

Tribesourcing Southwest Films Counter-Narrations and Reclamation

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

As a work in progress, the Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project seeks to decolonize midcentury US educational films about the Native peoples of the Southwestern United States by recording counter-narrations from cultural insiders. These films originate from the American Indian Film Gallery, a collection awarded to the University of Arizona (UA) in 2011. Made in the mid-twentieth century for the US K–12 educational and television markets, these 16 mm Kodachrome films reflect mainstream cultural attitudes of the day. The fully saturated-color visual narratives are for the most part quite remarkable, although the male "voice of God" narration often pronounces meaning that is inaccurate or disrespectful. At this historical distance, many of these films have come to be understood by both Native community insiders and outside scholars as documentation of cultural practices and lifeways—and, indeed, languages—that are receding as practitioners and speakers pass on. The Tribesourcingfilm.com project seeks to rebalance the historical record through collaborative digital intervention, intentionally shifting emphasis from external perceptions of Native peoples to the voices, knowledges, and languages of the peoples represented in the films by participatory recording of new narrations for the films. Native narrators record new narrations for the films, actively decolonizing this collection and performing information redress through the merger of vintage visuals and new audio.

PROJECT REPORT

Tribesourcing Southwest Films: Counter-Narrations and Reclamation

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As a work in progress, the *Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project* seeks to decolonize midcentury US educational films about the Native peoples of the Southwestern United States by recording counter-narrations from cultural insiders. These films originate from the American Indian Film Gallery, a collection awarded to the University of Arizona (UA) in 2011. Made in the mid-twentieth century for the US K–12 educational and television markets, these 16 mm Kodachrome films reflect mainstream cultural attitudes of the day. The fully saturated-color visual narratives are for the most part quite remarkable, although the male "voice of God" narration often pronounces meaning that is inaccurate or disrespectful. At this historical distance, many of these films have come to be understood by both Native community insiders and outside scholars as documentation of cultural practices and lifeways—and, indeed, languages—that are receding as practitioners and speakers pass on. The Tribesourcingfilm.com project seeks to rebalance the historical record through collaborative digital intervention, intentionally shifting emphasis from external perceptions of Native peoples to the voices, knowledges, and languages of the peoples represented in the films by participatory recording of new narrations for the films. Native narrators record new narrations for the films, actively decolonizing this collection and performing information redress through the merger of vintage visuals and new audio.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge; audiovisual records; cultural sovereignty; cultural reclamation; 1940s–2010s; media literacy

The *Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project* is a work in progress that seeks to decolonize midcentury US educational films about the Native peoples of the Southwestern United States by recording counter-narrations from cultural insiders. These films originate from the American Indian Film Gallery, a collection awarded to the University of Arizona (UA) in 2011. Made in the mid-twentieth century for the US K–12 educational and television markets, these 16 mm Kodachrome films reflect mainstream cultural attitudes of the day. The fully saturated-color visual narratives are for the most part quite remarkable, but the male "voice of God" narration often pronounces meaning that is inaccurate or disrespectful. At our historical distance, many of these films have come to be understood by both Native community insiders and outside scholars as documentation of cultural practices and lifeways—and, indeed, languages—that are receding as practitioners and speakers pass on. The Tribesourcingfilm.com project (Figure 1) seeks to rebalance the historical record through collaborative digital intervention, intentionally shifting emphasis from external perceptions of Native peoples to the voices, knowledges, and languages of the peoples represented in the films by participatory recording of new narrations for the films. Native narrators record new narrations for the films, actively decolonizing this collection and performing information redress through the merger of vintage visuals and new audio.

