-visual collection at the National Library of Jamaica**

<b>VISUAL</b>	Film (16mm): 5000 – 10,000 reels (16mm) Film (digitally transferred): 2503 Videocassettes (Born video): 795 Videocassettes (transferred from film): 500 DVDs: 557 Slides: 16,959 Downloaded (born digital) videos: 12, 471 Microfilm: Approximately 3000 rolls Off air broadcasts (digital): 3650
<b>AUDIO</b>	Audio reel to reel tapes: 4910 CDs: 2542 Audiocassettes: 259 Downloaded audio: 952 Audio (digitally transferred): 175 Phonodiscs (LPs & 45s): 3221 Off air broadcasts: 616

The 16mm film collection and the audio reel to reel collection are the rarest jewels in the Collection. The earliest examples of film created in Jamaica come from the Jamaica Film Unit (JFU), precursor to the Jamaica Information Service (JIS). Established in 1951 under the leadership of Martin Rennalls who was its Director for two decades, the JFU produced films that -stressed community participation, encouraged a spirit of voluntarism, focused on self-help and featured Jamaican people and locations. The first film it produced, in 1951, *Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying*, is part of the

Library’s collection and includes other films such as *It Could Happen to You* which deals with sexual transmitted disease and *Let’s Stop Them* which examines the problem of praedial larceny. *The Man with the Plan*, also a part of the collection, is the first instance of the use of film as political propaganda in Jamaica. Created on the eve of the first election after the rejection of Federation, it sought to persuade the people to continue under the leadership of Norman Manley into Independence. *Bustamante, National Hero* examines the legacy of Jamaica’s first post-Independence Prime Minister.

The audio reel to reel collection consists of approximately seventy (70) recordings of *Miss Lou’s Views* which represent an important contribution to the cultural heritage of Jamaica. *Miss Lou’s Views* are Louise Bennett-Coverley’s commentary on Jamaican life and represents an important contribution to the cultural heritage of Jamaica. Recorded from 1966 – 1981 for Radio Jamaica, **Miss Lou’s Views** are Louise Bennett-Coverley’s commentary on Jamaican life. Sharp, observant and humorous and presented primarily in the Jamaican dialect through the observations of “Auntie Roachie” Miss Lou’s famous fictional muse, *Miss Lou’s Views* educates as well as entertains. These recordings are the only ones of their kind which now exist and represent a unique vision of Jamaica as expressed by one who is a cultural icon in her own right. Also included in this collection and worthy of note is the radio drama *Dulcimina*. *Dulcimina* was a radio serial which told the story of a girl who moved to Kingston from the country. A 15-minute drama, it began life at the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation and later moved to Radio Jamaica. It was speculated that at its peak, the program had an audience of 500,000 listeners or one in four Jamaicans. It

was broadcast in the middle of the day and was so popular that when the actress playing one of the more popular characters died, her funeral which was held downtown was so well-attended that Parade was blocked for hours. *Dulcimina* was written, produced and directed by Elaine Perkins and ran for thirteen years (1967 – 1980).

These collections represent Jamaica's memory in its truest form, moving away as it does from the colonizer's gaze, focusing on issues that concerned Jamaicans, reflecting not only their opinions but solutions born of their experience and knowledge of the country in which they live and work. Films such as *Ska: Music and Dance at the Sombrero Club* which featured iconic band Byron Lee and the Dragonnaires and a very young Jimmy Cliff playing and singing to the beat of the indigenous ska music, offer a look at a vibrant cultural life that was purely Jamaican. A major focus of the Library is to promote material such as this not just as curiosities to be added to other works as enhancements but as legitimate primary source materials as much a part of research as books and journals, properly centering the Jamaican socio-cultural experience and contextualizing its political and economic realities. In short, a documented history of Jamaica's past which specifically aims to disrupt a still present colonial mindset.

### **3. Challenges to preserving the Audio-Visual Collection**

Audio-visual archives approach preservation on three different levels. Preservation of the analogue collection, preservation of the playback equipment and preservation of the digital collection. Film, videocassette, audio reel to reel and audiocassettes each present their own challenges. For example, the film collection of the National Library of Jamaica is stored in what is known as the Vault

located at the back of the Main Reading Room. Approximately 95% of the collection consists of 16mm acetate film as well as a few 35mm and 8mm films. One of the greatest threats to acetate films collections is "vinegar syndrome". Its proper name is "acetate film base degradation". The causes of the syndrome are causally related to the conditions in which the films are stored. The symptoms of vinegar syndrome include a pungent vinegar smell (hence the name), shrinkage of the film itself and embrittlement.

