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# 1 **Archival practices and Indigenous perspectives:** 2 **Yarning with Dr. Rose Barrowcliffe**

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6 Based on a yarn with Dr. Rose Barrowcliffe, a Butchulla Aboriginal woman and Postdoctoral Research  
7 Fellow at Macquarie University, this article explores her work around integrating Indigenous perspectives  
8 within archival practices. Dr. Barrowcliffe champions better discoverability and access to Aboriginal and  
9 Torres Strait Islander records for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, offering insights for  
10 archives both in Australia and globally. Her recent work examines how these communities use social media  
11 to bypass traditional archival barriers and share their historical narratives. Highlighting the importance  
12 of collaboration between Indigenous communities and archival institutions, this discussion aims to put  
13 First Nations voices front and centre in historical and cultural narratives, pushing for Indigenous data  
14 sovereignty and transforming archival practices.

15 **Keywords:** Archives, resistant knowledges, Indigenous data sovereignty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
16 Islander peoples, Critical Race Theory

## 17 **1. Prologue**

18 As a recent settler in Australia, I have been undergoing a rapid immersion into  
19 the rich and complex histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. My  
20 upbringing in the UK, like that of many others, provided little insight into the British  
21 colonies and their lasting impacts. Now, as an academic librarian and a member of the  
22 Critical Race Theory collective (<https://crtccollective.org/>), I am driven by a passion for  
23 knowledge around libraries and archives, and an understanding that these institutions  
24 are not immune to the impact of racism and coloniality. This led me to meet Dr.  
25 Rose Barrowcliffe, a Butchulla woman whose work in archives is both inspiring and  
26 crucial. I had known of Dr. Barrowcliffe primarily through her work on the Indigenous  
27 Referencing Guidance for Indigenous Knowledges (Indigenous Archives Collective,  
28 2023), a tool that I use in my work as an academic librarian, but it was our mutual  
29 connection to the Critical Race Theory collective that brought us together. I was lucky  
30 enough to catch Rose shortly before she set sail to NYU as the 2023–2024 ENRICH<sup>1</sup>  
31 Global Co-Chair, exploring Indigenous rights and representation in US collecting  
32 institutions.

33 Yarning<sup>2</sup> with Rose was an honour. Her work exemplifies the power of integrating

<sup>1</sup>Equity for Indigenous Research and Innovation Coordinating Hub.

<sup>2</sup>Yarning is a traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practice involving storytelling and

34 Indigenous perspectives into archival practices. I had read extensively about her  
35 achievements and accolades, which can be quite intimidating, especially as someone  
36 new to the details of archival work. However, I was struck by how deeply personal  
37 her journey was, helping me to understand the disconnect between traditional archival  
38 practices and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples.

39 Rose's work is a testament to the importance of "re-search" – an approach that  
40 challenges colonial narratives and centres Indigenous voices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017).  
41 Her advocacy for Indigenous data sovereignty and efforts to reshape archival practices  
42 align with the principles of resistant knowledges, aiming to unmask and counteract  
43 the pervasive influence of coloniality.

44 Dr. Barrowcliffe's insights have broadened my understanding of the transformative  
45 potential of inclusive archival practices. Her dedication to empowering Indigenous  
46 communities to take control of their historical narratives is not just an academic  
47 endeavour but a vital step towards a more just and equitable archival landscape. This  
48 journey with Rose has been enlightening, and I am grateful for the opportunity to  
49 learn from her experiences and share these crucial narratives with others who, like  
50 me, are seeking to understand and address the complexities of our shared histories.

## 51 **2. Introduction**



52 The archival field is undergoing a remarkable transformation, increasingly embrac-  
53 ing Indigenous perspectives that breathe new life into our understanding of history  
54 (Smith, 1999; Thorpe et al., 2021). One of the people helping drive this shift is Dr.  
55 Rose Barrowcliffe, a Butchulla Aboriginal researcher whose passion and pioneering  
56 work at Macquarie University in Sydney are reshaping how archives are perceived  
57 and managed. Dr. Barrowcliffe is not just studying archives; she's redefining them to

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conversation to share knowledge, build relationships, and foster community understanding. It is an essential  
method in Aboriginal research (Bessarab D. & Ng'andu B., 2010).

