

We Are Going



SUMMARY

They came into the small town, a small group of people who were partially nude, quiet, and withdrawn. They were the only ones left from their tribe. They came here, to what had once been their sacred land. Now, though, the place is full of white men who hurry around like ants over an anthill. The property agent who owns the land put up a sign that says, “trash can be dumped here.” Now garbage partly covers the faint lines of what had once been sacred a ring built into the ground, where ceremonies were held. “Now it seems like we’re the ones who don’t belong here, but the white tribe are the ones who actually don’t belong. We’re supposed to be here. We come from the old traditions. We embody traditional gatherings and dances, and the sacred ground where ceremonies are held. We embody those traditional ceremonies themselves, as well as the laws and traditions of the oldest in our community. We embody the wondrous stories that come from the beginning of time when everything was created, which has never ended and is where dreams come from. We embody the legends and stories that are told by the tribe. We are history itself, with all its hunts and games filled with laughter. We are the campfires that appear to wander from place to place as we move around. We are the bolt of lightning over a nearby hill, fast and awe-inspiring, and we are the loud thunder who comes after the lightning. We are the calm, silent dawn that lightens up the dark inlet of ocean water. We are the shadows, resembling ghosts, that inch closer as the campfires start to go out. We embody nature and the past itself, all the old traditions and ways of life, which have now been dispersed throughout the land. The low bushes have disappeared, as have the hunts that we went on and the laughter of those games. The eagle has disappeared from this place, and so have the emu and the kangaroo. The sacred ring where ceremonies were held is gone. The gatherings and dances are gone. And we are leaving too.”

their lives and identities, and destroying the beauty and balance of the natural world.

The opening of the poem places it in the aftermath of British conquest in Australia, and strongly implies that many Aboriginal Australians have already lost their lives as a result of this conquest. The speaker describes “[a] semi-naked band,” or small group of people, coming into a “little town,” and says that they are “[a]ll that remained of their tribe.” This description makes clear that this tribe—implied to be a tribe of Aboriginal Australians—was once much larger; now, though, as a result of colonialism, only a small number are left.

This small group of Aboriginal Australians, who are described as “subdued and silent,” are then contrasted with the “many white men” who now “hurry about” the town “like ants.” In other words, where before the white colonizers were the minority, they have made themselves the majority—implicitly through conquest of the native people.

The poem also reveals that colonialism destroys whole ways of life and what is most sacred to these Aboriginal Australians. For example, “bora ground” is sacred land where ceremonies were traditionally held. However, the poem describes how the “old bora ground” has been taken over by white colonizers, who have even set up a sign indicating that “Rubbish May Be Tipped Here.” In other words, the sacred land of the Aboriginal Australians is now used by the colonizers as a dump.

Later the speaker remarks that “all the old ways” are “[g]one now and scattered,” suggesting that all the traditional ways of life of the Aboriginal Australians have been lost as a result of colonialism. The ending of the poem reinforces this sense of lost culture, when the speaker says that “[t]he bora ring is gone” and “[t]he corroboree is gone.” A bora ring is a sacred ceremonial site in Aboriginal culture, and a corroboree is a traditional gathering or ceremony. In dispossessing people of their land and their traditions, the speaker implies that British colonialism has destroyed these sacred aspects of Aboriginal life.

Finally, the poem suggests that colonialism has also destroyed the land and natural world itself. The speaker mourns the loss of the “eagle, the emu, and the kangaroo” who are now “gone from this place.” In other words, British colonialism has resulted not only in the loss of the native people and their culture, but also in the loss of the animals that once inhabited the land. Implicitly, what was balanced and integral in this natural setting has been destroyed.

Ultimately, the poem suggests that Aboriginal Australia, their ways of life, and all that is beautiful in the land they inhabit will be lost forever if something doesn’t change. The beginning of the poem shows a small group of Aboriginal people still



THEMES



THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF COLONIALISM

Written by an Aboriginal Australian poet, “We Are Going” examines the consequences of British colonialism in Australia. The poem describes what has been lost through British conquest, and what will be lost in the future if Aboriginal people aren’t respected and valued. Ultimately, the poem offers a powerful critique of colonialism. It suggests that colonialism is a form of cultural genocide, robbing Aboriginal Australians of

remaining. But the title, “We Are Going,” which repeats in the poem’s last line, suggests that these last Aboriginal people will soon disappear from the land as well. The diminishing line lengths of the poem also convey a sense of a way of life that is eroded and disappearing forever. And once it is gone, the poem strongly implies, it can’t come back.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 19-25



ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE

“We Are Going” explores the destructiveness of British colonialism and the erasure of the Aboriginal Australian people. At the same time, the poem offers a powerful *counter* to this erasure. While the poem begins with a description of Aboriginal Australians that could be from a white, colonial point of view, it goes on to speak from an Aboriginal perspective, celebrating Aboriginal identity and culture even as it mourns the erosion of this culture. In the face of colonialism, then, the poem asserts the beauty and resilience of Aboriginal Australians, and it implies the importance of centering and valuing Aboriginal experiences and perspectives.