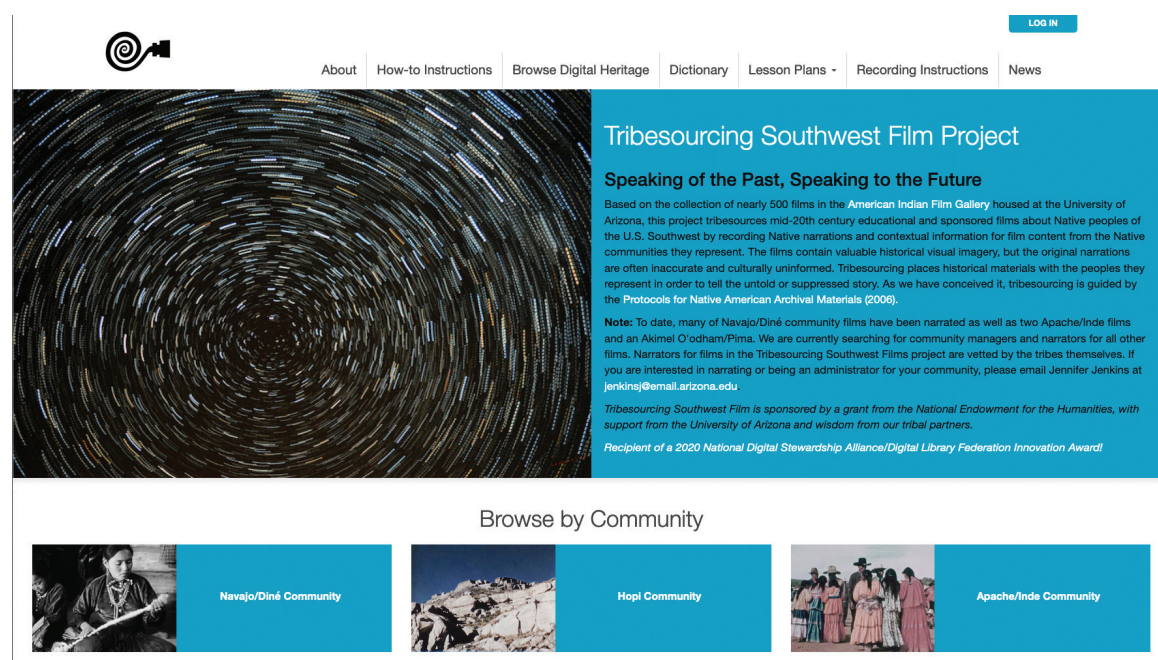


Figure 1: Screenshot of the *Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project* home page.

Tribesourcing

“Tribesourcing” invokes the notion of crowdsourcing, or inviting a dispersed public for assistance in identifying a variety of aspects of the audiovisual archival artifacts, such as names of people, locations, and practices shown onscreen. For the present *Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project*, Native narrators are identified from within their respective communities by regional coordinators embedded within those communities through organic processes such as word-of-mouth invitation and outreach. By encouraging narrators to drive the counter-narrative how they see fit and compensating them for their contributions, this aspect avoids becoming yet another example of soliciting free and invisible labor from communities of color. Films in this project are streamed through the content management system Mukurtu’s interface, with adjacent alternate narrations from speakers from within the represented culture in English and in Native¹ languages.² This method allows for an approach, unmediated by outsiders, to identification of people, places, practices, vocabulary, and stories that might otherwise be lost, as well as provides a rich, community-based metadata record for each film.³

Taking a small step toward cultural repatriation of content, Tribesourcing as a methodology is guided by the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (2006) and the groundbreaking work of Margaret Kovach (2010) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012). The *Protocols*, above all else, operate on an assumption of continual consultation within relationships of mutual respect. While originally designed to address material objects within archival institutions and to work in concert with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the *Protocols* are nonetheless highly adaptable to archival audiovisual materials.⁴

¹ Preferred terminology varies from one geographical region and one culture to the next. In Canada, *Indigenous* or *First Nation* might be the term of choice; in most of US Indian Country, *Native* is the commonly preferred adjective.

² At the time of this writing Mukurtu is still built on a Drupal 7 framework. According to a January 2020 message from the Mukurtu Development and Support team, they will accordingly shift to a different framework in 2021.

³ *Mukurtu* is a Warumungu word meaning a safe keeping place for sacred materials. The content management system was developed in 2007 in a collaboration between Warumungu people of Australia and information scientists Kim Christen and Craig Dietrich, and it is now based at Washington State University. See <https://mukurtu.org/about/>.

⁴ The basic principles of the *Protocols* are: 1. Building Relationships of Mutual Respect; 2. Striving for Balance in Content and Perspectives; 3. Accessibility and Use; 4. Culturally Sensitive Materials; 5. Providing Context; 6. Native American Intellectual Property Issues; 7. Copying and Repatriation of Records to Native American Communities; 8. Native American Research Protocols; 9. Reciprocal Education and Training; 10. Awareness of Native American Communities and Issues.

