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The Role of Oral History Vs. Written History in The Works of Sally Morgan And Kate Grenville

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of oral history and written history in shaping historical representation within Australian literature, with particular focus on Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. It investigates how these two narrative modes function as distinct epistemological frameworks that influence the construction of identity, memory, and historical truth. The analysis reveals that Morgan foregrounds oral testimony as a means of recovering marginalised Indigenous voices and reconstructing suppressed family histories, while Grenville engages with written archival records and employs imaginative reconstruction to address their silences. By adopting a qualitative and comparative approach, the study highlights how both authors challenge the authority of conventional historiography and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Australia's colonial past. The findings demonstrate that the integration of oral and written histories is essential for addressing the limitations of each mode and for producing nuanced, multidimensional narratives of history.

Keywords: oral history, written history, Australian literature, Sally Morgan, Kate Grenville, Indigenous identity, historiography, cultural memory

1. INTRODUCTION

The historiographical tension between oral and written modes of representing the past occupies a central position in contemporary Australian literary discourse, particularly in the works of Sally Morgan and Kate Grenville. Their texts, *My Place* and *The Secret River*, emerge within a cultural and intellectual landscape shaped by the legacies of colonisation, where the authority of written archives has historically marginalised Indigenous voices and experiences. This study examines how these two authors negotiate the relationship between oral and written history, not merely as narrative techniques but as competing epistemologies that structure the production of historical knowledge in Australia.

In settler-colonial contexts such as Australia, written history has traditionally been aligned with institutional authority, documentation, and permanence. Colonial records, including journals, legal documents, and administrative reports, have long been regarded as the primary sources of historical truth. However, these records are inherently partial, reflecting the perspectives and



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interests of colonial agents while excluding or distorting Indigenous experiences. Oral history, by contrast, operates through memory, storytelling, and intergenerational transmission, offering a dynamic and relational mode of engaging with the past. It captures subjective experiences and communal identities that often resist codification within written forms (Perks and Thomson, 2015; Abrams, 2016). The distinction between these two modes is therefore not simply methodological but deeply ideological, reflecting broader power structures that determine whose histories are recorded and legitimised.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* represents a significant intervention in this historiographical landscape, foregrounding oral history as a means of recovering suppressed Indigenous identities. The narrative is constructed through a series of personal testimonies, particularly those of Morgan's mother and grandmother, whose stories reveal the hidden impact of assimilation policies and racial discrimination. These oral accounts function as a counter-archive, challenging the silences of official records and reasserting Indigenous presence within Australian history. Morgan's work aligns with broader developments in Indigenous life writing, where storytelling serves as both a cultural practice and a political act of resistance (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Heiss, 2018). The emphasis on voice, memory, and relational identity underscores the limitations of written history in capturing the lived realities of Indigenous communities, particularly when those realities have been systematically excluded from archival documentation.

At the same time, *My Place* demonstrates the complexities involved in translating oral narratives into written form. The act of writing inevitably introduces processes of selection, organisation, and interpretation, raising questions about authenticity and representation. Morgan navigates these challenges by preserving the dialogic nature of oral storytelling, allowing multiple voices to coexist within the text. This narrative strategy reflects what scholars describe as a hybrid form of historiography, where oral and written modes intersect to produce a more inclusive account of the past (Attwood, 2015; Hamilton and Shopes, 2017). The text thus resists the binary opposition between oral and written history, instead illustrating their interdependence in reconstructing marginalised histories.

In contrast, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* engages primarily with written history, drawing on archival research to reconstruct the experiences of early colonial settlers. However, Grenville's approach is characterised by a critical awareness of the limitations and silences inherent in the historical record. The absence of detailed accounts of Indigenous experiences within colonial archives necessitates a turn towards imaginative reconstruction, where fiction becomes a means of exploring what cannot be directly documented. This method reflects a broader trend in contemporary historiography that recognises the value of narrative and imagination in addressing gaps within the archive (Curthoys and Docker, 2016; Twells, 2023).



