

Free to Roam: Foot Notes on Sovereignty in Indigenous Film and Fiction

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All great speeches are said to stand the test of time. But while some of Australia's greatest speeches "mattered . . . from the moment they were delivered," there are others that only "in hindsight reveal their cultural importance," that only later become "significant markers of Australian history" (Warhaft xii). If the Australian nation-state ever officially recognises Indigenous sovereignty, then a speech delivered by the Indigenous legal scholar Irene Watson in Adelaide in 2003 may well become a significant marker in the political journey towards that achievement. At the inaugurating conference of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association, Watson delivered a grand lament, framed mostly as a series of questions, on the state of Indigenous affairs in Australia and the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty, as she saw it, at the start of the new millennium. The title of her address was "Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Are We Free to Roam?"

In subtitled her speech with this simple but materially weighted question about Indigenous bodies potentially in motion in Australian space, Watson addressed herself to a subject that, in her view, had largely been forgotten in the early 2000s as a political goal: Indigenous sovereignty. What now dominated political discussion and discourse on land rights, according to Watson, was not the potential procurement of sovereignty but the achievement of native title rights, arising from the *Mabo* decision of 1992. While the High Court of Australia recognised native title rights to land in *Mabo* it also confirmed the British Crown's "acquisition of sovereignty" upon settlement, ruling that sovereignty could not be contested in any Australian court (*Mabo v. Queensland, No. 2* 51). Importantly, the High Court made no statement or ruling on whether they thought Indigenous people had any sovereignty before British settlement. The court granted Indigenous Australians rights to the "possession, occupation, use and enjoyment" of land in *Mabo No. 2*, but effectively ruled that *if* Indigenous people ever had sovereignty over land, under international law they had lost it to the British in 1788.

In her 2003 speech, Watson argued that native title posed "no challenge to Australian real property law, nor to the governance of the state" (46). Further, the nation-state's investment in a regime of native title rights silenced conversations about sovereignty: "Today the words 'Aboriginal sovereignty' have become the unspeakable. Aboriginal sovereignty is feared as posing a threat to the security of Australians and their assumed 'territorial integrity'" (43). Specifically, and personally, Watson lamented her own lack of freedom to live and sing on the lands of her ancestors, the unceded lands of the Tanganekald, Meintangk, and Boandik Nations of the Coorong and the south-east of South Australia. The central question in her speech was addressed to her fellow Indigenous Australians: "Are we free to roam?" (40). To "roam" is not just to walk; it describes a particular kind of movement: "to move about a large area, especially without a specific purpose or definite destination" ("Roam"). As a legal philosopher, Watson thus identified the freedom to roam—to wander, to move freely on Country—as a marker of, indeed, as a yardstick for measuring the attainment of First Nations sovereignty. Watson then challenged Indigenous thinkers and activists to look "beyond the limited horizon" of state-sanctioned native title towards a time and place where the "sovereign Aboriginal self" might be "free to roam across" Country (41, 40). And she asked, "Is there an Aboriginal voice, or are

there voices of Aboriginal diversity and community that can express and also transcend this time?" (47).

Watson's lament of 2003 might now be read as prophetic. Not in the sense that Indigenous Australians are "free to roam" on sovereign land (because they are not), but in the sense that sovereignty *is* now being spoken about. That conversation is no longer silenced. Indigenous intellectuals like Watson stress the differences between nation-state sovereignty and Indigenous sovereignty: "The white way of knowing country is forged by ownership, possession and control. The Aboriginal way of knowing comes through spirituality, identity and traditions of historical connectedness" (46). Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes Indigenous sovereignty not in terms of legal contract but in terms of corporeal connection to Country:

Our sovereignty is embodied, it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land. In this sense, our sovereignty is carried by the body and differs from Western constructions of sovereignty, which are predicated on the social contract model, the idea of a unified supreme authority, territorial integrity and individual rights. (2)

