IMAGINING HUMAN RIGHTS IN
TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY THEATER

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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CHAPTER 6

CHALLENGING THE “FETISH OF THE VERBATIM”: NEW AESTHETICS AND FAMILIAR ABUSES IN CHRISTINE EVANS’S SLOW FALLING BIRD

Christina Wilson

Australian playwright Christine Evans aims to show her audience a "dream with a hard core of truth." In her 2003 play, *Slow Falling Bird*, the hard truth emerges as the continuity of human rights abuse in Australia. Breaching several international laws, Australia currently confines undocumented asylum seekers to indefinite mandatory detention. *Slow Falling Bird* dramatizes the daily humiliation and terror of asylum seekers in Woomera, the nation’s most infamous detention center. Importantly, however, Evans divides her attention between Afghan and Iraqi detainees and their Australian guards, one of whom is an Indigenous Australian and victim of earlier crimes against the Stolen Generations. Evoking narrative conventions from Stolen Generations’ texts, Evans connects Australia’s treatment of refugees to earlier ideologies of discrimination. Thus, while the plights of

*Slow Falling Bird* was developed in 2003 at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival and was a finalist for the 2003 Patrick White Playwrights Award. Directed by Rebecca Novic, the play premiered at San Francisco’s Crowded Fire Theatre Company in 2005. It has also been produced in Melbourne (2004) and Brisbane (2007), workshopped at London’s Young Vic Director’s Project (2007) and appeared as a reading at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York City (2009). Evans received the Reba Lossy Playwriting Award (San Francisco, 2004) and the Monash Association National Playwriting Award (Australia, 2004) for *Slow Falling Bird*. 
undocumented asylum seekers remain her focus, Evans maps these violations onto a trajectory of abuse.

If the situation at Woomera reveals a difficult truth, the “dream” appears in Evans’s aesthetic. *Slow Falling Bird* presents meticulously researched events and conditions in a “hallucinatory” and “delirious” light. As reports indicate severe psychological distress among detainees, Evans’s aesthetic mirrors the actual trauma she depicts: her Woomera is “at once a real place; and a place inside a desert of the mind.” Evans’s aesthetic is a sort of warped realism influenced by the stylings of physical theater. And although the term is most often associated with Latin American literature, *Slow Falling Bird* might usefully be understood in terms of magical realism because this style tends to use “fantastic/phantasmagoric characters . . . to indict recent political and cultural perversions” and it also presents “historical narrative [not as] chronicle but clairvoyance.” Significantly, Evans is interested in “non-naturalistic and poetic approaches to writing politically engaged theater, especially in a time when the loudest drums we hear are those of testimony . . . I’m tired of the fetish of the verbatim.”

As Evans’s remarks suggest, the dominant trend in literature purporting to bring visibility to human rights violations has been individual narratives of abuse. Joseph Slaughter has shown that human rights and storytelling are intimately aligned because “human rights abuse is characterized as an infringement on the modern subject’s ability to narrate her story.” Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith further explain that, “life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims.” The power of legal testimony—the individual speech acts that help prosecute human rights crimes—certainly attracts frequent adaptation. However, questions have arisen about the limitations of testimony in the arts. Allen Feldman argues that the convergence of trauma-aesthetics and testimony “simulate[s] a cathartic effect that too easily transcends the violence described” because these narratives’ “linearity . . . establish[es] the pastness of prior violence.” If an audience can be lulled into displacing abuse temporarily, then they may similarly distance themselves geographically. Rustum Bharucha contends that the unequal relationship between core and periphery may allow Western audiences to consume the Other non-critically; in other words, dramatized testimony of suffering may provoke an unintended voyeurism that undermines the goals of the performance.

In *Slow Falling Bird*, Evans’s nonrealistic aesthetic challenges audiences out of the comfort and “fetish of the verbatim.” Rejecting what has become the hegemonic discourse of human rights, Evans instead connects and exposes abusive ideologies through an experimental aesthetic. As Evans evokes and then destabilizes the formal and thematic conventions from Stolen Generations texts, testimony and “home,” respectively, the stories of both undocumented asylum seekers and the Stolen Generations take on new, forceful dimensions.