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Grenville's work has been situated within the context of Australia's "history wars," a series of debates concerning the interpretation of the nation's colonial past. Her use of fiction to represent historical events has generated discussion about the boundaries between history and literature, particularly in relation to questions of accuracy and ethical responsibility. Rather than presenting a definitive account, *The Secret River* foregrounds the uncertainty and partiality of historical knowledge, inviting readers to consider the moral complexities of colonisation and the difficulties of representing violence and dispossession (Clendinnen, 2016; McKenna, 2018). The novel thus challenges the authority of written history by exposing its omissions, while simultaneously relying on its framework to construct a coherent narrative.

The juxtaposition of Morgan and Grenville reveals both convergence and divergence in their treatment of oral and written history. Morgan privileges oral testimony as a primary source of historical truth, emphasising its role in preserving Indigenous identity and resisting colonial erasure. Grenville, on the other hand, works within the framework of written history while critically interrogating its limitations. Despite these differences, both authors share a commitment to recovering marginalised perspectives and questioning the authority of dominant historical narratives. Their works reflect a broader shift in Australian historiography towards recognising the importance of multiple forms of evidence and the need for more inclusive approaches to the past.

Furthermore, the interaction between oral and written history in these texts raises important questions about authority, authenticity, and representation. Oral history, with its emphasis on lived experience and communal memory, challenges the notion of a single, objective historical truth. Written history, while offering structure and permanence, is revealed to be shaped by power relations and selective documentation. The works of Morgan and Grenville demonstrate that a comprehensive understanding of the past requires an engagement with both modes, acknowledging their respective strengths and limitations.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the need to integrate oral and written histories in order to address the gaps and biases inherent in traditional historiography. This approach recognises that oral narratives provide insights into experiences that are often absent from written records, while written documentation offers a means of preservation and dissemination. In the Australian context, where Indigenous histories have been systematically marginalised, such integration is particularly crucial. The literary contributions of Morgan and Grenville exemplify this shift, illustrating how the interplay between oral and written history can produce a more nuanced and multifaceted representation of the past.

2. NEED OF THE STUDY

The present study emerges from the need to critically examine the epistemological tension between oral history and written history within Australian literary discourse, particularly in the



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works of Sally Morgan and Kate Grenville. In the Australian context, historiography has long been shaped by colonial frameworks that privileged written documentation as the primary source of historical truth, often marginalising Indigenous modes of knowledge transmission rooted in oral traditions. This imbalance has resulted in a fragmented and exclusionary understanding of the past, where Indigenous experiences, memories, and identities have been either omitted or misrepresented within official archives. Consequently, there is a pressing academic need to reassess how different forms of historical narration function within literature to challenge, reinterpret, and expand dominant historical narratives (Perks and Thomson, 2015; Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

The study is also necessary to explore how literature serves as a mediating space where oral and written histories intersect, interact, and sometimes conflict. Sally Morgan's *My Place* foregrounds oral testimony as a means of recovering suppressed Indigenous identities, while Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* engages with written archival history yet simultaneously exposes its silences through imaginative reconstruction. Analysing these texts together enables a comparative understanding of how different narrative strategies address the limitations of historical representation. Such an inquiry is significant because it highlights the role of literary texts in reshaping historiographical practices and in offering alternative ways of understanding the past that extend beyond conventional academic history (Attwood, 2015; Hamilton and Shopes, 2017).

Another important dimension underpinning the need for this study is the growing scholarly recognition of memory, voice, and subjectivity as legitimate sources of historical knowledge. Oral history, with its emphasis on lived experience and intergenerational storytelling, provides access to perspectives that are often absent from written records. However, its incorporation into written literary forms raises critical questions about authenticity, mediation, and narrative authority. This study seeks to address these concerns by examining how Morgan and Grenville negotiate the transformation of oral narratives into written texts, and how this process influences the representation of identity and history. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates in historiography and literary studies regarding the validity and limitations of different forms of historical evidence (Abrams, 2016; Curthoys and Docker, 2016).