It is this embodied sense of sovereignty, grounded in a communal connection to the land via the action of bipedal motion on the land, that is now being creatively imagined, in various guises, in various time periods, and in various territorial settings, by Indigenous filmmakers and writers of fiction. The Indigenous voices that Watson felt were needed, in order to look beyond the "limited horizon" of native title towards a time of sovereignty, are now prolific. Indigenous storytellers are contesting the nation-state's claim to exclusive sovereignty over the land. In many of these stories, Watson's invocation of the freedom to roam, to walk on Country, has become a metaphor for, or a direct expression of, an Indigenous assertion of sovereignty. In this essay, I examine the resurgence in Indigenous narratives of walking as a practice associated with reclamations of space and of law-making on the Australian continent. In particular, I will examine scenes from the films *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and *Stone Bros.* (2009), as well as representations of walking in Kim Scott's novel *Taboo* (2017) and, much more briefly, in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and Julie Janson's 2020 novel *Benevolence*.

But first, in order to establish parameters for the action of walking as law-making, I would like to turn to a story about walking with empire. This is a story told by the legal scholar Olivia Barr based on her reading of transcripts from a murder trial in early colonial Sydney. Her interpretation of these legal records suggests that walking as law-making—the practice of walking to assert sovereignty over territory—may have been more widespread in the territory now known as Australia than anyone has yet realised or acknowledged.

It is 1799, and violent clashes between new settlers and the Dharug people along the Hawkesbury River, on Sydney's outskirts, are becoming commonplace. In one incident, two male settlers are killed by Dharug warriors in the woods, as the bush was then called. A party of settlers and soldiers is assembled and sent on a walk into the woods to find and bury the two men. The party is given orders by the commander of the Hawkesbury settlement: its members are "to fire in upon . . . any Natives" they happen to meet, either going or returning on their walk (*R v. Powell* 340). The party meets no one on its journey. The deceased settlers are duly found, removed from the woods, and buried. But a month later some members of this original burial party are part of a larger group of settlers who detain three Dharug boys, march them off into the woods, and shoot two of them dead. (The third boy escapes.) These Dharug boys are known to have had nothing to do with the killing of any settlers. For the colonial authorities the unprovoked slaughter of Dharug youth cannot go unpunished. Five men are subsequently

arrested and tried by a criminal court for the murder of the two boys. In their courtroom defence, the accused point to the Hawkesbury commander's earlier order—the one about being allowed to shoot “any Natives” they were to meet in the woods—as lending justification to their subsequent actions. Their argument holds no ground. They are found guilty and convicted of the murder of two innocent boys. Some years later, however, they are pardoned. This is a landmark case in the colony of New South Wales because it is “the first instance of such an offence being brought before a criminal court” (*R v. Powell* 362).

On the one hand, we could read this story as an early attempt by the British authorities to appear to be asserting justice on the frontier. On the other hand, given the ultimate pardon for murder, it reveals British justice as a farce. In any case, Olivia Barr is interested in this story for other reasons. She argues that evidence submitted in this murder trial illustrates the motion of the common law in the tentative new colony. Barr says the trial reveals that the woods beyond the settlement were perceived as a place “not yet governed and not yet controlled by common law” (“Walking” 10), and that it was only by *walking into the woods* that the burial party brought the common law into place. That is to say, as the burial party walked, the laws of empire moved with it; the empire's laws were not already “there” in territory beyond the frontier. The idea that colonial law is walked into place, that it is “not as everywhere as it seems to be” (Barr, *A Jurisprudence* 5), might not sound strange to social geographers or spatial theorists. But according to Barr, lawmakers have hardly thought of things this way. In the leading judgement in the *Mabo* decision of 1992, Justice Brennan notes that according to legal theory as “there was no local law already in existence in the territory” of New South Wales “the law of England became the law of the territory (and not merely the personal law of the colonists)” (*Mabo* 24). However, does the common law range so smoothly and instantaneously at a moment of proclamation over broad swathes of territory? Not for Barr:

This imagined slide from the law of England to the law of the territory evokes a very familiar image of legal place . . . [one] of singular common law fullness; of one empty space filled with and only with common law; no gaps, complete, exclusive, everywhere; a non-textured, evenly distributed, perfectly well-buttered smothering of law across land. (“Walking” 4)