It is recommended by international organizations such as the Library of Congress that films should be stored at low temperatures and with low relative humidity levels. High temperatures and damp conditions speed up the chemical processes which lead to the deterioration of the film stock. It is important also to maintain stability of storage conditions, as fluctuations in temperature or relative humidity will cause further damage. However, there are several infrastructural, financial and environmental issues which pose a threat to the preservation of such collections. For example, in a tropical environment steadily rising temperatures due to climate change taxes inadequate air cooling systems which in turn necessitates frequent and expensive changes in the system. Unfortunately, the vault is far from ideal. It is not a space that was built specifically for the collection but modified for that purpose. Air conditioning units have been installed and temperatures set to recommended standards. The units have been included as a part of the preservation policy which recommends replacement where necessary and dictates that they are kept on for twenty-two hours per day to ensure that the temperature does not rise above 21°C.

The audio reel to reel tapes are also stored in the Vault. Again, it is not the ideal location by any means but with the challenges with regards to space it is, for now, the best option available to the Library for such a large collection. The Library of Congress recommends that any tapes needing preservation for a minimum of 10 years should be stored between 16°C - 21°C. Large fluctuations should be avoided at all costs. If the tapes need permanent preservation, as in the case at the National Library of Jamaica, they should be stored at 8° C- 10°C. This has not been possible. The air conditioning units installed in the vault cannot be programmed to go below 18°C. Again, while not as dangerous as the 16mm film, challenges with increasing temperatures have led to some but not extensive damage (some warping and mold) to the tapes.

Financial constraints play an important role in undermining the survival of audiovisual archives in the Caribbean. The maintenance and service of audiovisual equipment is an integral part of the preservation process. The danger of obsolescence of much of the equipment used forces archives to expend much time and effort in keeping the equipment in top working condition. Which poses its own challenges as the Library must ensure that staff employed to work with the collection must also be trained in basic equipment maintenance. Serious problems arise when technical issues beyond the knowledge capacity of the staff occurs. There are very few persons in the island that have the requisite knowledge to do any extensive repair on this equipment when this occurs and the Library has been forced to replace the stock on several occasions. The National Library's Audiovisual Department is a museum in its own right as it maintains several pieces of equipment that are considered very rare and very expensive to

purchase. For example, one of the newer pieces of equipment, a telecine machine (which was a second-hand purchase since a new machine would have cost \$24M) used to transfer films to digital format cost US\$68,000.00 (app. \$7M) which the Library was able to access through funding from The Culture, Health, Arts, Science and Education (CHASE) Fund. Annually, the servicing budget is often in excess of J\$2M per year.

#### **4. Recommendations to preserve audio visual archives: Some considerations**

In light of the infrastructural and financial constraints there is no one best fit solution for all of the issues facing audiovisual collections. One possible solution in tropical environments is to house audiovisual collections in a separate facility underground where it is cooler and would make it easier to control the temperature thus reducing the instances of spoilage. Also, this kind of collection should be kept as far away as possible from human contact as it is, by its very nature, a toxic format. At the National Library access is only available to authorized persons such as the audiovisual technician whose responsibilities include the digitization of the content and the implementation of conservation measures.

“Have you digitized yet?” is an almost ubiquitous question asked of those who manage archives such as that housed within the National Library of Jamaica. ‘Digitization’ is a buzz word often used to determine how advanced an organization may be in the management and organization of its collection. The question is often asked and the determination is often made without a true understanding of what is entailed in the digitization of a collection. To be sure, there are many advantages to having a digitized collection. For example, digital files can be read/watched/listened to, reformatted,

compressed, transferred and retrieved across networks without degradation of the quality presented. Also, content is much more accessible as it can be viewed on a variety of devices, i.e. computer monitors, tablets and phones. The tremendous benefits for education and research when cultural heritage materials are digitized cannot be underestimated. It is a gateway to providing a large number of users access to unique special collections. However, audiovisual digital collections face a variety of challenges.

The fact is, there are several pitfalls to the digitization process. Media and hardware obsolescence poses a significant threat to archives with minimal facilities to IT budgets. For example, the Library has taken the decision to copy the DVD and CD collections for storage on its server. This generally is the best method as optical disks (CD and DVD collections) are not suitable for long term storage as they are very susceptible to surface damage such as scratches which can result in the inability to access the content. Technology changes, often. For example, at the National Library, a few years ago, the upgrading of the Windows Operating System led to the decision to phase out use of the database management system WINISIS and to seek alternatives as it has made it inaccessible unless one went through an onerous process of creating a virtual machine, an operating system installed on software that essentially mimicked the system set up on dedicated hardware. Set up to imitate the Windows 7 environment, it allowed the database management system to operate. It however had several drawbacks which included its propensity to crash, the time it took to open and the fact that it did not allow multiple users and proved therefore useless when it came to making the database accessible.

Additionally, the Library depends completely on software for the digitization and playback of audiovisual files. Hardware and software obsolescence is a clear and present danger and necessitates constant vigilance. Failure to do this can very easily lead to loss of rare and valuable content due to the inability of access. It is very necessary to keep in mind that “although identical digital copies may be made from digital files, functionality from every software programme cannot be emulated.” Similarly, storage space is of constant concern within the digitization process. At the National Library, archival standards dictate that digital files are not compressed. In short a 5-minute video clip can conceivably be 5GB in size. In 2016, the collection was stored on a server with approximately 44TB of space which had to be shared with other digitization projects. The space ran out. The server was upgraded to 120GB, however as digitization continued, it was recognized that even this was not enough and the decision was taken to upgrade to 200TB.