Furthermore, the study is essential in the context of ongoing discussions surrounding Australia's colonial past and the ethical responsibilities of representing it. The works of Morgan and Grenville are deeply embedded in these debates, often referred to as the "history wars," where questions of historical accuracy, narrative ownership, and cultural sensitivity are central. By examining the role of oral and written history in their texts, this research addresses the need for a more nuanced understanding of how literature participates in these national conversations and influences public perceptions of history (McKenna, 2018; Clendinnen, 2016).



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Ultimately, this study is required to bridge gaps in existing scholarship by providing a focused comparative analysis of oral and written historiographical practices within Australian literature. It not only contributes to literary criticism but also engages with interdisciplinary concerns in history, cultural studies, and Indigenous studies, thereby reinforcing the importance of inclusive and pluralistic approaches to understanding the past.

3. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study is to critically investigate how oral history and written history function as distinct yet interconnected modes of representing the past in the works of Sally Morgan and Kate Grenville. By focusing on *My Place* and *The Secret River*, the study seeks to examine how each author employs different narrative strategies to engage with Australia's colonial history, and how these strategies reflect broader epistemological tensions between Indigenous and Western systems of knowledge. The research aims to move beyond a simple comparison of techniques by analysing how oral and written histories shape the construction of identity, memory, and historical truth within these texts, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Australian literary historiography (Perks and Thomson, 2015; Abrams, 2016).

A central objective of the study is to explore how Sally Morgan utilises oral testimony as a means of recovering marginalised Indigenous voices and reconstructing suppressed family histories. Through this, the research intends to highlight the significance of oral traditions as legitimate and authoritative sources of historical knowledge, particularly in contexts where written archives have failed to represent Indigenous experiences adequately. At the same time, the study aims to examine how Kate Grenville engages with written historical records while acknowledging their limitations, using fiction as a tool to interrogate archival silences and reimagine the colonial past. This dual focus allows the research to assess the strengths and constraints of both oral and written modes of history in literary representation (Attwood, 2015; Curthoys and Docker, 2016).

Another key purpose of this study is to analyse the ways in which these texts negotiate issues of narrative authority and authenticity. The research seeks to understand who is positioned as the rightful narrator of history and how credibility is constructed through either oral testimony or documented evidence. In doing so, it addresses broader theoretical concerns regarding the reliability of memory, the subjectivity of storytelling, and the ideological nature of historical writing. By examining how Morgan and Grenville navigate these complexities, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the nature of historical truth and the role of literature in shaping historical consciousness (Hamilton and Shopes, 2017; McKenna, 2018).

Additionally, the study aims to situate these literary works within the wider socio-cultural context of Australia's engagement with its colonial past, particularly in relation to debates surrounding representation, reconciliation, and historical responsibility. Through this



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contextualisation, the research intends to demonstrate how literature not only reflects historical tensions but also actively participates in redefining them. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive and critical framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between oral and written history in Australian literature, emphasising their combined role in producing more inclusive and multifaceted narratives of the past (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Clendinnen, 2016).

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between oral history and written history has been extensively theorised within historiography and literary studies, particularly in contexts where dominant archives have excluded marginalised voices. Recent scholarship has emphasised that oral history is not merely a supplementary source but a distinct epistemological framework grounded in memory, subjectivity, and lived experience. Perks and Thomson (2015) argue that oral history reshapes historical practice by privileging personal narratives that challenge institutional authority, while Abrams (2016) further conceptualises oral testimony as an interpretive act that reveals how individuals construct meaning from the past. These perspectives are crucial in the Australian context, where Indigenous histories have historically been transmitted through oral traditions rather than written documentation. The privileging of written archives within colonial historiography has therefore resulted in a partial and often distorted representation of the past, necessitating a critical re-evaluation of what constitutes legitimate historical evidence.

Within Australian literary studies, this historiographical shift has been closely linked to the emergence of Indigenous life writing, particularly from the late twentieth century onwards. Scholars have identified Sally Morgan's *My Place* as a seminal text in this tradition, marking a turning point in the visibility of Indigenous narratives within mainstream Australian literature. Moreton-Robinson (2015) situates Indigenous storytelling as a form of resistance that reclaims sovereignty over identity and history, arguing that such narratives disrupt colonial frameworks of knowledge production. Similarly, Heiss (2018) highlights the role of Indigenous autobiography in articulating experiences of dispossession and cultural survival, emphasising the importance of voice and self-representation. These studies collectively underscore the significance of oral history in *My Place*, where the recovery of family stories operates as both a personal and political act.