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58 ensure they serve as a bridge between past and present, particularly for Aboriginal  
59 and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

60 As someone who is growing in the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in  
61 my own work, I can deeply appreciate Rose's transformative approach to archival  
62 practices. Her expertise in this field has been formally recognised through her role  
63 as the inaugural First Nations Archives Advisor to the Queensland State Archives  
64 (QSA). This significant role aligns with the Queensland Government's Path to Treaty,  
65 underscoring how vital archives are in supporting Indigenous self-determination  
66 and the broader Treaty process. An active participant in the Indigenous Archives  
67 Collective (IAC), Rose passionately champions the rights and representation of  
68 Indigenous peoples within the archival community.

69 The core of this article springs from a yarn with Rose about her chapter, 'The  
70 future of Australian Indigenous records and archives is social,' in *The Routledge*  
71 *Handbook of Australian Indigenous Peoples and Futures* (Carlson et al., 2024). In her  
72 writing, she explores the significant hurdles that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
73 communities face with large institutional archives and their creative uses of social  
74 media to bypass these barriers. This practice highlights the dynamic evolution of  
75 archival methods and underscores the urgent need for more inclusive practices that  
76 truly respect and incorporate Indigenous rights and perspectives.

77 Exploring Rose's insights and experiences reveals how her work is contributing  
78 to transformations in archival practices in Australia but also enriching our broader  
79 understanding of Indigenous self-determination and representation in the digital era.  
80 Her contributions highlight a shift towards acknowledging and integrating Indigenous  
81 voices in a field that is increasingly influenced by digital advancements.

### 82 **3. The journey to archival research**

83 Given the significant impact and depth of her work, I had assumed before meeting  
84 Rose that she had carefully mapped out her path to becoming an archivist. However, I  
85 was pleasantly surprised to learn that her journey was rooted in personal experiences,  
86 "I ended up researching in archives because of my own experience of trying to  
87 access an archive about my traditional Country." This archive, although more of a  
88 collection, was launched without involving her community. "We weren't even aware  
89 of the archive until it was launched at a symposium," she shared, reflecting a mix  
90 of surprise and determination. Rose happened to be at the event as her mother's  
91 "glorified chauffeur", and this unexpected discovery sparked a series of actions. The  
92 Elders, upon hearing about the archive, requested to see it. Initially, the response  
93 was dismissive: "Their response was, 'Well, you know, there's not really any cultural  
94 information in it . . . you probably won't find it that relevant.'" But, with persistence,  
95 the university organised a bus trip for the Butchulla community to visit the campus  
96 and review the records.

97 What they found was significant: names of their ancestors, mentions of important

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98 events and places. The librarians, unfamiliar with the family's genealogies and stories,  
99 didn't recognise the significance of the information in the records they held. Rose's  
100 mother took on the task of looking into the archive more deeply and so Rose, by virtue  
101 of being her mother's driver, found herself regularly visiting the campus and going  
102 through the records. This experience sparked Rose's interest in the nature of archives  
103 and the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, igniting her  
104 passion for the field.

105 Guided by Professor Sandy O'Sullivan, a Wiradjuri academic at Macquarie Uni-  
106 versity whose expertise in reversing the gaze in collecting institutions has enlightened  
107 many, Rose found a new opportunity. "The academic staff suggested I could pursue  
108 this as a postgrad, which opened up a whole new pathway for me," she recounts the ex-  
109 citement about the unexpected turn in her career. Influenced by Professor O'Sullivan's  
110 research on the representation of Indigenous peoples in museums across the US and  
111 Australia (O'Sullivan, 2016) Rose encountered the concept of symbolic annihilation,  
112 a term that captures how Indigenous peoples are often erased or misrepresented in  
113 cultural narratives, including museums and archives (Tuchman, 2000). This, alongside  
114 her introduction to critical race theory (CRT), equipped her with language to articulate  
115 and challenge the systemic biases embedded within archival practices. Reflecting on  
116 her early experiences, Rose's words resounded with me deeply having had similar  
117 experiences in my own work, "I didn't have the language to describe what I was experi-  
118 encing . . . discovering critical race theory helped me understand what was happening  
119 here," allowing her to recognise and address the deep-seated misrepresentations in  
120 the field. The mentorship by Professor O'Sullivan didn't just highlight the challenges  
121 within Indigenous archives but also provided Rose with the critical tools to address  
122 these challenges deepening her impact in the field.