Barr argues, instead, that testimonial evidence of the events in and around the Hawkesbury frontier in 1799 suggest that “colonial movements of law into and in Australia were more complex and messier than a series of proclamations” (“Walking” 8–9). In the Colony of New South Wales “the place of common law was more temperate, disparate, messier and incomplete. . . . Hawkesbury was . . . a dynamic, moving, incomplete common law place” (9). Barr asserts that for too long “understandings of common law practice have been overly institutionally bound, but this is not the only way common law works” (*A Jurisprudence* 132). She proposes that “common law moves with the walking of the subject through the jurisdiction of the person” (“Walking” 6–7). In other words, colonial law is *bodily walked into place*, tentatively at first, and then, progressively, more fully over time. Barr calls this practice “walking with empire,” and points out that it continues to occur today “on unceded Aboriginal land” (*A Jurisprudence* 1). In this sense colonial law and Indigenous law “do not meet well,” and Australia's great legal challenge, according to Barr, “is to rethink the meeting of laws, and hence, questions of sovereignty and territory” (2).

The Indigenous legal scholar C. F. Black, in *The Land is the Source of the Law*, explains that what undergirds Australian Aboriginal jurisprudence is the “essential engagement with the land” through walking, which is done repeatedly, down through the generations: “[It] was that act of *walking the land* of my ancestors that actualized and authenticated the knowledge I . . . acquired” (8, emphasis in original). Black emphasises the “jurisprudential reasoning

underpinning the concept of ‘walking the land’—the law-fullness of walking—and that “it is only by walking and singing the land that it is possible to truly know a law and in turn the people who emanate from that land” (18, 19). What I would like to emphasise here is the recognition of the action of walking as law making, and the image of the foot and of walking the land as a sign of making land law. This sign has now emerged in contemporary Indigenous narratives as one marker of Indigenous sovereignty, of Indigenous sovereign connection to land. However, I would like to be more temporally specific about the development of the use of this particular trope by Indigenous storytellers, and propose its more consistent and more insistent insertion in narratives, as a marker of assertions of sovereignty, only after around the middle of the first decade of the new millennium. I will look first of all at an Indigenous film, from the year 2002, to illustrate the beginnings of the development of what might be called a discourse of walking sovereign.

Gamilaroi filmmaker Ivan Sen’s first, full-length feature film, *Beneath Clouds* (2002), is principally a road movie about two teenagers who escape from country-town environments in New South Wales, and find themselves and each other on a journey to Sydney. However, as Adam Gall and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey point out, *Beneath Clouds* is not a typical “road film” due to Sen’s depiction of “a photographic, flaneurial attention to the road and what lies beneath it and beside it. His films do not hurtle down the road at top speed with a sense of frenetic escape, but are composed at walking pace” (425). While Lena (Dannielle Hall) and Vaughn (Damian Pitt), the teenage protagonists, do travel in various cars, “much of the film concentrates on the movement of these characters on foot” (436). A lot of this walking occurs along roads. In fact, Lena and Vaughn are mostly restricted to walking along public thoroughfares. Rarely on their journey are they allowed to divert from these paths; in this sense, they are not allowed to roam. The one time in the film they are shown to cross a distinct boundary, from public to private land, in what I will call the cornfield scene, they get into trouble.

The protagonists, both hungry, approach the entrance to a farm containing a cornfield. A gate to the field, locked by a heavy chain, bars their way. A close-up of the locked gate shows the legs of the teenagers as they clamber over the chain, stressing the significance of their entry from the public space of the road onto private property. After picking some corn to eat they hear a tractor approaching and run back to the gate to escape from an angry farmer. Jumping out of his tractor, the farmer pursues the fleeing teenagers to the gate on foot, and shouts at Vaughn: “Go on! Get out of here you black bastard!” Vaughn, now walking away on the other side of the gate, turns at the racist slur, drops the corn he is holding, and strides back to the gate to confront the farmer. A switch from wide-angle shots to a close-up of Vaughn reveals the forcefulness of his retort: “What did you say? What d’ya fuckin’ say?” The farmer then responds from his side of the gate: “You stay off my land you little shit.” Vaughn replies angrily: “Your land! This ain’t your land. You stole this fucking land, and don’t you fucking forget it, fuckin’ prick!” (Sen 00:41:44–59). Vaughn and the farmer part company without coming to blows. Romaine Moreton reads Vaughn’s final statement here as a challenge to “the moral currency held by the farmer as owner of the land” (Moreton). Through Vaughn, Sen offers a corrective to settler-colonial denial of Indigenous dispossession.