## **5. The new digital age: Impacts and Concerns**

With the coming of the digital age there were changes in the way media was collected, curated and made accessible. The evolution of the cell phone = smart phones with very good cameras – everybody could now record (video) anything and everything. Platforms such as YouTube provided new avenues for storing and managing material. Greater democratization of access and facilitation of the appropriation of cultural material for consumption and creation of new works. In the face of this new digital age, how do we decide what to collect and when?

In 2014, the Library took the decision to begin downloading video from the internet.

The National Library's newest collection reflects the myriad ways in which the world has made use of the tools which now exist. It reflects almost every aspect of Jamaican culture. Jamaicans have fully embraced this format and thus far the Audiovisual Department of the National Library of Jamaica has collected over 12000 videos which include lectures, news and entertainment programs, culinary shows, vlogs, music videos, live concerts, book and poetry readings, and have been organized thematically: *Visual Music* (music videos – one of the largest collections at the Library (3200+ videos and growing) offers a fascinating look at the diversity of Jamaican music from, as the title suggests, a visual point of view, for anyone willing to explore it; *The Comedy Corner* (featuring comedians such as Michael Abrahams); *Culinary Jamaica* (includes a variety of cooking programs e.g. Grace Foods featuring Miss Maisie); *Documentaries* (a variety of subjects including: Rastafari, Skin bleaching, Yellowman, etc.); *News, Views, and Interviews* (e.g. TVJ, CVM); *The Entertainment Report* (e.g. Pon Di Road, Mission Catwalk, etc.); *The Lecture Circuit* (e.g. Tedx Talks Jamaica); *The Literary Festival* (e.g. readings by Marlon James, Jean Binta Breeze, Lorna Goodison, etc.); *Vloggers Paradise* (e.g. Dutty Berry, Bella Blair, etc).

One of the newer digital collections is the *Usain Bolt Collection* and in many ways it represents the new direction that collection development of digital formats may go in archives such as the Library's if they are to continue following the mandate of collecting and preserving Jamaica's heritage. The idea came when I, then the Manager of the Department, noticed the sheer volume of articles being written about Bolt during the 2016 Olympics. I began collecting the

articles, then photographs and finally videos from a variety of sources including his Twitter and Instagram accounts. Thus far there are 183 videos, 395 photographs and 230 articles all harvested online. The reality is this: the present generation is not documenting their lives whether personal or professional using paper-based formats. They are texting, "WhatsApping" and "Twittering". If the present culture is to be memorialized, there needs to be recognition that present collection methods can no longer depend on persons donating or depositing items. As more Jamaican personalities put their lives online in an effort to remain relevant, it is up to the profession, the institutions to find a way despite challenges (staffing, funding, digital storage space, software obsolescence) to collect the material.

## 6. Conclusion

Institutions like the National Library of Jamaica are often referred to as "memory institutions". Its mandate demands that we collect and safeguard the history and the culture. This is what is done, but quite often, duties and functions are carried out in a cloud of rage and frustration as audiovisual archivists engage in the constant and unending fight for resources that are desperately needed but often not forthcoming. Those in authority, those who hold the purse strings and formulate policy often talk at length about the importance of Jamaican history and culture, how necessary it is to "build and promote the brand" and ensure that Jamaicans realize that our culture should not be appropriated but properly exploited for own benefit. Much of this talk is shallow rhetoric as there is a failure in the understanding that accomplishing these goals means recognition that those in authority need to provide the necessary resources. In short, money is needed. Maintaining any

archive is an expensive endeavor and audiovisual archives even more so (the annual operating budget for the Audiovisual Department quite often exceeds J\$10M annually). Those who work in the culture and creative industries are often forced to compete for funding from the same sources in order to maintain the high standards needed to preserve the various collections. As the world economy fluctuates as more countries join the fight for scarce resources, the pool becomes smaller, the situation a little more desperate. Those in authority must recognize and acknowledge the actual work that goes into the conservation of these collections and formulate policy and set budgets that will, if not fully cover the cost of maintenance at least go farther than the present situation allows. The failure to do so can only lead to the eventual disappearance of our heritage. Jamaica, though a post-Independence society, is yet to entirely decolonize. Recent discussions (passionate, often virulent arguments) regarding identity in the Jamaican space emphasizes the need for collections such as these. The aim of the Library to preserve, promote and develop the Jamaican culture through the acquisition, preservation and provision of access to these

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cultural and historical materials, plays an integral role in battling the persistent colonial influence which informs so many aspects of Jamaican society. The audiovisual archive is not only a mirror, reflecting the true Jamaica, it also serves as a viable weapon, a source of empirical evidence to bolster the defense of the indigenous against those who would hold the society to a standard that is dangerous in its persistence in hewing to a past that has done very little towards the positive development of this country. It is an essential tool in ridding the society of outdated colonial influences and its preservation is essential.

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