*Slow Falling Bird* opens with Woomera Immigration Detention Centre guards Rick and Micko scanning the desert horizon, on the lookout for
human activity but spotting only rabbits on the run. Although the international community protects undocumented asylum, Australia’s undocumented asylum seekers wait for their refugee applications to be processed while in detention, surrounded by barbed wire fences; in effect, they are “prisoners without having committed any offence.” Evans introduces three such detainees: Zahrah, a pregnant Iraqi widow, and the Afghan orphans Leyla and her brother Mahmoud, aged 15 and 12. Like their real-life counterparts, these asylum seekers “[live] initially in the hope that soon their incarceration will come to an end but with the passage of time, the hope [gives] way to despair.”

Located in the South Australian desert, Woomera was once an army base for the United States. Rick, the experienced guard and a white Australian from the area, tells Micko that after “the Yanks” left town, “the [detention] camp rescued this town from the morgue.” In her article “Asylum Seekers and ‘Border Panic’ in Australia,” Evans explains

With its status as a Defense Force town and history as missile testing range and joint U.S./Australia spy base, it’s illegal to live at Woomera without a full time job. It’s no exaggeration then, to say that the incarceration of Middle Eastern asylum seekers has been keeping the town alive.

In Slow Falling Bird, Evans primarily highlights the town’s militaristic violence—an attitude that seeks to “protect” the nation but in doing so, harms others. However, Evans’s Woomera also appears sleepily ominous: the isolation and quiet of this desert town keeps the realities of mandatory detention, the suffering and abuse, contained.

For Rick, the worst part of Woomera is not the riots or traumatized children “cutting themselves up,” but rather, “the worst thing’s the boredom.” Anxious for “something real” to happen, Rick is in luck for Evans’s second scene reveals something both real and unreal through the figures of the Fish Child (the “hovering spirit” of Zahrah’s baby) and a “spectral Chorus of Crows” named Mortein and Baygon (“the brand names of two leading Australian pest control products”). The Fish Child refuses to enter this world in the desert, insistent that she needs water to live. While the Fish Child hovers above the stage, Mortein and Baygon arrive ready for action. Mortein and Baygon, spiritual ferrymen, wait to collect those who will eventually “cross over.” As with Rick, Woomera bores Baygon early in the play; he is convinced that they have arrived in the wrong town but Mortein insists “misery leads to action.” Of course, Mortein is right and as he tutors Baygon, Mortein simultaneously leads the audience through the worsening conditions at the detention center. Mortein and Baygon engage with the living characters and help shape the action, keeping a particularly close eye on Micko.

Micko’s navigation of Woomera largely informs Slow Falling Bird’s narrative arc. New to the area and the detention center, Micko displays palpable discomfort with his job. Ultimately, Mortein and Baygon prevent Micko
from becoming another Rick, a hardened guard and damaged human being. One evening, after a particularly bad day at the detention center, Micko succumbs to Mortein and Baygon's provocations. As they interrogate him, Micko indicates that he is an Indigenous Australian and a member of the Stolen Generations—Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families and placed in government custody.

With Micko's admission, *Slow Falling Bird* transitions from a play about one example of human rights violations to a play concerned with a trajectory of abuse. As the refugee scandal has taken place concurrently with reconciliation efforts toward the Stolen Generations, Evans suggests that nothing has materially changed in Australia. Indeed, the troubles of Australia's detainees become more obscene as Evans evokes the past treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Strikingly, the legal prejudices directed toward both Indigenous Australians and contemporary refugees intersect through the issues of citizenship and child abuse.

The early-nineteenth-century *terra nullius* ("no man's land") fiction exemplifies legal discrimination against Indigenous peoples. *Terra nullius* established Australia as an uninhabited territory and effectively made Indigenous Australians legally invisible, enabling the British government to create a (white) Australia free of Indigenous complication. As noncitizens, Indigenous Australians were subject to abusive policies of exclusion late into the twentieth century. In fact, Indigenous peoples were not legally counted, and thus not legitimized as Australians, until the Constitutional Referendum of 1967.

Assimilation was a second tactic for eliminating Indigenous presence from Australia and was the primary motivation behind the forced removal of Indigenous children, the Stolen Generations. Between 1910 and 1970, an estimated 50,000–100,000 Indigenous children, usually of mixed race, were forcibly taken from their families and placed into white homes, mission centers, or orphanages where they were taught, among other things, the English language and Christian faith. While the government outwardly aimed to "protect" these children, they also hoped to assimilate them into white Australia, breeding out the Aborigine. While children were placed in white families under the guise of adoption, they were most often treated as servants and suffered acute physical, psychological, and sexual trauma. Moreover, because of general mismanagement and falsification of documents, many stolen children were unable to reunite with their families as adults and thus suffered a lifetime of separation.