However, this scene, considered within the film more broadly, reveals how restricted these characters are in terms of the spaces they are allowed to inhabit, to move freely in and across. As Gall and Probyn-Rapsey note, in Sen’s films

it is often Aboriginal characters who are perceived by whites as “trespassers” in spaces dominated by whites (roads, cotton fields, corn fields, pubs, cafes). Sen’s films emphasize the “somewhereness” of land and place by focusing on the

contested nature of spaces beside the road, beneath the road and off the road.
(427)

But also *above* the road: Constricted mobility is indexed filmically via frequent, expansive wide shots of the sky, where clouds, unrestricted in their wanderings, are “visually cut by power lines, pylons, telegraph cables and poles” (Cater 5). For Samantha Cater, these ordered, symmetrically spaced, lineal cuttings in the sky “simultaneously [evoke] feelings of both disruption and connectedness” (5). But they are also reminders of public, infrastructural constraints imposed on the pedestrian protagonists, hierarchically from above, in stark contrast to free-floating clouds higher up. Throughout the film, then, the movement of these Indigenous characters is tolerated only to the extent that it occurs within demarcated public space, such as along roads. As soon as Lena and Vaughn divert from public pathways to cross boundaries, as in the cornfield scene described above, they are chased off the land. Although the politically savvy Vaughn confronts the farmer over his claim to ownership of the land, as Indigenous wanderers Vaughn and Lena have been put back in their place, as it were, by the coloniser.

Looking now beyond the story of this film, to consider the time and the political context of its production and release, we might ask: what is the position, the place, of Indigenous people in Australia at this time? Is the Aboriginal protagonist, as represented in *Beneath Clouds*, condemned to remain removed from the land, on one side of a fence, propertyless, shouting in anger at a non-Aboriginal owner of land on the other side of a boundary? We can view Sen’s film, released in 2002, as a story of its time. This “time” is a low point in Indigenous people’s ongoing struggle for justice. As Irene Watson was to make clear in her Adelaide speech, just a year after the release of *Beneath Clouds*, native title laws flowing from the *Mabo* decision of a decade before had been watered down, and were proving illusory for many Indigenous groups. The History Wars, involving a conservative backlash against Indigenous history, were in full swing. The years 2002/2003 mark the middle point of the no-apology Howard years. In this context, *Beneath Clouds* is a narrative that reveals Indigenous people’s ongoing occlusion from land in contemporary Australia. Indigenous wandering or mobility across land is still successfully contained by the coloniser.

For most of Australia’s colonial history Indigenous mobilities have proven to be perplexing for the coloniser. Earlier on, Indigenous “wandering” was essentialised as signalling a lack of fixed connection to place and, therefore, as an indication of propertylessness: “Aboriginal movement through country—the ordered, regular, seasonal circular mobility that was highly attuned to the landscape—was characterised as irrational and read as being antithetical to Indigenous rights in land” (Standfield 22). The “nomadic” lifestyle of the indigene was used to justify displacement and dispossession. Later, colonial structures of protectionism and assimilation demanded that Indigenous wandering be contained and controlled. Policies enacted “to ‘settle’ Aboriginal people . . . helped curtail Aboriginal physical resistance and removed Aboriginal people from country, making additional areas of land available for colonial occupation” (Standfield 22–23). However, across colonising times and territories, First Nations mobility “has proved to be vitally important in resisting colonial incursions and restrictions on movement” (23). Mobility on lands and seas is “an essential component of Aboriginal life ways . . . This travelling through and across territory creates country” (Russell 167; see also Robin 289). Put another way, walking on Country helps to establish and maintain sovereign connection to land. Such acts of ambulatory history and law making now abound in First Nations Australian fiction.