The Films

The films in this project represent just a small portion of the over 450 midcentury films about Native, First Nations, and Indigenous peoples of the Americas that were collected by J. Fred MacDonald, a historian originally from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. While a professor of history at Northern Illinois University, MacDonald began buying up school and library collections of educational, industrial, and tourist films when public facilities were beginning to “upgrade” their media resources to videotape, mainly in VHS format, in the 1980s. Countless reels of 16 mm film—and the information they contained—were saved from landfills. MacDonald’s plan was to digitize the films and place them in an online archive of sorts, which he called the American Indian Film Gallery. When he got ready to retire, MacDonald put out a call for proposals for stewardship of the collection. UA’s proposal was successful for a number of reasons. The State of Arizona is home to twenty-two federally recognized tribes and over 250,000 Native Americans. Reservations and tribal communities occupy over a quarter of Arizona’s lands. Founded in 1885 as the state’s land-grant university, UA is a premier public research university where over one thousand Native students are presently pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees across the spectrum of disciplines. The UA School of Information (SI) supports a signature program, the Knowledge River (KR) initiative for Hispanic and American Indian Library and Information Issues. From 2011 to 2016, Knowledge River interns worked on the UA legacy project the American Indian Film Gallery (<https://aifg.arizona.edu/>). The cultural, geographical, and educational context of UA therefore conceptually informs this project, although it now resides wholly in cyberspace.

Once at UA, the collection posed a dilemma from the perspective of user experience. Rather than simply hosting a static website, we wanted to adapt the collection as an educational resource for Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous communities. The midcentury content thus raised some interesting questions: although the historicity of the films is a useful teaching tool, and some films document past artisanal processes in silversmithing, basketry, textile weaving, and the like, how could voiced midcentury attitudes go unanswered? What was a feasible adaptation of the nearly 460 “vintage” films? While the visuals represent the Golden Age of Kodachrome 16 mm filmmaking, the audio tracks often derive from the dark ages of cultural insensitivity and misprision. The solution was to take the films back into the communities where they were made and invite narrators from within the culture to record informed and culturally sensitive narrations for the films: Tribesourcing. The digital humanities site would provide the means to blend original film and new narrations—an active form of decolonization and repatriation of image and voice. In 2017, the US National Endowment for the Humanities funded a three-year project based on the premise of Tribesourcing, “The Afterlife of Film: Tribesourcing Southwestern Materials in the American Indian Film Gallery.” The NEH grant funded new digital scans of sixty films about Southwestern US Native peoples, our nearest neighbors, and provided funding to pay narrators for their time and knowledge. The very first Tribesourced film, “Arts and Crafts of the Southwest Indians (1953)” (Figure 2), was prepared as a demonstration piece for possible narrators and funding agencies. The Native female speaker strikes immediate contrast with the white, male “voice of god,” opening with a greeting in Diné Bizaad, identifying herself and her location, thereby speaking to her authority in narrating this film. She then proceeds to identify and explain onscreen locations, individuals, and practices as they come into view from a position of cultural competency. This narration literally speaks truth to power by countering the essentializing and generalized voiceover of the original film.

The Narrators

The process of identifying narrators is best handled within the communities. Thus, paid Tribal Narration Coordinators perform the essential function of recruiting and working with narrators on site. Rhiannon Sorrell serves in this position at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona. Having done the very first counter-narration as proof-of-concept for the *Tribesourcing* project, she is well equipped to explain the project to potential narrators and oversee recordings and payments for narrators, as follows:

As part of the initial proposal, I'd already identified potential collaborators in various departments and offices of the college, including the Diné Policy Institute (DPI) and the Center for Diné Studies (now part of the School of Diné Studies and Education), as well as local community knowledge holders. Moving closer to the recording stage, however, I soon found that explaining the project and carrying out recordings would not be as straightforward as I originally planned, as I could already see that there was a range of different interpretations, understandings, and approaches among family, friends, and colleagues with whom I discussed the project. Because of this, I knew moving forward that no two narrators would follow the same template (nor should they be expected to) and that I would have to work closely with each to help them put out what they wanted to communicate about the films.

The Navajo Indian (1945)

COMMUNITY Navajo/Diné Community

CATEGORY Completed Alternate Audio Narration, Sponsored and Educational Films

SUMMARY A profile of Navajo/Diné social life, family structure, and culture. Activities shown: farming corn, sheep herding, preparing corn bread, children and family pets; weaving wool and yarn preparation, loom building, silversmithing, trading goods, and more.