Following generations of suffering and decades of activism, Indigenous concerns finally caught the attention of the larger Australian populace and the international community by the 1990s. Prime Minister Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern Address stands out as one of the first official acknowledgements of Indigenous suffering: "We...smashed the traditional way of life.... We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us." Speaking on the eve of the United Nations Year
of Indigenous Peoples, Keating famously accepted a degree of responsibility on behalf of wider Australia.23

Yet while Keating’s Redfern Address highlights the beginnings of nationwide efforts toward reconciliation, his administration’s immigration policy has an equally important legacy. Strikingly, the Redfern Address used Australia’s history as a nation of immigrants to arouse empathy for Indigenous Australians:

Australia once reached out for us. Didn’t Australia provide opportunity and care for the dispossessed Irish? The poor of Britain? The refugees from war and famine and persecution in the countries of Europe and Asia? … if we can build a prosperous and remarkably harmonious multicultural society in Australia, surely we can find just solutions to the problems which beset the first Australians—the people to whom the most injustice has been done.24

As Keating promotes compassion and multiculturalism and recognizes injustice, it is bitterly ironic that this speech came within months of new immigration laws that laid the foundation for Australia’s racist anti-asylum policies. Presumably, while “we” could not previously imagine having “our” children taken from “us,” “we” remained stubbornly unimaginative—unwilling or unable to see the effects of indefinite imprisonment on refugee children and adults alike.

In August 1991, Minister for Immigration Gerry Hand began mandatory detention for asylum seekers who enter Australia without visas, individuals commonly referred to as “boat-people” due to their arrival by sea. Meant to deter unauthorized arrivals, mandatory detention reflects unreasonable expectations of orderly refugee migration.25 James Jupp explains that “in the view of the [Australian] Immigration Department, there should be no undocumented arrivals,” even though international law protects undocumented asylum seekers and allows for the necessity of unplanned refuge.26 Initially, undocumented asylum seekers could be held for a maximum of 273 days; in 1994, the time limit was removed and indefinite detention began.27

The Keating administration also introduced the Migration Amendment Act of 1992, which established four-year temporary protection visas rather than permanent residency. Although the Amendment Act was abandoned in 1993, it resurfaced in 1999 under Keating’s more conservative successor John Howard. The Howard administration’s Temporary Protection Visas granted asylum for renewable periods of three years but did not extend asylum to a refugee’s immediate family. In the foreword to Human Rights Overboard, Julian Burnside argues that this new restriction led to desperate behavior: in a single night, “353 people [mostly women and children] drowned as they tried to get to Australia to be reunited with their immediate family members who had already been accepted in Australia as refugees.”28

By the late 1990s, the majority of undocumented asylum seekers came from Afghanistan and Iraq, fleeing either the Taliban or Saddam Hussein.29 Conservative efforts to frame Middle Eastern asylum seekers as “terrorists”
helped secure support for their detention. Labor Party leader Kim Beazley stated in 2001, "I don’t think it’s humanitarian to try and keep control of your refugee program. I don’t think it’s humanitarian to try to deter criminals." Howard further insisted that without “a proper processing system” the government would have no way of knowing whether the “people on these boats [were] terrorists.” (Mistakenly, Howard identifies mandatory detention as a “processing system” when it is, in fact, a punishment.)

The “Children Overboard” scandal best illustrates attempts to paint undocumented asylum seekers as criminals. Largely seen as political maneuvering on the heels of 9/11 and leading up to the November 2001 elections, Howard’s government claimed that “boat people” had thrown their children into the sea to coerce the Australian Coastwatch into rescuing them. Later investigations found no evidence to support these claims, yet at the time, Howard remarked, “I certainly don’t want to see people of that type in Australia, I really don’t.” As Howard’s response seems framed at keeping “that type” out of Australia, his view suggests that only the (white) Australian requires protection. Recalling earlier fears of racial and cultural mixing, the Middle Eastern refugee becomes Australia’s new Other to exclude.

Rhetorical violence in vilifying asylum seekers as criminals works to justify their detention. And as they are first isolated in detention centers and then refused permanent asylum, refugees in Australia are segregated into what Suvendrini Perera calls “not-Australia.” Linking asylum seekers to Australia’s Stolen Generations, Perera argues that in this “ever expanding space of civil exclusion,”

Australia’s history reappears in unfamiliar yet still recognizable guises. Indigenous Australians remember other internment camps... The inmates of not-Australia are, in official phrasology, unlawful non-citizens. They are Not-Australians and unAustralian; the stuff of contraband... Non-people.