123 As Rose aimed to understand and challenge these archival practices, she learned  
124 from the works of theorists like Michelle Caswell, co-founder of the South Asian  
125 American Digital Archive (<https://michellecaswell.org/>). Caswell's research, which  
126 focuses on how archives can empower marginalised communities, resonated with  
127 Rose's exploration into how archival records could better represent Indigenous com-  
128 munities – not just in quantity but in the quality and context of their representation.  
129 Rose shared a significant moment from her research: "In one of the records, a sin-  
130 gle sentence about my great, great grandmother revealed why she left the island –  
131 a pivotal moment that reshaped our family history." This seemingly minor detail  
132 overlooked by archival staff held profound implications for her family. This brief  
133 sentence unlocked a critical piece of her family's history, altering their collective  
134 memory and deepening their connection to their heritage. The story highlighted to  
135 me the power of seemingly small archival entries to reveal significant, life-changing  
136 narratives the impact these discoveries can have on personal and community identity,  
137 and the shortcomings in how these records are managed and interpreted by those  
138 outside Indigenous communities. Motivated by this experience, Dr. Barrowcliffe has  
139 become a staunch advocate for the 'Right to Know.' This principle asserts the rights  
140 of Indigenous peoples to access and fully understand archives that pertain to their own  
141 history and culture, championing transparency and inclusivity in archival practices.

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#### 142 **4. Challenges in Indigenous archives**

143 The ‘Right to Know’, a primary challenge for Indigenous people in colonial  
144 archives, is a concept that underscores the right of Indigenous peoples to access  
145 records about them. This principle, initially articulated by Vine Deloria, a prominent  
146 Native American author and activist from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, underscores  
147 a critical aspect of Indigenous self-determination and identity. Throughout his career,  
148 Deloria emphasised the importance of accessing archives for Indigenous communities,  
149 advocating for their right to know their past, their traditional alternatives, the specific  
150 experiences of their communities, and the world that surrounds them. He argued for  
151 direct funding from the federal government to tribes for library, information, and  
152 archival services, and for the transfer of records dealing with tribal histories to modern  
153 and adequate facilities on reservations (Deloria, 1978).

154 “[The] first lens I was looking through was the Right to Know . . . All Indigenous  
155 people have the right to know about records that relate to them,” Rose explained.  
156 This seemed like a straightforward enough notion to me, but the very need to state  
157 this principle highlights the significant challenges Indigenous communities encounter  
158 when accessing their own historical records. These challenges range from reliance on  
159 imprecise finding aids written from a non-Indigenous perspective, to complex legal  
160 and procedural hurdles like privacy laws and freedom of information processes, and  
161 of course financial costs associated with gaining access. These complications are  
162 exacerbated by a lack of supportive legislation for accessing personal information in  
163 non-government records, severely hindering the retrieval of family or community history  
164 (Barrowcliffe, 2024). Further compounding matters, are the inadequate metadata  
165 descriptions in archival records. Dr. Barrowcliffe highlights this issue, explaining,  
166 “The descriptions of these records are so insufficient to be able to identify what’s  
167 actually in the records . . . to be able to enact the ‘Right to Know’ is almost impossible  
168 in its current state.” In this context, Derrick Bell’s theory of Interest Convergence<sup>3</sup>  
169 can be particularly insightful which suggests that meaningful advances in racial equity  
170 often coincide with the interests of the dominant group (Bell, 1980). This CRT  
171 principle is directly relevant to Dr. Barrowcliffe’s findings, revealing why the rights  
172 of Indigenous peoples to access archives might not be fully acknowledged unless  
173 they also serve the broader objectives of archival institutions or align with prevailing  
174 societal interests.