The speaker starts by describing a group of Aboriginal people as they would be seen from a white, colonial perspective. The description of these people as a “semi-naked band” echoes colonial language, which often emphasized native people’s physical appearances and attire as “evidence” of their sub-human status.

Additionally, all that is said at this point about these people’s experience is that they are “subdued and silent.” This implies that they have undergone extreme suffering, yet the poem doesn’t, at this point, offer their point of view. The opening of the poem, then, implicitly conveys the ways in which Aboriginal Australians—and many native peoples around the world—are seen and represented: as dehumanized and fundamentally voiceless.

Yet the poem goes on to subvert this opening by giving voice to the people who are, at the start of the poem, “silent.” The speaker shifts to the collective first person: “We.” This can be read as the voice of the group of Aboriginal Australians described at the poem’s beginning. The poem goes on to sustain this point of view for the remainder of the poem. In its structure, then, the poem centers and prioritizes the perspective of people, who, it implies, have too often been dismissed, ignored, and silenced.

Speaking from this “we,” the poem speaks to the beauty and complexity of Aboriginal Australian identity and culture. In the list that sustains much of the poem, the speaker describes this

identity in detailed, varied ways. The list emphasizes the connection of identity to both tradition and the land, in such lines as “We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders,” “We are the lightning bolt over Gaphembah Hill,” and “We are the quiet daybreak paling the lagoon.”

The variety and complexity of this list—the speaker asserts that “We are” such varied things as “the hunts and the laughing games,” “shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires die low,” and “nature and the past”—emphasize the unique beauty and complexity of this culture.

Importantly, then, while the speaker describes the *erosion* of Aboriginal Australian culture—“all the old ways,” the speaker says, are “[g]one now and scattered”—the poem also powerfully asserts the *presence* of this culture. The vivid specificity of the speaker’s descriptions allows the reader to visualize the aspects of Aboriginal Australian experience that the poem describes. Additionally, the repetition of “we are” creates a sense that despite the violence and erasure they have experienced, the Aboriginal people speaking within the poem are present and resilient.

By giving voice to the people who are, at the start of the poem, described as “subdued and silent,” the poem implicitly shows the urgency and importance of understanding and valuing Aboriginal Australian perspectives. In doing so, it refuses to accept the colonial framework that erases these perspectives, instead showing a “we” who are dispossessed and “going”—but not gone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*They came in ...
... of their tribe.*

In the first three lines of the poem (“They came [...] their tribe”), the speaker describes a group of Aboriginal Australians coming into a small town. The speaker notes that this group is “semi-naked,” as well as “subdued and silent.” The speaker then notes that this group of people is “[a]ll that remained of their tribe.”

By letting the reader know that this group of people are the only ones who remain from their tribe, the speaker places the poem in the aftermath of British conquest in Australia, and also strongly implies that many Aboriginal people have already lost their lives as a result of this conquest. Those who do remain, the poem implies, are now dispossessed of their land, since they are coming into a “little town” that is no longer their own.

Additionally, the speaker describes the group of people as

“subdued and silent,” implying that they have gone through violence and suffering and are now withdrawn and quiet. The [sibilance](#) of /s/ sounds in this description, which evokes a kind of hush, emphasizes this silence.

The word “subdued” means to be withdrawn, solemn, or quiet. At the same time, it implies that one has been *forcibly* subdued, since the verb “subdue” means to conquer or pacify someone or a group of people by force. Both meanings are present and relevant in the poem, and the hush in these opening lines conveys a sense of overwhelming loss and violence that this small “band” of people has endured.

Interestingly, the speaker’s descriptions of this group of people, and the [imagery](#) the speaker uses, call to mind colonial descriptions of Aboriginal and Indigenous people. The speaker remarks that the “band” of people is “semi-naked.” Colonizers often emphasized the physical appearances of native people, including their attire or partial nudity, to make the argument that they were less “civilized”—and implicitly less human—than white Europeans.