Alexis Wright’s 2006 novel *Carpentaria* opens and closes with epic movement. The story begins with the journey of the ancestral serpent, “laden with its own creative enormity” (1), shifting from sea to land. It moves inland to shape the rivers, the hills, the underground aquifers and the plains “all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria” (1). We learn

that the “serpent’s covenant permeates everything” (10). But humans, the first humans on the continent, have come to know of the serpent’s agency, for what is called the “inside knowledge” of the serpent’s covenant is retained in “Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began” (2). *Carpentaria* ends with the chief carrier of Aboriginal Law, the novel’s protagonist Norm Phantom, re-enacting both the motion and the mission of the creative serpent from the novel’s beginning. Having survived a giant storm out at sea and on an island in the Gulf, where he met up with his grandson, Bala, Norm travels back to the mainland. He arrives and looks out across the floodplains, where all human infrastructure has been washed away by the storm, and he starts thinking about the home he will rebuild where his old house once stood. Bala, who represents the next generation of Law holders, walks hand in hand with his grandfather across the land. The two do not speak, for it was “much better to listen to the mass choir of frogs” assembled around them as they move along. In the final sentence, the narrator reports that “there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh” (438). The return of the land’s traditional custodian with his future in hand is welcomed in song, and Indigenous sovereign connection to Country is represented in the bodily presence of Norm and Bala on the land via the action of walking. C. F. Black asserts that the body of Aboriginal law, encompassed in a Law of Relationship with the land, “vibrates in song” across Corpus Australis: “This is expressed in the concept of songlines, or Dreaming Tracks, which criss-cross the body of the continent” (15). Black describes these tracks as “trade routes of intellectual property . . . that affords the owner the songs that sing up and actualize the Law of the Land” (15–16). We might therefore read the final scene of *Carpentaria* as an actualising of Indigenous law, as represented in the bodily presence of Norm and Bala walking onto Country as it vibrates with song.

In Kim Scott’s 1999 novel, *Benang: From the Heart*, the narrator-protagonist Harley is *not* depicted as walking the land. At the very start of the novel, Harley rises from the ground to hover in the campfire smoke, and starts to sing. He touches the earth “only once” during his performance to leave “a single footprint in white sand and ash” (7). But otherwise, he floats above the ground as a storyteller, signalling, among other things, a lack of grounded connection to community and to the land. Harley remains ungrounded in relation to kin and Country. Like Vaughn and Lena in Ivan Sen’s *Beneath Clouds*, Harley is a character of his time: in Scott’s turn-of-the-century novel Harley is unable to walk sovereign. This is a time, as Megan Davis puts it, when a reconciliatory quest for truth and justice “went into abeyance . . . when then-Prime Minister John Howard . . . pushed back on the fundamental infrastructure required to address the country’s ‘unfinished business,’ such as constitutional recognition and treaty” (32).

However, Scott’s 2017 novel *Taboo* is all about finding one’s footing, about groundedness in Country in contemporary Australia, as key characters are granted access to a pastoral property they have been excluded from for decades. Tilly, the protagonist, recovering from abuse, is told by another Indigenous character, “We need you able to stand on your own two feet, Tilly. Anything else is a bonus” (189). Standing on one’s own feet in this novel becomes the literal and metaphorical foundation for “anything else” that might happen. Indeed, Tilly’s very name references a walker or wanderer: “Tilly” is properly Matilda. This is what her mother calls her (149). As Lukas Klik explains, while Matilda is the name associated with the transient labourer in A.B. Paterson’s “Waltzing Matilda,” the phrase “to walk (also waltz) the Matilda” means “to carry a swag, to travel the road” (Klik 185). Indeed, Tilly “travels a road,” re-traces the footsteps of her ancestors on Noongar land in the novel (Klik 185). In addition, the expression “a-waltzing Matilda,” as Paterson used it (Paterson 249), is most likely derived from the German *auf die Walze gehen*, which means “to go a-wandering” (Ludowyk 2). In abrogating a name linked with an itinerant of white nationalist landscapes, Scott appropriates Matilda/Tilly for Indigenous purposes, re-writing her as a wanderer whose footsteps re-assert Indigenous sovereignty over contemporary Australian space.

