

Digitising Black British Histories: Methodological Innovations and Cultural Significance in the GLR Black London Archive

Abstract

This paper presents the methodology and findings of the “FIAT/IFTA Save Your Archive: Black Lives” initiative, focusing on the preservation and analysis of the “GLR Black London” audiovisual archive. Employing advanced digitisation of legacy media formats and integrating a Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) architecture into a Media Asset Management (MAM) system, the project enables enhanced access to historically underrepresented narratives of the Black British experience. The material reveals interse...

Keywords: Black British experience, Archival preservation, Digitisation, Media Asset Management, Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), Social justice, Cultural heritage, Audiovisual archives, FIAT/IFTA

1. Introduction

The threat of decaying physical media poses a critical risk to marginalised historical narratives. For decades, the lived experiences of Black individuals in Britain have been under-documented or omitted from formal archives (Gyimah, 2024). The “Save Your Archive: Black Lives” initiative addresses this void, offering a methodological and technological intervention to ensure these histories are preserved and made accessible.

This paper focuses on the “GLR Black London” collection, a component of Dr David Dunkley Gyimah’s personal archive, and reflects on the broader implications of digitising and contextualising Black British audiovisual heritage.

2. Project Context and Objectives

The author led this initiative as producer and software architect, supported by FIAT/IFTA (2021–2022) and Memnon Archive Services (Velázquez, 2022). The objective was not only to preserve analogue media, but to integrate those records into a digitally sustainable, searchable ecosystem, reinforcing cultural memory and public scholarship.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Legacy Media Digitisation

The project focused on obsolete broadcast formats including Beta SP, D1, D2 tapes, and ¼ inch reels. These were retrieved, digitised to preservation-grade standards, and stored within a custom-built Media Asset Management (MAM) system. Metadata enhancement was prioritised through controlled vocabularies and transcript generation.

3.2 Integration of RAG Architecture

To enable intelligent search, a Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) system was deployed. This system segments archival content (e.g., transcripts and annotations) into indexed chunks. When a query is issued, the relevant chunks are retrieved and passed to an LLM, enabling accurate, context-aware responses.

3.3 System Architecture Diagrams

Figure 1: RAG-enabled Media Asset QA interaction flow

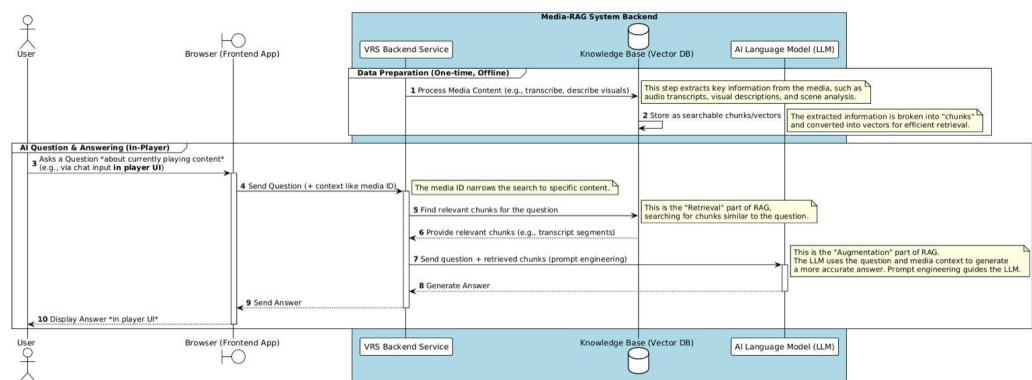
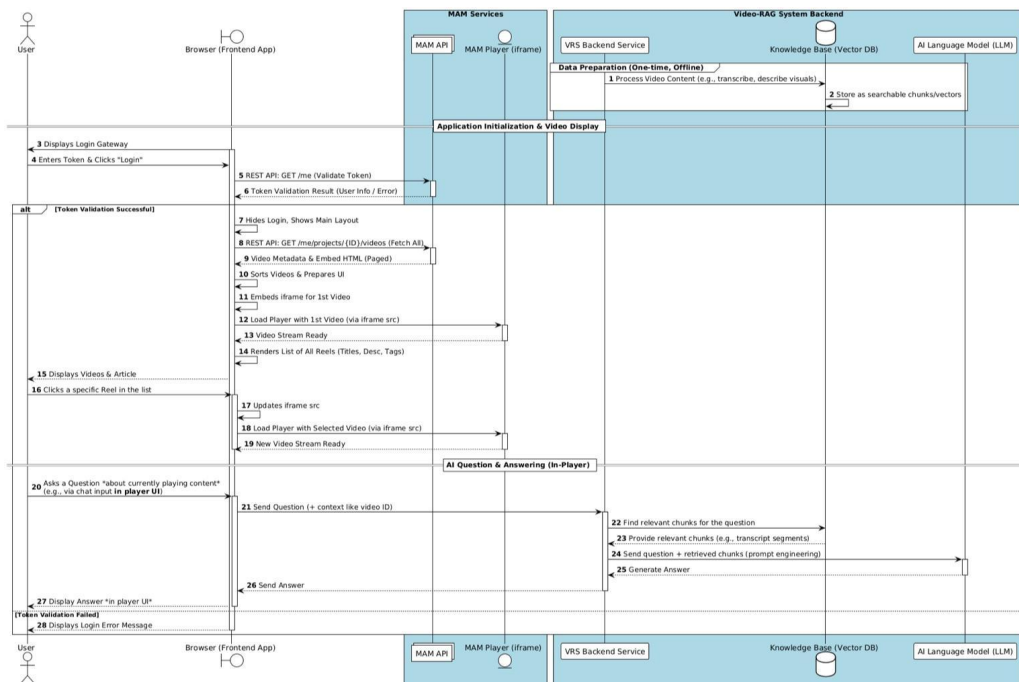