The Navajo Moves Into The Electronic Age (1965)

COMMUNITY Navajo/Diné Community

CATEGORY Completed Alternate Audio Narration, Sponsored and Educational Films

SUMMARY Survey of modern conveniences and amenities to be found on the reservation, including Navajo/Diné-owned businesses, boarding schools, soldiers and Boy Scouts, art classes, public ceremonies, and the newly opened General Dynamics Pomona Navajo Facility.

Arts and Crafts of the Southwest Indians (1953)

COMMUNITY Navajo/Diné Community, Pueblo/Puebloan Community, Hopi Community

CATEGORY Completed Alternate Audio Narration, Sponsored and Educational Films

SUMMARY Part 1: Navajo activities include: silversmithing, rug weaving, trading post activity. Part 2: Hopi and Zuni artisans make pottery and jewelry, also visit an Indian Fair. Part II begins at 11:20.

Category

- ☐ Akimel O'odham/Pima Community & Tohono O'odham/Papago Community (1)
- ☐ Hopi Community (1)
- ☐ Intertribal/Mixed Community (1)

Category

- ☒ Completed Alternate Audio Narration
- ☐ Sponsored and Educational Films (19)
- ☐ B-Roll and Outtakes (1)

Collection

- ☐ Needs Review by Akimel O'odham/Pima Community (1)
- ☐ Needs Review by Hopi Community (1)
- ☐ Needs Review by Pueblo/Puebloan Community (1)

Media Type

- ☐ Audio (19)
- ☐ Video (19)

Keywords

- ☐ dah list'i (10)
- ☐ dibé (9)
- ☐ béésh figaai il'ini (7)
- ☐ dibé bighaa' (7)
- ☐ áichini (6)
- ☐ Canyon de Chelly/Tséyi' (6)
- ☐ herder/shepherd (6)

Figure 2: Screenshot of one of the “Browse Digital Heritage” pages on the *Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project* website, which shows a list of films with completed alternate audio narration, including the very first Tribesourced film, “Arts and Crafts of the Southwest Indians (1953).”

The narrative approaches, styles, reactions, and goals are as varied as the narrators themselves. Among the first narrators were employees of the Diné Policy Institute, who were well equipped to educate viewers on places, events, activities, and people depicted in their respective films in a more straightforward manner from a Diné academic perspective. By contrast, there are narrations done completely in the Diné language by an elderly couple who focus on describing various activities depicted in the films and explaining the significance of each activity to Diné livelihood. A younger Diné couple exchange stories, experiences, and teachings among themselves and discuss their potential impact on their children. As more recordings were carried out and more narrators from myriad backgrounds recruited, I found that the initial “prompt” that I’d used to help focus the discussion of the films shifted. Instead of merely asking for explanations of the films, I found that narrators were more responsive to the request to talk about the films as if future generations of Diné children would be watching them: what would they want them to know? Thus, narrators could more clearly see how their voices contribute to reclamation of these visual artifacts.

Perhaps the biggest indication of reclamation and integration back into the community is their use as instructional aids in a number of curricula. In the tribal college setting, there is a higher demand for traditional knowledge resources to be used in and out of the typical classroom setting. Because the passing down of traditional knowledge (often existing in the form of songs, stories, demonstrations, etc.) has typically been a carefully guided performative process, much is lost, absent, misappropriated, or distorted in a vast majority of written texts which are overwhelmingly written by non-Native authors. Through collaboration with narrators from organizations such as the Navajo Cultural Arts Program, which works in an academic and community outreach setting to enhance and revitalize the Navajo cultural arts through hands-on programming and apprenticeship, the films and their counter-narrations support a more culturally appropriate curriculum that focuses on the intergenerational transfer of knowledge.