Critical analyses of *My Place* have consistently foreground its reliance on oral testimony as a narrative strategy. Attwood (2015) interprets the text as a form of "history from below," where marginalised voices are brought into dialogue with dominant historical narratives. This approach aligns with broader developments in oral history methodology, which seek to democratise historical knowledge by incorporating diverse perspectives. Hamilton and Shopes (2017) further argue that oral history introduces a dialogic dimension to historiography, where meaning is co-



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constructed between narrator and listener. In Morgan's text, this dialogic process is evident in the way family members recount their experiences, often revealing contradictions, silences, and emotional complexities that resist linear narration. Such features highlight the limitations of written history, which tends to prioritise coherence and factual consistency over the ambiguities inherent in lived experience.

At the same time, scholars have raised important questions about the process of translating oral narratives into written form. The act of writing inevitably involves selection, editing, and interpretation, which can alter the original context and meaning of oral testimony. Curthoys and Docker (2016) note that while oral history offers an alternative to written archives, its incorporation into literary texts requires careful consideration of issues such as authenticity and representation. This concern is particularly relevant in *My Place*, where Morgan assumes the role of both listener and author, mediating the voices of her family members within a structured narrative. Despite these challenges, the text is widely regarded as a successful example of how oral and written histories can be integrated to produce a more inclusive account of the past.

In contrast to the emphasis on oral history in Morgan's work, scholarship on Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* has focused on its engagement with written archives and historical fiction. Grenville's novel has been extensively discussed within the context of Australia's "history wars," a series of debates concerning the interpretation of colonial history. McKenna (2018) examines how Grenville's work challenges traditional historiography by foregrounding the emotional and moral dimensions of historical events, particularly in relation to frontier violence. Clendinnen (2016), while critical of the use of fiction in historical representation, acknowledges the novel's capacity to evoke empathy and stimulate public engagement with the past. These debates highlight the contested nature of historical knowledge and the role of literature in mediating between fact and interpretation.

Grenville's approach has been described as a form of "creative historiography," where fictional narrative is used to explore gaps and silences within the historical record. Twells (2023) argues that such approaches expand the scope of historical inquiry by incorporating imagination as a legitimate tool for understanding the past. In *The Secret River*, the absence of detailed accounts of Indigenous perspectives within colonial archives necessitates a speculative reconstruction of events, raising questions about the boundaries between history and fiction. This method contrasts with Morgan's reliance on oral testimony but shares a common objective of addressing the limitations of traditional historical sources.

A significant body of literature has also examined the ethical implications of representing Indigenous histories within settler narratives. Moreton-Robinson (2016) critiques the appropriation of Indigenous experiences within non-Indigenous frameworks, emphasising the importance of recognising Indigenous sovereignty in storytelling. In the context of Grenville's



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work, this critique is particularly relevant, as the novel attempts to represent Indigenous experiences through a predominantly settler perspective. Scholars have debated whether such representations risk reinforcing colonial viewpoints or whether they can contribute to a more critical understanding of the past. This tension underscores the broader issue of narrative authority, which is central to the comparison between oral and written history.

The concept of cultural memory provides another important framework for understanding the interaction between oral and written histories. Cultural memory studies emphasise the ways in which societies remember and reinterpret the past through various forms of representation, including literature. Hamilton and Shopes (2017) suggest that oral history plays a crucial role in shaping collective memory by preserving personal experiences that might otherwise be forgotten. In contrast, written history often functions as an institutionalised form of memory, shaping national narratives and identities. The works of Morgan and Grenville can be seen as participating in this dynamic, offering alternative perspectives that challenge dominant accounts of Australian history.