Although we are told that Tilly and her mob are “[not] used to walking” (Scott 216), later on, they do walk on Country. It is these acts of ambulation on traditional lands— “[f]ootprints formed in the vibrant earth” (217)—that become the restorative centre of the novel. They yield a sense of healing and re-connection, as people slowly come to know the land, its stories and its songs again. Nita, like other characters, is reluctant to walk on this particular property because it is a massacre site. But then, as she puts it, “I do like to walk where my family been. Hundreds and hundreds of generations of them been here, until not long ago really” (223). Another character, Gerald, sets off on a walk “just like his ancestors had done . . . He followed in their footsteps” (257). And as he strides out, carrying a stone in each hand, what begins as a *walk*, alone, gradually transforms into a *roam*:

A smooth stone cupped in the palm of each hand, Gerald was one of many moving among the paperbarks, there in the shadows near the water’s edge. Gerald was gently compelled: go this way, that way. And then there was a thin path through rushes and he strode out briskly, his muscles long and loose even so long without sleep. He breathed deeply, free of anxiety. The stones reminded him; let gravity ground you, your spirit soar; let the energy of this old path move you; let it set the direction and you just stay by the tiller. (Scott 258)

In his book *Palestinian Walks* (2007), Raja Shehadeh recounts places and times in recent Palestinian history when “it was possible to walk unimpeded” across Palestinian land (3), or when it was possible to participate in what is known as a *sarha*:

To go on a *sarha* was to roam freely, at will, without restraint. The verb form of the word means to let the cattle out to pasture early in the morning, leaving them to wander and graze at liberty. . . . A man going on a *sarha* wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. (2)

For Shehadeh in Palestine, as for Irene Watson in Australia, being able to roam becomes a marker of the experience of sovereign connection to land. To borrow from Shehadeh, Gerald, in the passage above, participates in a *sarha*: He no longer feels bound to a set track, but comes alive with the land as he wanders “this way, that way.” The stones that he bears are not a burden, do not weigh him down, but “ground” him in the land. Like someone in a boat riding the currents of the sea (“by the tiller”), Gerald is free to truly roam. While Gerald and other characters in *Taboo* are not granted any form of legal sovereignty, Scott has created a textual space, set on Noongar lands in Western Australia, in which Indigenous people are free to roam on Country. Gerald and other characters are seen to be acting out or performing as sovereign owners of land; they are represented as experiencing the land bodily as “sovereign Aboriginal [selves]” in being able to roam (Watson 41).

Julie Janson’s historical re-writing of early colonial Sydney, in her 2020 novel *Benevolence*, transforms the Greater Western Sydney and Hawkesbury River areas into Dharug country. This begins with acts of Indigenous mapping and naming on the page that faces page 1 of the text. Principally, the transformation of space into Dharug place in this novel occurs via the remarkable mobility of the protagonist, Muraging, or Mary. The wily Mary survives by remaining on the move. Her first escape is from the Parramatta Native School where she has been reared from a young age. Mary and her first lover, Boothuri, “walk an ancient pathway through sturdy white gum trees . . . and through open grass plains beneath the Blue Mountains” (79). The couple journey up and over the mountain range to a survivors’ camp, free of *waibala* (white people). Although she is captured again or forced to live and work for *waibala*, Mary

cannot be contained. She grows up negotiating what are referred to as “[h]er peoples’ footpaths” in the bush (91) or watery pathways “along the great sacred Deerubbin” (Hawkesbury River), described as “the shining silver track that binds and links her people from the Blue Mountains” to all the creeks and headlands across western and northern Sydney (334). Mary moves from one known place to another, to visit family, to escape, to hide, to play. Settings and locations are shifting all the time as Janson creates what Eve Vincent refers to as a developing “ambulatory history” of Australia, generated via Indigenous-led storytelling (Muecke et al.).