The Digital Humanities Site

From its inception, this project has existed at the crossroads of Indigenous studies, film and media studies, and public digital humanities. In addition to facilitating image, voice, and cultural reclamation, the project promotes media literacy through users’ access and response to the films. Mukurtu as a digital content management system affords us the means by which to reach a broad user base in Indian

Country, where geographical distances often inhibit access to primary materials. The intellectual content resides with our Native partners, and dissemination and access occur through this digital project that we steward. Close collaboration with Native Nations, even remotely, helps to ensure cultural competence in information management and provide context for film content. These are two fundamental principles of the aforementioned *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*. To that end, Mukurtu also provides a community with the opportunity to implement the *Protocols* both logistically and methodologically in regard to materials on the site. The platform's "Protocols"⁵ function gives full agency to each tribe or band to decide whether a particular film is open for public viewing or restricted to specific community members. Additionally, through Mukurtu's integration of Local Contexts' Traditional Knowledge (TK) Labels, members can attribute iconographic labels that denote cultural restrictions under which materials can or cannot be viewed (e.g., gender or seasonal conditions). TK labels also denote if the content needs additional verification, requires attribution to a particular custodian or owner, and other safeguards.

The Navajo Moves Into The Electronic Age (1965)

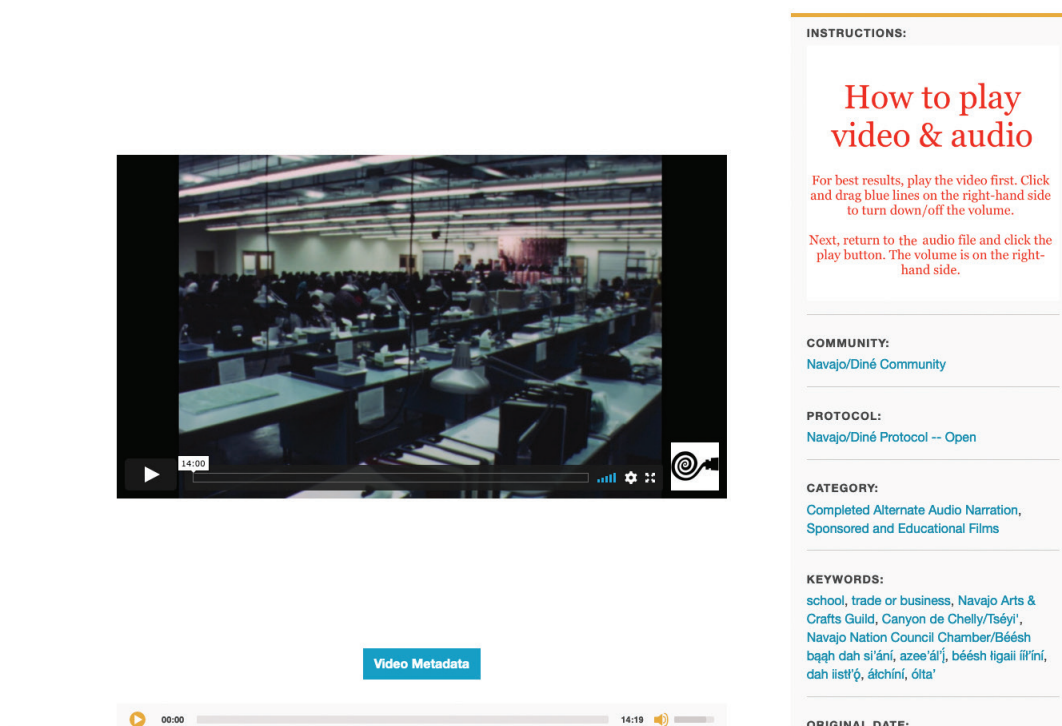


Figure 3: Screenshot of the Mukurtu interface used by the *Tribesourcing Southwest Film Project*. With this interface, the project can display new narrations, metadata and keywords, and TK Labels alongside the video player.

Mukurtu's interface provides "Digital Heritage" pages for digitally displaying new narrations, metadata and keywords, and TK Labels alongside the video player (Figure 3). These features strategically serve our project's objective. In lieu of abandoning the filmmaker's conventional and problematic narratives altogether, newly created counter-narratives and associated metadata subvert the films' original rhetorical conventions and prompt the viewer to question the original films' visual and spoken argumentation. This new contextual information does "more justice to the reality and complexity of the world as people experience[d] it" (Posner 2016). The platform also incorporates into its user interface Google maps, HTML5 video and audio players, and linked data between films, and it integrates with third-party streaming platforms such as Vimeo, YouTube, and Soundcloud. UA's servers originally hosted the *Tribesourcing* site and all of its content. In 2019, precipitated by a need for timely control over practical technical aspects such as upgrading the software, we moved the project to Reclaim Hosting's shared hosting services. More importantly, our team felt the ethical obligation to forestall the university's potential proprietary control of information, as all material on university servers is owned by the Board of Regents. We were particularly

⁵To be clear, the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* is a guidance document devised by Native, First Nations, and Indigenous archivists. The "Protocols" function of the Mukurtu platform allows for local control of access to cultural materials presented on the site.

concerned about the newly created counter-narrations that only exist on the project site and with the tribal partner communities.