For asylum seekers and Indigenous Australians alike, Perera’s “not-Australia” recalls Hannah Arendt’s assertion that “the loss of citizenship deprive[s] people not only of protection, but also of all clearly established, officially recognized identity.”

Exploited by a government that did not recognize them, the Stolen Generations suffered “the loss of their homes, and this meant the loss of the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established themselves a distinct place in the world.” For asylum seekers, as Arendt argues, the trauma “is not [only] the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one.” While Indigenous peoples became officially Australian in 1967, the combined effect of mandatory detention and temporary visas works to prevent undocumented asylum seekers from acquiring citizenship—and thus a home—completely. However, for both the Stolen Generations and the undocumented asylum seekers, citizenship is but one hurdle to a realized
homecoming; the second difficulty lies in the disruption of normal familial relationships.

Forced into orphanages and mission centers, the Stolen Generations did not grow up surrounded by the relatives who loved and cared for them. And as Indigenous children were removed over the course of several generations, many individuals lost not only their parents but their own children as well. More recently, Australia’s immigration policies have posed serious problems to asylum seekers and their families. Following the 1994 requirement for individual asylum applications, which provides no guarantee that members of a family would be granted refuge together, many undocumented asylum seekers are denied contact with their families outside the detention center, leaving their loved ones to wonder what has become of them. Most egregiously, mandatory detention includes children, a practice Chris Goddard and Linda Briskman describe as “organised and ritualised abuse.”

Between 1999 and 2003, Australia’s detention centers held more than 2,000 children. In detention, children are both victims of and witnesses to acts of violence and self-harm, including suicide. Though adult detainees are more often the targets of brute violence, children are affected as witnesses to their parents’ abuse. Reports indicate that guards routinely, and indiscriminately, strike detainees with batons and use riot gear, including water cannons. In addition to physical harm, detention severely undermines parents’ ability to care for their children and, as a result, parents often suffer from “feelings of guilt, depression and a loss of self-esteem.” The authors of Human Rights Overboard argue that “both the deterioration in the mental health of their parents and the conditions of detention itself, [expose] the children held in detention to trauma.” In fact, nearly all detained children develop psychiatric disorders; a majority suffer from suicidal thoughts and “a quarter had self-harmed.” In an interview, one child described himself as a caged bird: “I am like a bird in a cage.... [One of his drawings was of an egg with a boot hovering above it ready to crush it. Pointing to the egg he said,] These are the babies in detention.” Although Australia signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) concluded in its 2004 report A Last Resort? that mandatory detention fundamentally violates article 37(b) of the CRC: “no child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be used only as a measure of last resort.”

While A Last Resort? details the devastating consequences of mandatory detention, it is another HREOC report, Bringing Them Home (1997), that plays a central role in the political and cultural landscape surrounding the Stolen Generations. Containing hundreds of testimonies, the report documents the terrible actualities of government policies. The rhetoric that once emphasized providing Aboriginal children with education was replaced in the popular imagination by stories of abuse and suffering. As the title suggests, recovery efforts for the Stolen Generations revolve around the metaphor of
“home,” finding a way back to the Indigenous family after decades of separation. The dominant trope of Stolen Generations’ narratives involves the journey, actual or metaphorical, that a stolen child takes back to his or her mother and to his or her Aboriginal identity. For instance, one early best seller, Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), chronicles the author’s discovery of her Indigenous ancestry as she investigates her mother and grandmother’s pasts. More recently, Phillip Noyce’s film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), based on actual events, depicts the story of three young stolen girls who escape from a mission center and, following a dangerous journey through the Australian outback, return home to their Aboriginal mother.45

Strikingly, in her article “Asylum Seekers and ‘Border Panic’ In Australia,” Evans notes the story of Alamdar and Montazar Bhaktiari, detained asylum seekers who

escaped from Woomera in 2002, making their way to Melbourne, where they walked into the British embassy and claimed asylum from persecution by the Australian government. Although their bid was quashed with cynical speed . . . [t]hey made visible to a general Australian public the faces, names and stories of some of those buried behind the wire and most shockingly, revealed themselves as preadolescent children.46

Echoing the desert voyage from *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, a film released the same year as the Bhaktiarias’ flight, children become the faces of both forced removal and mandatory detention. The parallel between the Bhaktiarias’ story and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* suggests that abuse in Australia continues under new guises, with new targets; importantly, it also indicates that while political and cultural sensitivity exists for one group of rights victims, such awareness has done little to prevent new violations. Indeed, while the young girls in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* return home, the Bhaktiarias—like all undocumented asylum seekers—remain homeless.