I would now like to switch focus from novels back to film as I move towards concluding this essay. Gunditjmarra filmmaker Richard J. Frankland’s 2009 film *Stone Bros.* also thematises and celebrates Indigenous mobility on the land, though in contemporary Western Australia. *Stone Bros.* is a stoner road movie, billed as the first feature-length Indigenous Australian comedy. The film centres on two cousins, Eddie (Luke Carroll) and Charlie (Leon Burchill). They live in Perth but Eddie is sick of the city and wants to travel back to his homeland, further inland. The road trip the cousins then undertake to Kalgoorlie involves them and others in a search for personal, communal, sexual and political identity. Near the beginning of the film, Eddie, who has lost his job as a cleaner in a Perth museum, packs his bags and announces his intentions to Charlie and Charlie’s partner, Rhonda (Rohanna Angus): “I’m going home, Rhonnie. I came here to make a go of things but all I’ve been doing is walking in circles. Now I’m gonna walk the land” (Frankland 00:06:46–55). In announcing his journey, a quest to live more purposefully, Eddie declares that he wants to walk on Country. Although this is one line in the film, it is an important statement of intent by the main character that initiates the road trip. His quest to “walk the land” is contrasted here with “walking in circles” or going nowhere. Such discourse positions an Indigenous quest to walk the land as meaningful and goal-oriented, rather than disorientating. To walk the land becomes synonymous in *Stone Bros.* with finding home, with re-establishing connection to sovereign place.

In addition to a focus on walking the land, and in further contrast to the curtailed mobility of Indigenous characters in *Beneath Clouds*, Eddie and Charlie are afforded freedom and relative autonomy of movement on their road trip. In a 2006 study of road films, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey notes how Indigenous drivers and passengers in many Australian road films are restrained by police who constantly check their identity and the roadworthiness of their cars. These characters do not experience freedom on the highway; their mobility is contained (99). Probyn-Rapsey examines two road films that Richard Frankland was involved in creating: a documentary, *Beating About the Bush* (1993) and his short-film *No Way to Forget* (1996). In both films, participants and characters face various constraints in their respective journeys (Probyn-Rapsey 102–04). However, while roads in film are often bound up with “narratives of imperial expansion,” Australian roads/tracks are at other times invoked as “sites for demonstrating and calling attention to the performativity of Aboriginal sovereignty” (Probyn-Rapsey 97). This is indeed the case with Frankland’s *Stone Bros.* In contrast to his earlier road films, Eddie’s car is never pulled over by the police or frustrated in its progress by the hand of the state. Eddie is briefly incarcerated in a prison farm but manages to free himself and to remain mobile. Eddie, Charlie and their entourage move into all manner of public and private spaces—cities and towns, outback/desert spaces, homes, bedrooms, public halls, petrol stations, roadhouses, bars, a mission station, museums—in order to assert their sovereignty over place. As the credits roll at the end of the film, a shot of Eddie, back in his homelands, reveals him wearing a uniform with an emblem on it, suggesting he is now a cultural tour guide or a ranger. He has fulfilled his promise to himself: he is walking the land.

These particular ambulatory histories of walking, wandering and roaming, of bodily being in and moving on Country, as represented in Indigenous-authored stories, serve to affirm Indigenous mobilities on lands and seas and to assert Indigenous sovereignty over unceded

territory. It is little wonder, then, that the word “walk” should appear twice in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, a contemporary Australian text that has now brought matters of voice, treaty and Indigenous sovereignty to the forefront of public debate. The rejection of an Indigenous voice to parliament by a majority of Australian voters in the recent referendum has not stifled public debate on sovereignty, nor has it diminished the significance of the *Uluru Statement’s* call to work towards a treaty or treaties that might recognise Indigenous forms of sovereignty over the continent. The *Uluru Statement* envisions an Australia in which constitutional reform will empower today’s Indigenous children to “walk in two worlds” wherein “their culture will be a gift to their country.” And the *Statement* closes with an invitation to bipedal action. The 200-plus Indigenous authors invite non-Indigenous Australians to engage in a simple and rather pedestrian human practice: “We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future” (Referendum Council).

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