Moving to shared hosting was not a seamless process. Unfortunately, we encountered one insurmountable issue: streaming such large video files directly from the content management system. Mukurtu as a platform can stream video and audio files through its interface, and when the project's newly digitized films files were stored on the university servers we did just that, despite the fact that the file sizes range anywhere from 750 MB to 3 GB, depending on length. However, files of these sizes continually surpassed the maximum execution time limit for php processing allowed by Reclaim for uploading.⁶ Grant dollars had paid for higher resolution scans of the films, and we were committed to offering the best quality access copies. Thus, we chose to stream files from Vimeo at the Mukurtu support team's suggestion. Vimeo has multiple safeguards in place that allow the user to hide videos from searches within their website and from the internet. The community still controls the protocols and community standards for the video on the *Tribesourcing* site itself, and we are able to deliver a high-quality viewing copy of the film.

As a film preservation project, we also acknowledge a critical warning from Gerry Lawson, member of the Heiltsuk First Nation and technology lead for the University of British Columbia's Indigitization program: "precious fragments' of indigenous knowledge are increasingly held captive in obsolete audio-visual media formats" (Lawson 2017). Issues of data migration and storage are integral to the *Tribesourcing* project as well. Digitized originals and access copies are distributed geographically on hard drives, in the cloud on Dropbox, and on Vimeo, in keeping with archival best practices LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe).⁷ The original films on reels collected by Fred MacDonald are housed at the Library of Congress and are believed to be in the public domain.

The *Tribesourcing Southwest Film* project offers pedagogical applications as well. They include media literacy lesson plans for college students, which were researched and developed by Rhiannon Sorrell, as well as plans for K–12 students written by Amy Fatzinger, Associate Professor at UA. In terms of language revitalization, the audio components certainly enliven spoken language for the listener. Moreover, Mukurtu's dictionary and hyperlinked keywords also bring in Native languages textually, and the platform even keeps intact diacritical marks used in, for instance, the Diné Bizaad alphabet. The hyperlinked subject and personal name keywords found throughout the site help to quickly collocate related films and to highlight common themes for a visitor to the site. The standalone dictionary contains some of these same keywords and adds yet more terms drawn from a variety of trusted sources that are, in keeping with the *Protocols*, vetted by the language communities' members.

Conclusion

The 2020–2021 Covid-19 global pandemic has disrupted countless cultural and language reclamation projects worldwide. More importantly, it has been particularly devastating to our Native partners' communities. In light of the devastation, community outreach and recordings were put on hold. Prior to the pandemic, however, our Native partners contributed nineteen counter-narrations. Obviously Indigenous Knowledges are as multiple, distinct, and complex as the cultures whose ontologies they convey. With this film repurposing project, we seek to decolonize a collection of twentieth-century audiovisual materials and thereby assert image, voice, and content sovereignty—an intentional act of Indigenous Knowledge reclamation and assertion. We hope it will serve as a model for Native and First Nations archives to restore and repurpose moving image records in their collections.

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⁶ It should be noted that Reclaim Hosting will adjust these kinds of specifications for entities that want to pay for private hosting on their servers. Fortunately, Reclaim integrates rather well with Mukurtu otherwise, including an option to automatically update the software upon new release. While creating this workaround was unexpected, both Mukurtu's and Reclaim Hosting's support teams worked diligently to help us utilize the platform as we originally intended.

⁷ Originals are almost entirely 16 mm films entrusted to the Library of Congress. We refer readers to the Library's best practices for care of motion picture film: "Care, Handling, and Storage of Motion Picture Film" (Library of Congress n.d.). Our digital copies are in an open standard MEG-4 file format. The Library of Congress "Recommended Formats Statement" (n.d.) lists MPEG-4 as an acceptable viewing proxy format for Video - File-Based and Physical Media.

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