The Stolen Generations’ thematic fixation with home resonates in Evans’s contemporary concerns. Of course, Evans recognizes that undocumented asylum seekers have little chance of establishing a safe haven, let alone a home, in an atmosphere defined by mandatory detention. Consequently, Evans invokes and then subverts this trope in her play to express a bleaker truth. Though “home” is an achievable space in most Stolen Generations narratives, Evans’s revision brings to light Australia’s Stolen Generations who continue to suffer, as they are unable to find their families or otherwise complete the journey home.

Evans most clearly challenges Stolen Generations narratives through Micko. Deeply ambivalent, Micko represents both the adult child who travels to the desert to find answers about his past and the detention guard who keeps children locked away. Evans frames much of Micko’s concern for the asylum seekers in terms of his own experiences. Still, Micko is uncomfortable voicing a strident defense of the detainees, seemingly afraid of being identified as an Other himself. When Micko tells Rick, “we’d better post [the
paperwork for Leyla and Mahmoud], mate. It’s the law," Rick responds with a stricter interpretation of the law: "They didn’t ask for asylum at the initial interview. So immigration told us we can scrap it." But Micko doesn’t scrap their application; he secretly posts it through to lawyers.

Alone in an unfamiliar land, surrounded by authority figures whose language they do not speak, Leyla and Mahmoud must remind Micko of his own stolen childhood. Leyla and Mahmoud are “unaccompanied children” and represent approximately 14% of Australia’s detained minors.48 As Leyla struggles to maintain faith that someone will soon begin their processing, she insists that Mahmoud practice the only English they know: “Please sir, refugee from very bad fightings. Mother and father no. We ask please sir, an asylum.”49 With resignation, Mahmoud tells her, “No one’s coming. No one ever comes.”50 Though they do not know it, Micko has ensured that help is on the way. However, Micko’s sympathies lapse when Mahmoud insults him. Micko then begins “rouhing Mahmoud up” until Rick takes over, beating Mahmoud so badly that the boy dies.51

Consistent with Evans’s aesthetic, Rick’s vicious attack in the detention center transforms into an obscene dance at the local bar later that evening. Here, Mortein and Baygon arrive to comment on the “good suntan” Micko has “for a long-sleeved job."52 They then casually ask a drunken Micko if he is from the area:

Micko: Well, maybe. Might have used to be.
Mortein: “Might have used to be.”
Micko: Yeah, well I sort of remember it but I dunno where from. I was born in the desert. Least I think I was. That’s what they told me at the Mission, anyway.
...I was just another skinny outback kid. Could’ve come from anywhere and there’s no-one to ask.53

Although Micko hints at his background earlier in the play, the above exchange solidifies Micko’s identity as an Indigenous Australian and stolen child. Micko’s revelation becomes more significant as it directly follows the assault on Mahmoud because Micko knows what it means to be alone and mistreated, a vulnerable child who has “no-one to ask” for anything.

While the detention center is primarily a locus of misery for asylum seekers, the abuse Micko experienced as a child echoes through Leyla and Mahmoud’s anguish. Nonetheless, Micko retains hope that Woomera can alleviate his suffering. He explains

When I’m in the desert, I sort of recognize the light—So maybe I was born out here. I dunno. You know the way it shimmers so you can’t see straight? ... It’s real beautiful, like a long drink of water when you don’t know you’re thirsty—and it reminds me.54

Micko’s feelings toward the desert are saturated with his longing; and as Micko compares the light in the desert to “a long drink of water,” the trick
of the light stands in for the idea of home. Throughout *Slow Falling Bird*, water represents home as a necessity, restorative, and haven; indeed, water becomes a manifold metaphor for home. Most notably, water stands in for both a spiritual home and the very real and dangerous environment “boat people” must negotiate as they travel from one home in the hopes of finding another. Of course, as Woomera is located in the desert, *Slow Falling Bird* constantly reminds its audience that water—home—cannot be found here. Yet because undocumented asylum seekers are immediately sent to detention centers in Australia’s deserts, the open waters become their last sanctuary.