Figure 2: Full system interaction from login to playback and Q&A



4. Content Analysis of the GLR Black London Reels

The digitised content offers a historically significant, multi-dimensional view of Black life in London between 1991 and 1993.

4.1 Political and Social Activism

Key recordings reflect debates on race equality, immigration laws, and voting rights amid escalating racism. The aftermath of the Rodney King verdict and related protests in London highlight transnational solidarity. Interviews cover the appointment of Herman Ouseley as CRE chair (BL009), and *challenges in police cultural awareness* (BL014).

4.2 Systemic Racism and Discrimination

The collection explores the criminal justice system's disproportionate impact on Black Britons (BL008). *Health disparities, especially maternal mortality among Black women, are discussed* (BL004, BL008). *Underrepresentation in government and civil service* (BL020) further illustrates structural inequities.

4.3 Grassroots Advocacy and Community Initiatives

Materials document efforts like the "Black Camden Sisters" supporting survivors of domestic abuse (BL003), and *Dr Abiola's advocacy for pan-African unity* (BL008). Such examples of community resilience reveal independent organising against systemic neglect.

4.4 Cultural Identity and Representation

The archive captures artistic movements through theatre (BL005), *African cinema* (BL011), and music—highlighting the influence of Fela Kuti and Melvin Van Peebles. The Leicester Carnival (BL011) and *Brixton Song Contest* (BL015) exemplify diasporic cultural vibrancy.

5. Thematic Insights and Societal Impact

Thematic patterns emerging from the archive include:

- **Struggle and Resilience:** A continuous thread of resistance and recovery
 - **Domestic Abuse and Mental Health:** Unflinching focus on under-addressed issues (BL003, BL027)
 - **Public Institutions and Accountability:** Insight into governance, policing, and infrastructure (BL004, BL012)
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6. Discussion

The GLR Black London collection's value lies in both content and accessibility. Digitisation converts ephemeral media into durable assets; RAG indexing allows nuanced queries across a corpus previously invisible to researchers.

Such infrastructure is replicable. By combining ethical archival practice with computational linguistics, this initiative sets a precedent for inclusive digital preservation.

7. Conclusion

This work secures and revitalises a critical component of Black British history. Through methodical digitisation and the deployment of advanced discovery systems, these voices—once at risk of being lost—are made available to inform public discourse, academic inquiry, and creative practice. Future iterations will focus on open-source implementation, public accessibility, and integration with digital humanities frameworks.

References

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About the Author

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