175 In response to these layered challenges, Dr. Barrowcliffe calls for a transformative  
176 approach to knowledge management that centres Indigenous knowledge authority,

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<sup>3</sup>Interest Convergence, formulated by Derrick Bell, a prominent American lawyer and civil rights activist, suggests that racial justice advances only align with the needs of dominant groups, typically whites in the context of the United States. This principle highlights the conditional nature of progress on racial equity, arguing that substantive gains for racial justice occur only when they also benefit the majority group. Bell’s work critically assesses how systemic inequalities are entrenched and perpetuated through these alignments of interests (Bridges, 2019).

177 aligning her work with Indigenous data sovereignty (IDS). This approach not only  
178 acknowledges the right of Indigenous peoples to control their own data but also  
179 champions the creation of metadata that reflects Indigenous perspectives (Kukutai  
180 & Taylor, 2016), thereby enhancing the discoverability and accessibility of records.  
181 Through this lens, the work of archival professionals and researchers can begin to  
182 address the structural inequities embedded within their practices, moving towards a  
183 more inclusive and equitable archival future.

## 184 **5. UNDRIP and the Tandanya Adelaide Declaration**

185 Being new to IDS and archival studies, I found the specific frameworks, principles,  
186 and initiatives mentioned in Rose’s chapter a bit overwhelming, though I knew they  
187 were crucial to grasp. Fortunately, Rose took the time to explain in simple terms,  
188 that the Tandanya Adelaide Declaration is essentially “placing UNDRIP within an  
189 archiving setting.”<sup>4</sup> The Declaration turns broad UNDRIP principles into actionable  
190 guidelines for archives, ensuring Indigenous communities have control of records that  
191 concern them.

192 As a recently appointed executive member of the *Maiam nayri Wingara* collective,  
193 a group dedicated to championing Indigenous control over their data, Dr. Barrowcliffe  
194 is a strong advocate for Indigenous people’s rights to their knowledge. Her under-  
195 standing of and advocacy for the different approaches to Indigenous perspectives  
196 within archival practices enabled her to explain the tools and frameworks to me.  
197 She connected the dots between overlapping models and frameworks, highlighting  
198 their joint impact on transforming archival practices. “These tools are critical because  
199 they empower our communities,” she explains. This collaborative approach aims to  
200 enable Indigenous peoples to govern every aspect of their records – creation, stor-  
201 age, description, and access – aligning with UNDRIP principles to rectify historical  
202 injustices and assert Indigenous autonomy over their cultural narratives and heritage.

## 203 **6. Ownership and access in archival materials**

204 Ownership and access in Indigenous archives are not just technical issues; they’re  
205 entwined with Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights. These rights

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<sup>4</sup>The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, robustly advocates for Indigenous rights, including self-determination, the preservation and revitalisation of cultural traditions, and the management of cultural heritage and intellectual property (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2007). The Tandanya Declaration translates these principles into guidelines focused on Indigenous data sovereignty, ensuring that Indigenous communities can maintain and control their narratives and heritage (Expert Group on Indigenous Matters, 2011).

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206 acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge is not just collective – it’s also enduring,  
207 unlike the finite nature of copyright in Western law. Dr. Barrowcliffe stresses the  
208 importance of building archival practices from the ground up with those who are  
209 most connected to this knowledge. She points out, “The issues of access start well  
210 before the archive . . . we want to have been, as much as possible, acquiring records or  
211 managing records with the people in the community that have the closest relationship  
212 to that knowledge, not some third party who has come in, captured and then gone on  
213 to be the copyright owner.” This proactive approach challenges traditional notions  
214 of ownership and access, shedding light on how these practices often reinforce  
215 ‘Whiteness as Property,’<sup>5</sup> a concept where intellectual authority is predominantly seen  
216 as white, perpetuating systemic inequalities in access and ownership (Harris, 1993).  
217 This connection underscores yet another link between CRT and Rose’s approach to  
218 her work, emphasising the systemic challenges she seeks to address.