The Fish Child, the spirit of Zahrah’s baby, explains that not only does she “like the boat” Zahrah traveled in, but she views the sea as an extension of the womb.55 When Zahrah goes into labor, Mortein and Baygon encourage the Fish Child to descend from her perch above the stage. As they tie a rope, her umbilical cord, connecting her to Zahrah, the Fish Child argues that she wants to “Go back in the water!” Acting on her preference, the Fish Child unites her end of the rope and attaches it to a small plastic shark, her body. Though her body is delivered into the desert, the Fish Child’s refusal traps her between worlds and separates her from her mother; as Zahrah and the plastic shark are taken off stage, the Fish Child panics, screaming “Mama! Mama!!”57 Later scenes reveal that Zahrah finds the separation equally distressing; she knows something is deeply wrong, for the child will not drink and has “cold fish eyes.”58

In despair, Zahrah tries to coax the plastic shark with a lullaby. Recounting her husband’s drowning in the offshore waters, Zahrah sings: “There’s a cord from me to you/Made of dreams and seawater/And your daddy’s open mouth/Singing shark lullabies.”59 The Fish Child listens from her perch and replies: “There’s a cord from him to you/Tangled up in your daughter/As the sea rolls his bones/Through the green ocean dark.”60 While Zahrah cannot hear the Fish Child, the exchange indicates that there is indeed something that continues to bind this family together. According to the song, even as Australia’s immigration policies tear families apart, the deep connections between mother and child, husband and wife, continue to exist. However, these connections can only be spiritual. And so, though it is a consuming and deadly sea, the water is also a place where members of a family can return to one another in a spiritual haven.

Zahrah’s lullaby appears in various forms throughout the play to mark this alternative homecoming. After Mahmoud’s death, Leyla sits alone in her cell where she simply “sucks her thumb and rocks”,61 traumatized, the only English she now knows was clearly learned from the guards: “ Fucking animals. Refugee cunt.”62 Eventually, Leyla hangs herself. Yet her suicide is framed as if she is in a “beautiful underwater cave” and not a detention cell in the desert.63 As she reads herself, laughing and smiling, “transformed back into a hopeful young girl,” Mahmoud, Mortein, and Baygon gather to the side of the stage and sing: “There’s a cord from me to you/Made of bones and seawater/And your brother’s open mouth/Singing shark lullabies.”64 In this
instance, the song marks Leyla’s transition from Woomera to an oceanic spirit world where she reunites with her brother.

As the sea becomes the last available home for Australia’s undocumented asylum seekers, Evans cohesively brings this thematic thread back to Micko with another song. After Micko discloses his Stolen Generations identity, Rick persuades him onto the karaoke stage where Micko sings along to Warumpi Band’s “My Island Home.” Often believed to celebrate Australia itself, “My Island Home” actually refers to lead singer (and Aboriginal Australian) George Rurrumbu’s remote island homeland.55 As Micko sings “six years I’ve been in the desert/And every night I dream of the sea,” he sings about his own longings for a home as he simultaneously describes the undocumented asylum seekers he guards.66 If the sea represents an idea of home, a place where families can reconnect, Micko is homeless in the desert. A stolen child still searching for his family, in the desert he thinks he might be from, Micko must wonder at the lyrics, “They say home is where you find it/Will this place ever satisfy me?”67 Though his chances at homecoming appear slim, Micko wants to fulfill the promise of other Stolen Generations narratives and return home.

Centrally, the story of the Stolen Generations, including its thematic preoccupation with “home,” is tied to the testimonial model. The HREOC’s report, Bringing Them Home, identified human rights abuse through nearly 800 submissions, 535 of which were personal narratives. Since the rise of truth and reconciliation commissions, testimony or individual narration has been seen as a crucial step toward the end goals of justice, community reconciliation, and the furtherance of human rights. Public storytelling is often explained as a process of reinstating victims into the collective. If victimization is a condition of otherness, of isolation from the larger community, granting victims a space for their tale is seen as a means of augmenting official narratives to include those whose personal lives have been forever changed. The implied contract between narrator and addressee, victim and nation, embedded within most human rights narratives ensures that as the storyteller voices his or her experience, the audience must listen and acknowledge his pain; yet the addressee also expects that their attention will produce positive effects. Put another way, listening to testimony from human rights victims may be understood as the first step toward “bringing them home.”