By describing the group of people as “silent,” the speaker also suggests that they are voiceless or unable to articulate their experience. This, too, resonates with the ways white, colonial frameworks have depicted Indigenous people: as suffering, solemn, and fundamentally inarticulate.

At the start of the poem, then, the speaker [alludes](#) to the way that Aboriginal Australians have often been seen from a white, colonial perspective: the reader sees this group of people as a white outsider might see them, but the poem doesn’t yet fully show their own perspective or experience.

LINES 4-7

*They came here ...
... old bora ring.*

It becomes clear that these Aboriginal Australians have come to a place that was once theirs but is now inhabited by white colonizers. “They came here to the place of their old bora ground,” the speaker says in line 4. The [anaphora](#) of “They came,” which repeats from the opening of the poem, creates rhythm and musicality, and imbues the experience of this group of people with gravity and weight. At the same time, the speaker’s use of the word “here” places the poem, and the reader with it, within this single place in time, implicitly emphasizing the importance of this “here”—this specific land.

The speaker’s [allusion](#) to “bora ground” is also important. Bora ground is sacred ground to Aboriginal Australians, where ceremonies were traditionally held. By saying that this group of people came to their “old bora ground,” the speaker reveals that these people have been displaced from what was once most sacred to them, since it has now been turned into a “little town.” In line 4, then, the poem subtly shifts from the more distanced, almost dismissive stance at the poem’s opening, and moves

closer to the perspective of the people who were “silent” at the poem’s start.

Indeed, line 5 goes on to describe the white colonizers in this place as this group of Aboriginal Australians might have seen them: these white men “hurry about like ants,” oblivious to the sacredness of the land that they now inhabit. This [simile](#) works to create a clear visual image of these white men who, like ants, are intent only upon constructing what they want to construct, regardless of what was there before. Their busy, hurried activity, too, [juxtaposes](#) with the subdued, silent group of people who watch them.

In lines 6-7, the juxtaposition between the white colonizers and the Aboriginal Australians who observe them becomes even more stark. The speaker remarks that an “estate agent,” or property manager—implicitly white and British—has set up a sign over this sacred ground that says, “Rubbish May Be Tipped Here,” meaning that people can leave their trash on this area of land. And in fact, this rubbish now “half covers the traces of the old bora ring.”

This last image is especially important to the meaning of these lines. Here, it becomes clear that the white colonizers have not only taken over this land to build a town; they are also using the most sacred place on the land—the “bora ring”—as a dump. A bora ring is, in traditional Aboriginal culture, a sacred site where ceremonies, especially coming of age ceremonies, would be held. Here, though, all that remains of this ring are just “traces,” now half-covered with colonizers’ trash: the poem implies that the traditions, culture, and sacred land of the Aboriginal Australians have already been almost completely destroyed through colonialism.

Several poetic effects in these lines work to emphasize their meaning. The /r/ sounds in “bora ring” and “bora ground” are echoed in the /r/ sound of “rubbish;” this [consonance](#) enacts what the poem describes, the rubbish being dumped onto the sacred ground. At the same time, the consonance emphasizes the radical difference *between* these two things—the sacred bora ground, and the “rubbish” which is now dumped carelessly onto it. Meanwhile, the [alliterative](#) /n/ sound in “notice” repeats in “now,” emphasizing how the actions of the colonizers have resulted in what is “now” here in this place.

Finally, it is notable that these lines are almost all [end-stopped](#). Lines 5 (“Where now [...] ants”), 6 (“Notice [...] tipped here”), and 7 (“Now...bora ring”) in fact all feature full stops. This creates a sense of finality, implying that with the onset of colonialism, Aboriginal Australians’ ways of life have been permanently altered.

LINES 8-9

*We are as ...
... the old ways.*

The poem shifts in line 8 (“We are as strangers [...] the

strangers"), speaking now from the perspective of a collective, first person "we." It soon becomes clear that this "we" is in fact the group of people who were said to be "silent" at the poem's beginning, the group of Aboriginal Australians who were displaced and "all that remained of their tribe."

"We are as strangers," this collective voice says, "but the white tribe are the strangers." Importantly, this line contains a subtle [simile](#): the collective, Aboriginal speaker says that they are "as strangers," meaning that they have been made to feel like they are strangers. But it is the white colonizers, the "white tribe," who are *truly* the strangers. The [repetition](#) (specifically [diacope](#)) of "strangers," here, emphasizes this difference between how these people are seen and made to feel, and what they understand to be true about their situation.