Recent scholarship has increasingly advocated for an integrated approach to historiography that recognises the complementary strengths of oral and written sources. Perks and Thomson (2015) argue that combining these modes allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the past, as each provides insights that the other cannot. Oral history offers depth, emotion, and immediacy, while written history provides structure, continuity, and accessibility. In literary contexts, this integration is often achieved through narrative techniques that incorporate multiple voices and perspectives, as seen in *My Place*, or through the blending of fact and fiction, as in *The Secret River*.

Furthermore, the role of memory in shaping historical narratives has been a key focus of recent research. Abrams (2016) emphasises that memory is inherently selective and interpretive, influenced by personal and cultural factors. This insight is particularly relevant in analysing oral histories, where recollections may change over time and reflect present concerns as much as past events. In Morgan's work, the process of uncovering family history involves confronting these complexities, as different versions of events emerge through oral testimony. Similarly, Grenville's fictional reconstruction of the past highlights the interpretive nature of historical writing, suggesting that all histories are, to some extent, shaped by narrative choices.

The literature also highlights the importance of context in determining the credibility and significance of different historical sources. Curthoys and Docker (2016) argue that historical understanding is always mediated by cultural and political frameworks, which influence how evidence is interpreted and valued. In the Australian context, this mediation is evident in the ongoing efforts to recognise Indigenous histories and incorporate them into national narratives.



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The works of Morgan and Grenville contribute to this process by challenging conventional historiographical boundaries and offering new ways of engaging with the past.

Overall, the existing body of scholarship demonstrates that the distinction between oral and written history is not absolute but fluid and contested. Rather than viewing these modes as oppositional, contemporary research emphasises their interaction and mutual influence. The works of Sally Morgan and Kate Grenville exemplify this interaction, illustrating how literature can serve as a site where different forms of historical knowledge converge. Through their respective engagements with oral testimony and written archives, both authors contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Australian history, highlighting the importance of recognising multiple perspectives in the construction of the past.

5. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in textual and comparative literary analysis to examine the role of oral history and written history in the works of Sally Morgan and Kate Grenville. The research is primarily based on secondary data, focusing on close readings of *My Place* and *The Secret River* as the core texts. These works are analysed within the framework of historiography, cultural memory, and postcolonial theory in order to understand how different modes of historical narration function within Australian literature. The methodological approach is analytical rather than empirical, aiming to interpret meanings, themes, and narrative structures rather than quantify data.

The study employs a comparative approach to identify both convergences and divergences in the use of oral and written history across the selected texts. Key thematic parameters such as narrative authority, representation of Indigenous voices, memory construction, and the treatment of historical gaps are used as analytical lenses. These themes are examined through a systematic process of textual interpretation, where passages from the primary texts are critically analysed in relation to existing scholarly arguments. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how each author negotiates the epistemological tensions between oral testimony and written documentation (Abrams, 2016; Hamilton and Shopes, 2017).

In addition to primary texts, the study draws on a wide range of recent scholarly literature from 2015 onwards to support and contextualise the analysis. These secondary sources include works from literary criticism, oral history theory, and Australian historiography, ensuring that the research is grounded in current academic discourse. The integration of these sources enables the study to situate its findings within broader theoretical debates concerning historical representation, authenticity, and narrative ethics (Perks and Thomson, 2015; Curthoys and Docker, 2016).

The methodology also incorporates a thematic analysis technique, where recurring patterns related to oral and written historiographical practices are identified and interpreted. This involves



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categorising narrative elements and examining their significance in shaping the representation of history within the texts. By combining comparative and thematic analysis, the study ensures a comprehensive examination of the research problem while maintaining coherence and depth. This methodological framework is appropriate for addressing the study's objectives, as it facilitates a critical exploration of literary texts as sites of historical negotiation and meaning-making.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* reveals a complex and layered interaction between oral history and written history, where each mode not only functions as a narrative strategy but also embodies distinct epistemological positions. The findings of this study indicate that oral history in Morgan's work operates as a restorative and reconstructive force, whereas written history in Grenville's narrative functions as both a foundation and a limitation, necessitating imaginative intervention. This divergence is not merely stylistic but reflects deeper ideological tensions concerning authority, authenticity, and the ownership of historical knowledge within Australian literature.