However, the model of storytelling as trauma alleviation is a thorny one. Recent trends in trauma studies suggest that storytelling may actually work to keep the past in the present; rather than healing, narration may instead oblige victims to carry their pasts into their futures. Feldman identifies an additional temporal problem with storytelling in that the linearity of first-person narrative enables audiences to “freeze the past” and thereby “situate the past as an object of spectatorship.”68 One consequence of Feldman’s argument is that as abuse becomes localized as a problem of the past, audience responsibility in the present may be, at best, ambiguous.

Due to the overwhelming use of personal narrative in Stolen Generations texts, it is significant that Slow Falling Bird includes no personal stories of
abuse. The absence of narration is most remarkable for Micko because, as a figure of the Stolen Generations, literary conventions demand Micko's narrative. By not telling his story, Evans's audience understands that Micko has yet to recover: he represents those Stolen Generations victims who have not been able to complete the journey home. Furthermore, Micko's silence puts the audience in the uncomfortable position of witnessing an untold story. If Micko does not narrate, they cannot listen and consequently, because narration has been understood as a means to both individual and community healing, Micko's silence denies both the audience and the character the possibility of catharsis.

Evans thus challenges her audience by highlighting Micko's past as a present absence, constructing a character whose pain is neither clearly understood nor easily reconciled. Fittingly, the undocumented asylum seekers do not narrate their unique pasts either. Putting aside Micko and the detainees' individual stories, Evans focuses attention on the larger history of abuse she illuminates through her experimental aesthetic. In this she suggests that storytelling cannot be enough because the story of the Stolen Generations is followed by the story of asylum seekers. Working to "un-freeze" the past, Evans interrogates the ways in which meaning has been made in Australia—how memory and representation have worked to redirect and sustain human rights abuse. In this, Evans allows her audience to see testimony as an aesthetic red herring: a form that capitalizes on the mesmerizing emotional appeal of the individual's path to healing rather than the causal forces of structural violence.

While testimonies have proven to be an effective strategy for both witnessing human rights abuse and facilitating empathy for victims, individual narratives may also obscure abusive ideological patterns as problems of the past. Of course, there are real-world consequences to this discursive problem insofar as the Australian government and public apologize to the Stolen Generations in one breath and condemn undocumented asylum seekers in the next. Thus, as Evans subverts the thematic convention of home, she must also subvert the dominant form in which that narrative appears: testimony.

Unable to reconstruct his narrative and recover home, Micko must leave Woomera. In the end, Leyla's suicide puts their mutual homelessness into stark relief. As Micko stands by the swaying dress that represents Leyla's body, he softly says, "I tried, all right?" Seemingly understanding the consequences of the state's abuse and his own complicity, Micko then throws down his radio and leaves the stage. As the voice on the radio repeats "Over. Over," Mortein and Baygon appear and nod "yes, it is over": the dream of home has ended for Mahmoud and Leyla, but it is also over for Micko.

Micko's departure leaves Rick as the last guard standing. Although "home" is most explicitly denied to Australia's racial Others, Evans also shows that mandatory detention's exclusionary and xenophobic practices are not without consequences to white Australians. Throughout *Slow Falling Bird*, Mortein and Baygon explain that Rick is damaged: according to these guides, the "mad bastard thinks he's underwater." Rick may delude himself into
believing he has a fulfilling and sustainable home life, but his alcoholism and his interactions with his wife Joy strongly suggest otherwise. Joy suffers from severe depression and refuses to leave their tightly sealed house. Spending her days lamenting her infertility, longing for a baby who will have "eyes like a new suburb, empty of ghosts," Joy wants nothing more than to keep the realities of Woomera from contaminating her suburban fortress.72

Invoking another parallel from Stolen Generations narratives through the conflation of mother, child, and home, Evans shows the Fish Child wavering between Joy and Zahrah. The Fish Child sings to Joy: "There's a cord from me to Mama/Made of dreams and sea water...There's a cord from me to you/Made of longing for your daughter-/If you give me her name/Maybe I can come down-."73 However, the Fish Child's future is tied to Zahrah's decisions, not Joy's. Seeing no alternative, Zahrah puts her baby down on the ground and, aided by Morten and Baygon, climbs the detention center's fence and enters the Fish Child's spiritual realm. As Zahrah jumps from the fence, the Fish Child falls to the earth, fully arriving in the desert. Rick then takes the Fish Child home to Joy and destroys her file, obliterating her official presence.