In line 9, the collective speaker goes on to affirm this sense that they, these Aboriginal Australians, are the ones who truly belong: "We belong here," the speaker says, "we are of the old ways." The repetition of "we," which appears three times in these two lines, emphasizes the position of the Aboriginal speaker; no longer viewed from the outside as voiceless, inarticulate, or helpless, this speaker asserts both their presence and their perspective. In doing so, too, the speaker asserts that they, the Aboriginal people, are the ones who belong "here"—the word "here" repeating from earlier in the poem—and that they are "of" or from, the "old ways," ceremonies, and traditions.

Interestingly, while these lines carry forward the pattern of [end-stops](#) that began in the lines before, the end-stopped lines in this instance have a different effect. Where before they created a sense of finality and closure, implying the ending of Aboriginal culture and existence, here the end-stopped lines actually do the opposite, emphasizing the strong *presence* of the collective, Aboriginal speaker and their authority.

Line 9, "We belong here, we are of the old ways," also makes use of [asyndeton](#), omitting the conjunction that might ordinarily link the clauses together. This asyndeton heightens the sense of the speaker's authority and rightness, as the first clause leads directly, almost inevitably, into the next.

LINES 10-13

*We are the ...
... wandering camp fires.*

This collective "we" continues to speak, listing aspects of Aboriginal identity as they assert who "[w]e are." This phrase, "we are," drives these lines through [anaphora](#), emphasizing the speaker's presence, resilience, and sense of self. "We are the corroboree and the bora ground," the speaker says, in line 10, and, in line 11, "We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders."

Here, the speaker connects their identity to culture and tradition, [alluding](#) to both "the corroboree" and "the bora

ground." A corroboree is a traditional part of Aboriginal culture; it can refer to a gathering or a collective dance or ceremony. Bora ground is sacred ground where these ceremonies would be held. And the speaker says that they are also these ceremonies themselves, as well as the "laws" that come from the "elders," the oldest people in the community.

Several elements of [repetition](#) reinforce the speaker's authority in these lines. First, "bora ground" repeats from earlier in the poem, when the more distanced speaker said that this group of people came to "their old bora ground." Here, though, the phrase repeats differently, as the speaker asserts that they *are* the bora ground itself.

The word "old" also repeats, from the phrase "old ways" in line 9. In this instance, however, the speaker says not just that they are "of" the old ways or the old ceremonies, but that they *are* the old ceremonies. The speaker suggests, in each of these instances, that their identity is not only connected to this ground or to these ceremonies, but that it is *inseparable* from these things.

The speaker builds on this list in lines 12-13, saying, "We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told. / We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires." Here, the speaker continues to allude to aspects of Aboriginal culture and ways of life.

In Aboriginal culture, Dream Time refers to the beginning of time, when it is believed that everything was created by the spirits and the ancestors; this beginning is believed to have never ended, and is the source of dreams, stories, and understandings of the sacred. Here, the speaker asserts that they are the "wonder tales," or wondrous stories that come from Dream Time, as well as the tribal legends that may have developed from these stories. The speaker also says that they are the "past" as a whole, as well as specific things like "hunts," "laughing games" and "camp fires" that would seem to "wander" with the people who made them from place to place.

Interestingly, over the course of this list from lines 10-13, the lines grow in length, as the speaker evokes more and more aspects of this culture and identity, bringing to mind a whole way of life. The [asyndeton](#) in lines 11-13 (the lack of coordinating conjunctions between clauses) emphasizes this sense of Aboriginal culture as rich and multifaceted, since each item in the list seems to give way to the next, implying that the list could continue forever.

LINES 14-17

*We are the ...
... the dark lagoon.*

With lines 14-17 ("We are the lightning [...] dark lagoon"), the speaker continues to express who "we are," now connecting Aboriginal identity to aspects of the natural world. "We are the lightning bolt over Gamphembah Hill / Quick and terrible," the

speaker says, “And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow.” Here, the speaker implies that their collective identity is inseparable from these elements of nature, including lightning and thunder. It is important, though, that the speaker also highlights a particular place, “Gaphembah Hill,” in connection with this lightning, suggesting that they are lightning, but also lightning within this specific landscape.