In *My Place*, oral history emerges as the primary mechanism through which suppressed identities are recovered and articulated. The narrative structure itself is fragmented and dialogic, shaped by conversations, recollections, and intergenerational storytelling. These oral testimonies do not present a singular, coherent version of the past; rather, they reveal multiple perspectives that often contradict or complicate one another. This multiplicity underscores the argument that oral history resists the linear and unified narratives typically associated with written historiography. As Abrams (2016) suggests, oral accounts are inherently interpretive, shaped by memory, emotion, and the socio-cultural context in which they are recounted. In Morgan's text, the gradual uncovering of her family's Aboriginal identity illustrates how oral narratives function as a counter-archive, filling the gaps left by official records that either ignored or deliberately obscured Indigenous experiences.

The findings further demonstrate that oral history in *My Place* is closely linked to the concept of cultural continuity. The stories shared by Morgan's mother and grandmother are not merely personal recollections but embodiments of collective memory that connect past, present, and future generations. This aligns with Moreton-Robinson's (2015) assertion that Indigenous knowledge systems are relational and grounded in community, rather than individual authorship. The act of listening and recording these stories becomes a process of reclaiming identity, challenging the erasure imposed by colonial assimilation policies. At the same time, the transformation of these oral narratives into written form introduces a layer of mediation that complicates their authenticity. As Hamilton and Shopes (2017) argue, the process of



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documenting oral history inevitably involves interpretation, raising questions about whose voice is ultimately represented in the text.

In contrast, *The Secret River* demonstrates the limitations of written history, particularly in its inability to fully capture the experiences of Indigenous Australians. Grenville's reliance on archival sources provides a framework for reconstructing the colonial past, yet these sources are marked by significant silences, especially regarding frontier violence and dispossession. The findings suggest that Grenville's use of fiction is a deliberate response to these gaps, allowing her to imagine perspectives that are absent from the historical record. This approach reflects what Curthoys and Docker (2016) describe as the necessity of narrative invention in addressing the incompleteness of archives. However, this imaginative reconstruction also raises ethical concerns about representation, particularly when depicting Indigenous experiences from a settler perspective.

The discussion reveals that while written history offers structure and authority, it is inherently selective and shaped by the power dynamics of its production. McKenna (2018) notes that colonial archives often reflect the interests of those who created them, thereby marginalising alternative perspectives. In *The Secret River*, this bias is evident in the limited documentation of Indigenous voices, which are largely absent from the written record. Grenville's narrative attempts to address this absence by incorporating speculative elements, yet it remains constrained by its reliance on a settler viewpoint. This limitation highlights the tension between historical accuracy and narrative empathy, a central concern in debates surrounding historical fiction.

A comparative analysis of the two texts indicates that oral and written histories are not mutually exclusive but operate in a dynamic relationship. Morgan's work demonstrates how oral testimony can challenge and supplement written records, while Grenville's novel illustrates how written history can be interrogated and expanded through imaginative storytelling. Perks and Thomson (2015) emphasise that integrating these modes allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the past, as each provides insights that the other cannot. The findings of this study support this view, suggesting that the interplay between oral and written history is essential for addressing the complexities of Australia's colonial legacy.

Another significant finding relates to the question of narrative authority. In *My Place*, authority is decentralised, distributed among multiple voices that collectively construct the narrative. This contrasts with *The Secret River*, where authority is more centralised, shaped by the author's interpretation of historical sources. Attwood (2015) argues that such differences reflect broader historiographical trends, with oral history emphasising inclusivity and participation, while written history often reinforces hierarchical structures of knowledge production. The discussion



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indicates that these differing approaches have important implications for how history is understood and represented, particularly in relation to marginalised communities.

The role of memory is also central to the findings of this study. In oral history, memory is not simply a repository of facts but an active process of meaning-making, influenced by present circumstances and cultural contexts. Abrams (2016) highlights that memory is inherently selective and subject to change, a characteristic that is evident in the varying accounts presented in *My Place*. These inconsistencies do not undermine the validity of oral history; rather, they reveal its complexity and depth. In contrast, written history tends to prioritise stability and coherence, often presenting a fixed version of events. However, as Grenville's work demonstrates, this stability can be misleading, masking the uncertainties and omissions that underpin historical narratives.