219 The emotional and cultural significance of archival materials often leads Indige-  
220 nous communities to discover innovative ways to preserve and share their heritage,  
221 especially when faced with restrictive traditional access methods. Rose’s example  
222 from her own experience struck a chord with me: for many Aboriginal and Torres  
223 Strait Islander people, a photograph in an archive signifies a deep familial connection.  
224 She explains, “Like, ‘That’s a photo of my great-grandmother. And so that’s my  
225 family’s record. I don’t care if the Colonial Secretary took that photo back in the  
226 1850s.’” This perspective challenges the often detached, legalistic barriers that can  
227 seem so disconnected from the human element of archival materials. It was a pivotal  
228 moment for me, realising how legal frameworks frequently fail to recognise the deep  
229 connections Indigenous communities have with their archival materials – revealing a  
230 stark contrast between bureaucratic procedures and the rich tapestry of personal and  
231 communal history.

232 For First Nations peoples, the decision to share such photographs on social media  
233 often transcends institutional rules, emphasising family and community connections  
234 over formal restrictions. This act of sharing not only serves to maintain vital links to  
235 their past but also demonstrates the crucial role social media plays in circumvent-  
236 ing traditional barriers, enabling Indigenous peoples to actively control their own  
237 historical narratives.

## 238 **7. The role of social media in enriching indigenous records**

239 Social media has transformed how Indigenous communities enrich and share their  
240 records. Dr. Barrowcliffe points out, “When things become impractical, people always

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<sup>5</sup>“Whiteness as Property,” a concept coined by Cheryl Harris in her seminal 1993 paper, describes how racial identity has been historically treated as a tangible asset, conferring privileges and rights disproportionately to white individuals. This framework is crucial in understanding how systemic inequities are perpetuated through seemingly neutral laws and practices.

241 find other ways to achieve things . . . if one person goes and pays for a digital copy, or  
242 for a scan of a record, and their aunty or their cousin is looking for that exact same  
243 record, of course, [they] are going to share it.”

244 Reading Dr. Barrowcliffe’s chapter before our yarn, I wondered about the effec-  
245 tiveness or sustainability of Indigenous communities using social media to share  
246 their records, considering that these platforms are ultimately controlled by others.  
247 This got me thinking about the implications of using platforms created by colonisers,  
248 which brought to mind Lorde’s idea that “Master’s Tools Will Never Take Down the  
249 Master’s House” (Lorde, 1984). This is a tricky situation: Indigenous communities  
250 are leveraging social media to keep their records accessible and share them widely,  
251 but the underlying fact is that these platforms are owned by entities that could misuse  
252 the data. I asked Rose what she thought about this, “I think when people are using  
253 social media in that way, they’re certainly not thinking about it, in terms of, Facebook  
254 owns all of these photos now . . . I find that most people don’t understand how much  
255 we’re giving up by sharing so much online.” She adds, “I don’t necessarily agree with  
256 this notion of decolonising an archive. I just don’t think it’s possible to decolonise  
257 an archival institution.” She mentions the work of Verne Harris in post-apartheid  
258 South Africa as an example. Harris felt that South Africa’s transition to democracy in  
259 1994 presented a powerful opportunity to reconfigure its archival practices (Harris  
260 & Hatang, 2000). However, despite the optimistic outlook, the reality was that, as  
261 Dr Barrowcliffe notes, “the systems [were] still inherently colonial, and it didn’t  
262 change anything”. Years later, few of the aims of making archives more accessible  
263 and transparent in South Africa had been achieved, an example which underscores  
264 the complexities and limitations of using existing systems and tools to achieve true  
265 decolonisation in archival practices.

266 Rose points out that while social media platforms are useful for sharing, they  
267 cannot replace the true value of traditional knowledge sharing, like storytelling on  
268 Country. She references a story from Debra Dank’s book, *We Come With This Place*  
269 (2022), to make her point: “[Debra] talks about that, out on her Country, there’s a  
270 circle of cycads . . . you would just assume that they’re growing wild there, and that  
271 this is mother nature doing her thing. But her great grandmother took her and her kids  
272 out there and told the story that every one of those cycads had been planted by her  
273 mother and her mother’s mother and her mother’s mother. So, this cycad ring is an  
274 archive in itself . . . It’s recorded time and place. And now they have planted their own  
275 cycads.” This was beautiful to me, much more enchanting than a traditional archive.  
276 A living piece of ancestral nature on Country, something descendants can experience  
277 and cherish every day. Rose emphasises that these ‘Living Archives on Country’ are  
278 crucial connections to the past. While social media is handy, “It’s just a medium for  
279 sharing. It’s not the knowledge itself.” This emphasises how First Nations peoples  
280 value traditional knowledge transmission methods, showing the limits of digital tools  
281 in preserving Indigenous cultural practices.