These lines sustain the [anaphora](#) of “we are” that began the lines before, yet they also diverge from the anaphora, with lines 15 and 16 (“Quick [...] fellow.”) each beginning differently. This creates variation in the poem, and brings the [images](#) the speaker describes to life—as, for the space of these lines, the lightning and thunder seem to take over the poem’s form with their powerful presence.

It is notable, too, that the speaker [personifies](#) thunder, referring to it with the capitalized “Thunderer” and describing it as “that loud fellow.” This personification suggests that the thunder within this natural setting is well-known to the speaker, as another person might be. Interestingly, too, while what the speaker describes here (a thunder and lightning storm) might be overwhelming or powerful, the [consonant](#) /l/ sounds in these lines (“lightening,” “Hill,” “terrible,” “fellow”) soften the description, suggesting that the collective speaker doesn’t fear these things but views them as familiar and even comforting since they are a natural part of the speaker’s home—and implicitly part of the speaker themselves.

In line 17, “We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon,” the speaker continues to express their identity as inseparably connected with this landscape. Through clear, vivid [imagery](#), the speaker conjures a picture of dawn breaking over a lagoon, a kind of inlet of ocean water that is usually separated from the sea by a coral reef or another kind of barrier. Here, then, the speaker says that they are the landscape but also these aspects of change and transformation within the landscape, the experience of daybreak within this particular, beautiful setting. All of these lines can, in a sense, be read [metaphorically](#), as the speaker says that they “are” all of these elements in the natural world, as well as the ceremonies and traditions evoked in the lines before. Yet while these lines might automatically be read as metaphors by a Western audience, other aspects of the poem suggest that aren’t intended this way.

Consider the earlier shift, when the speaker moved from saying that this group of people went to “their old bora ground” to asserting “[w]e are [...] the bora ground,” emphasizing that they *are* this ground and the land itself. Consider, too, the repetition of “[w]e are,” in which the speaker asserts, over and over, that they *are* all of these things. Importantly, then, while these lines can be read as metaphors, the speaker also seems to be saying that these *aren’t* only metaphors—that the speaker’s collective identity is inextricably connected to these elements of culture, tradition, and the natural world.

LINES 18-20

*We are the ...
... now and scattered.*

The speaker evokes a specific image of life within an Aboriginal Australian community, “the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.” This [imagery](#) conveys a campfire at night starting to burn down, while the dark shadows around the fire come closer as the light of the fire goes out.

The speaker asserts, here, that “[w]e are” these “shadow-ghosts,” aligning their identity not only with the light of the “wandering camp fires” as in line 13 (“We are the past [...] the wandering camp fires”), but also with the darkness around the fire. The [repetition](#) of “camp fires,” then, conveys a sense of the speaker’s identity as integral and whole, including all aspects of life—not only the fire, but also the darkness of night around it.

The [consonant](#) hard /c/ sounds in “creeping” and “camp fires” emphasizes this sense of integration, and the speaker’s identification with all of these aspects of traditional life. Yet it is important, too, that at this moment of the poem the image conveys a sense of a fire dying down, a light starting to fade. And this is where the poem turns.

“We are nature and the past,” the speaker goes on to say, “all the old ways / Gone now and scattered.” Here, the speaker asserts that in addition to all the specific things they have listed, they are “nature” and “the past” as a whole, in entirety. They also say that they are the “old ways,” but then they go on to say that these “old ways”—and implicitly nature and the past, too—are “gone now” and “scattered” or dispersed, no longer integrated and whole.

Repetition works powerfully here to convey the speaker’s meaning. In addition to the repetition of the image of “camp fires,” here the speaker repeats “the past” from line 13 (“We are the past”) and “old ways” from line 9 (“we are of the old ways”). In these iterations, though, the speaker is not only asserting that they *are* these things. The speaker is also letting the reader know that these things are now *gone*, lost with the onset of colonialism, and with the destruction of Aboriginal Australian life and the land they inhabited with respect and care.

This means, then, that since the speaker *is* all of these things, by implication they can’t *exist* without them. The connection of colonialism to this loss is further emphasized in the repetition of “now,” which previously appeared in the poem when the speaker described the sacred ground “[w]here now many white men hurry about like ants.” The “now” of the poem’s present, then, is a “now” permanently changed by colonization, which has fragmented and destroyed Aboriginal Australian life.