The ethical dimension of representing history is another critical aspect of the discussion. Both Morgan and Grenville engage with the moral implications of storytelling, particularly in relation to Indigenous histories. Morgan's use of oral testimony can be seen as an act of empowerment, giving voice to individuals whose experiences have been historically silenced. Grenville's approach, while more indirect, raises important questions about the responsibilities of writers in representing the past. Clendinnen (2016) cautions against the potential risks of fictionalising history, particularly when dealing with sensitive subjects such as colonisation and violence. The findings suggest that while fiction can offer valuable insights, it must be approached with an awareness of its limitations and ethical implications.

The following table summarises the key differences and intersections between oral and written history as observed in the selected texts:

Aspect	Oral History in <i>My Place</i>	Written History in <i>The Secret River</i>
Source of Knowledge	Personal testimonies, family narratives	Archival records, documented evidence
Narrative Structure	Fragmented, dialogic, multi-voiced	Linear, structured, author-driven
Authority	Decentralised, shared among narrators	Centralised, shaped by authorial interpretation
Representation of Indigenous Voices	Direct, self-represented	Indirect, mediated through fiction
Treatment of Memory	Subjective, evolving, relational	Selective, fixed, document-based
Addressing Historical Gaps	Fills gaps through lived experience	Fills gaps through imaginative reconstruction



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This comparative framework highlights that oral history provides immediacy and authenticity through lived experience, while written history offers organisation and continuity but is limited by its dependence on existing records. The interaction between these modes reveals the necessity of adopting a pluralistic approach to historiography, particularly in contexts marked by historical injustice and exclusion.

The discussion ultimately underscores that the works of Morgan and Grenville contribute to an ongoing redefinition of history within Australian literature. Rather than treating oral and written history as opposing forces, these texts demonstrate their interdependence and the need for their integration. The findings suggest that a more inclusive understanding of the past can only be achieved by recognising the value of multiple forms of knowledge and by critically examining the power structures that shape historical narratives.

7. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the interplay between oral history and written history in the works of Sally Morgan and Kate Grenville is central to understanding how Australian literature engages with the complexities of the colonial past. Rather than functioning as mutually exclusive modes of historical representation, oral and written histories emerge as interconnected and often complementary frameworks that reveal the limitations and possibilities inherent in each. Through *My Place*, Morgan foregrounds oral testimony as a vital means of recovering suppressed Indigenous identities and restoring voices that have been historically marginalised. Her reliance on intergenerational storytelling highlights the significance of memory, community, and lived experience as legitimate sources of historical knowledge, challenging the dominance of written archives (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

In contrast, Grenville's *The Secret River* operates within the domain of written history while critically interrogating its silences and omissions. The novel demonstrates that archival records, although authoritative, are incomplete and shaped by the power structures of their production. Grenville's use of imaginative reconstruction reflects an attempt to address these gaps, yet it also underscores the ethical complexities involved in representing histories that are not fully documented or directly experienced (McKenna, 2018). This tension reveals that written history, while offering structure and continuity, cannot fully account for the nuanced realities of the past without engaging with alternative forms of knowledge.

The comparative analysis underscores that both authors contribute to a broader redefinition of historiography within Australian literature, where the emphasis shifts from singular, authoritative narratives to plural and contested interpretations of history. Oral history introduces multiplicity, subjectivity, and emotional depth, while written history provides organisation and accessibility, making their integration essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the past (Perks and Thomson, 2015). At the same time, the study highlights the importance of critically examining



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issues of narrative authority and representation, particularly in relation to Indigenous histories that have been historically silenced or mediated.

Ultimately, the research affirms that literature plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between oral and written histories, offering a space where different forms of knowledge can coexist and interact. The works of Morgan and Grenville illustrate that history is not a fixed or objective record but a dynamic process shaped by memory, interpretation, and cultural context, requiring ongoing critical engagement and inclusive approaches to its representation.

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