Although the Fish Child enters Joy and Rick's family, finding a mother and consequently a home, the play's closing scene posits this home as a sham. During a surreal family dinner, Slow Falling Bird comes to an abrupt ending after Rick passes the table salt to the Fish Child. The Fish Child and the spirits of the dead then pour salt and red dirt onto the stage. While salt typically evokes religious metaphors of permanence and purity, Slow Falling Bird's usage more likely recalls the fact that salt is all that remains after water evaporates. Evans's last stage direction complicates the desert imagery: while the stage is lit with red lights and covered in salt and dirt, "the sound of water falling builds until we are engulfed in the roaring of a flood."74 As the characters on stage remain dry and homeless, the audience becomes enclosed by water, embraced (or consumed) by this primal home.

The play's final scene folds the audience into Slow Falling Bird's narrative, shifting them from spectators to participants. In this, Evans requires that the audience consider their relationship to the characters on stage and the violations that have informed their individual and collective histories. Indeed, Slow Falling Bird ultimately positions the audience as the subject of its main interrogation, asking that they consider their role in how this story came to be. With her emphasis on the formation of reality, Evans recalls Feldman's argument that, "[i]f a society is to come to terms with a terror-ridden past, then it must be through a knowledge of how certain memory formations contributed to the creation of that violent past."75 Because Rick is bored by the atrocities he witnesses daily and Evans has declared herself tired of testimony, Slow Falling Bird suggests that the usual ways of representing human rights abuse may be limited. Widening her scope to include not only the specific details of abuse against undocumented asylum seekers but also the ideological connections to the Stolen Generations, Evans focuses on this question of representation and understanding. Accordingly, then, Slow Falling Bird
moves political theater in a new direction and expands the possibilities for representing human rights on the stage.

NOTES

3. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 4.
4. Ibid.
5. Zamora and Faris, Magical Realism, 6.
6. Evans, "Another Immigration Detention Center Play."
11. Qtd. Burnside, "Foreword," 14. To clarify: "asylum seekers" do not become "refugees" until that claim has been approved, as it eventually is for over 90% of Australia’s detainees.
12. Ibid.
13. Slow Falling Bird was largely written and developed in the United States, where Evans now lives. It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed account of how the United States maps onto the play, but there are obvious connections to Guantánamo Bay. Moreover, while these detention centers are located in Australia, American-owned companies often employ the guards.
14. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 7.
16. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 5, 8.
17. Ibid., 4, 9.
18. Ibid., 36.
19. Ibid., 35.
20. The Latin phrase terra nullius refers to unowned land. Originating in Roman law, terra nullius has been widely used internationally though the phrase is currently highly associated with Australia and its aboriginal peoples. In 1835, Governor Bourke invoked terra nullius as a means of asserting that no other group had prior claims on Australia before the British Crown, thereby stripping Indigenous Australians the right to sell or assign property. Terra nullius effectively remained Australia’s official position until Mabo v. the State of Queensland (1992) in which the High Court of Australia rejected terra nullius and recognized that indigenous peoples had a pre-existing rights to Australia’s land and waters.
22. Keating, "Redfern Address."
24. Keating, "Redfern Address."
25. Burnside argues that mandatory detention was unsuccessful at deterrence for many asylum seekers did not know about the policy until they found themselves detained. Regardless of its expediency, deterrence uses “innocent people to achieve another objective.” “Foreword,” 12.
29. Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 52, 194.
30. Qtd. in Briskman, Latham, and Goddard, Human Rights Overboard, 49.
31. Ibid.
32. See Peter Mares, Borderline, 135.
33. Qtd. in Evans, “Asylum Seekers and ‘Border Panic’ in Australia,” 166.
34. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 287.
35. Ibid., 293.
36. Ibid.
38. Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, A Last Resort?, 66, cite the official number during this timeframe as 2,184; all these children were detained upon arrival and 92.8% were eventually found to be refugees. Briskman, Latham, and Goddard, Human Rights Overboard, 184, found that children were detained “for an average of one year and eight months including ‘one child locked up for five years and five months.’”
40. Ibid., 188.
41. Ibid., 189.
42. Ibid.
45. The film is based on Doris Pilkington’s memoir, Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence (1996).
47. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 42.
49. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 27.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 61.
52. Ibid., 64.
53. Ibid., 65.
54. Ibid., 65–66 (original emphasis).
55. Ibid., 29.
56. Ibid., 19.
57. Ibid., 22.
58. Ibid., 43.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 76.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 88.
64. Ibid.
66. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 67.
67. Ibid., 67–68.
69. Evans, Slow Falling Bird, 89.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 50.
72. Ibid., 80.
73. Ibid., 69–70.
74. Ibid., 93.