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## 282 8. Counter-narratives and Indigenous story work

283 Dr. Barrowcliffe's work shows how powerful counter-narratives can be in challeng-  
284 ing colonial archives. She pushes for Indigenous communities to be active partners in  
285 managing records, aiming for a future where metadata truly reflects their worldviews.  
286 This empowers Indigenous voices in archival access decisions and supports the Tan-  
287 danya Declaration. Rose points out, "If you have an organisation that has adopted  
288 Tandanya, and they're not acting in accordance with the values of that document, then  
289 you can point that out."

290 She also highlights the importance of Indigenous-led management of archival  
291 data: "I'd like to see more Indigenous communities managing and having their own  
292 repositories . . . there's absolutely no reason if communities are well resourced that  
293 they need to have their knowledge stored anywhere else." Rose's vision of Indigenous  
294 communities as the true custodians of their cultural heritage does not appear farfetched  
295 or unreasonable to me, while it does align perfectly with the principles or "re-search"  
296 – challenging the way archives have traditionally been run. It seems like such a logical  
297 and beneficial approach for everyone that it is baffling to me that it is still such a  
298 challenge to achieve. This realisation underscores how much I still have to learn about  
299 the complexities and obstacles faced by Indigenous communities in asserting their  
300 rights over their cultural and intellectual property.

301 Rose's dedication to changing archival practices is clear: "Everything I do, ulti-  
302 mately, is trying to be a counter-narrative . . . to this notion that colonial archives are  
303 the authority on this Indigenous place or about these Indigenous people. The next  
304 stage of that counter-narrative production is having Indigenous communities really  
305 be seen as partners in the management of those records that relate to them." This  
306 effort to transform archives offers a plan for empowering Indigenous stories globally.  
307 Richard Delgado<sup>6</sup> talks about how counter stories can "open new windows into reality,  
308 showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live" (Delgado,  
309 1989, p 2414). Rose's work is a great example of this, using counter-narratives to  
310 challenge old archival norms and imagine a more inclusive future.

## 311 9. Conclusion

312 Dr. Rose Barrowcliffe's research and advocacy have significantly illuminated  
313 the path towards a more inclusive and equitable archival landscape. By embedding  
314 Indigenous perspectives into archival practices, her work not only reshapes how  
315 archives operate in Australia but also offers vital insights for global practices. It

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<sup>6</sup>Richard Delgado, an American civil rights lawyer and scholar, introduced the concept of counterstories in his 1989 work. He argued that counterstories can reveal new realities and possibilities, enriching our understanding and pushing for social change. These narratives challenge the dominant perspectives and show that a richer, more inclusive world is possible (Delgado, 1989).

underscores the importance of recognising and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, not as supplementary information but as central to the narrative structure of our shared history and culture.

Her efforts to promote Indigenous self-determination and data sovereignty challenge the traditional paradigms of archival practices and advocate for a future where Indigenous communities are not merely subjects of archives but active curators of their historical narratives. This shift towards inclusive archival practices is crucial for rectifying past injustices and ensuring that Indigenous voices are respected and prioritised within historical narratives.

As the archival field continues to evolve, the collaboration between Indigenous communities and archival institutions will be pivotal. Dr. Barrowcliffe's work serves as a blueprint for how these partnerships can be formed and maintained, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Indigenous history is preserved accurately and respectfully. Through such collaborative efforts, we can ensure that First Nations voices, which have long been sidelined, are brought to the forefront, enriching our understanding of history and culture in profound and enduring ways.

It was an absolute pleasure to speak with Rose and learn from her experiences. Her insights have broadened my perspective on the transformative power of inclusive archival practices and the importance of empowering Indigenous communities in preserving their heritage.

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