

Watson's Lament, Walking the Land, and the Assertion of Sovereignty in Aboriginal Narratives

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Near the beginning of Richard J. Frankland's comic road-movie *Stone Bros.* (2009), the main character, Eddie, declares he is going to leave Perth and head home to Kalgoorlie: "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." Eddie's journey home and his quest to "walk the land" parallels a development found in recent Aboriginal narratives. This paper examines the trope of treading, roaming, walking the land in contemporary Aboriginal-authored texts, such as Frankland's film, and novels by Alexis Wright and Melissa Lucashenko. It argues the action of walking the land in story invokes not only a connection to country but an assertion of indigenous sovereignty. Retrospectively, these narratives might be read as responding to legal philosopher Irene Watson's 2003 speech, later published as an essay, "Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Are we Free to Roam?" In this seminal text, Watson specifically asserts the freedom to walk, to roam, "to sing and to live with the land of my ancestors," as a measure of the attainment of sovereignty. Still, writing at a low point in Aboriginal aspirations for justice, during the ascendancy of the no-apology Howard years, Watson yearned for "an Aboriginal voice" that might see "beyond the limited horizon" towards a time and place of sovereignty. These voices have now emerged. And while storytellers are not duty-bound to describe the social and political architecture of indigenous sovereign environments, their creative works do remain potentially transformative.

Bio

Geoff Rodoreda is a lecturer (*Lektor*) in the Department of New English Literature at the University of Stuttgart, Germany. He studied politics, media theory and journalism in Sydney, Australia, and worked as a journalist at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Adelaide, Sydney and Darwin before moving to Germany in 1996. In 2012, he gave up journalism work to concentrate on academic teaching and on writing his PhD, which has focused on the impact of the 1992 High Court Mabo decision on discourses of land and history in Australian fiction.