At the level of the poem’s form, the line endings and line lengths also reinforce this sense of unalterable change and loss. While most of the preceding lines have been [end-stopped](#), in these lines a moment of [enjambment](#) occurs at the very moment that the poem turns, when the speaker says, “all the old ways / Gone

now and scattered." This enjambment enacts what the speaker describes, as the poem disrupts the pattern of steady end-stopped lines. Meanwhile, the lines here diminish in length, conveying a sense of erosion in contrast to the plentiful lists that came before.

LINES 21-22

*The scrubs are ...
... from this place.*

After this turn, the speaker's list changes; instead of listing who "[w]e are," the speaker now lists what is "gone," what has been lost because of colonialism.

In lines 21-22, this list includes aspects of culture but also nature and this particular land: "The scrubs are gone," the speaker says, "the hunting and the laughter. / The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place." In this list, the speaker brings up unique aspects of the Australian landscape and the animals that have inhabited it, including "scrubs," or low bushes or brush, eagles, emus (a bird similar to an ostrich), and kangaroo. All of these animals and aspects of nature, the speaker suggests, have left "this place," implicitly because of the colonizers' destructive presence.

Importantly, where before the speaker said that they are "the hunts and the laughing games," here, "the hunting the laughter" are now gone. The slight changes in the form of each word—"hunts" changes to "hunting" and "laughing" to "laughter"—works to evoke what has been lost like an echo, recalling what was while also communicating the way in which it has been permanently changed.

This list also powerfully [repeats](#) (again using [diacope](#)) the word "gone," which appears three times in these two lines alone. After the repetition of "we are" that drove much of the poem, this repeating word implies that what is gone is now the most powerful presence in the speaker's life, as palpable as the speaker's collective life and experience previously was. All of this, the speaker says, is now "gone," implying that it is permanently lost, and the return to [end-stopped lines](#), here, emphasizes again this sense of finality.

Interestingly, these lines' combination of [asyndeton](#) and the conjunction "and" also recall an earlier moment in the poem, when the speaker said, "We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wander camp fires." Here, the speaker again combines asyndeton (omitting the conjunctions that would normally come after "The scrubs are gone" and "The eagle is gone") with the conjunction "and." Where before this combination conveyed the richness and diversity of Aboriginal Australian culture and loss, here the similar syntax recalls that diversity, but from a stance of mourning, as it expresses how much has been lost.

LINES 23-25

The bora ring ...

... we are going.'

The closing lines show the full implications of this loss. In a sequence of short, [end-stopped lines](#), the speaker says, "The bora ring is gone. / The corroboree is gone. / And we are going."

Here, the speaker again uses [repetition](#), [alluding](#) to the "bora ring" that appeared earlier in the poem, as well as the "corroboree," both sacred aspects of Aboriginal Australian culture that the speaker asserted were inextricable parts of their identity. Yet now, both of these are "gone," and the [parallelism](#) of these sentences emphasizes this sense of irrecoverable loss.

The final line, too, comes as almost inevitable: "And we are going," the speaker says. The speaker has expressed, throughout the poem, who they are as Aboriginal Australians, defining their identity as intricately connected to the land, to culture, and to all aspects of traditional life. If all of these aspects of their life, culture, and who they are, then, are now gone, then the "we," too, the poem suggests, will be lost. The [polyptoton](#) of "going," which repeats "gone" in another form of the word, emphasizes this connection.

Yet is important that something also resists this feeling of inevitability. The line "we are going" is in the present tense—and it is important that the "we" who have spoken throughout much of the poem, the collective "we" of the remaining Aboriginal people, are not, yet, gone.

Additionally, while the poem makes clear that all of these aspects of their life and culture have been destroyed by colonialism, the speaker also made these qualities of Aboriginal experience vividly present, through the assertions of who "[w]e are." In doing so, the poem suggests that there might, possibly, be a way forward for the "we" of the Aboriginal people who remain. If something can change, the poem implies, if the destructiveness of colonialism can be halted, if the Aboriginal people and their land can be treated with respect, then perhaps the "we," and who they are, can survive.



SYMBOLS



RUBBISH

In the opening scene of the poem, the speaker describes a group of dispossessed Aboriginal Australians coming into a small town now inhabited by white men. The speaker says that this place is the site of the "old bora ground," meaning that it was sacred land to the Aboriginal Australians, where ceremonies were held. Now, though, an "estate agent," or white property manager, has put up a sign that says "Rubbish May Be Tipped Here," and this rubbish "half covers the traces of the old bora ring," the most sacred site within Aboriginal culture.

It is clear that in this scene, what the speaker is describing is

literal; colonizers have built a town on top of sacred Aboriginal land, and established a dump for their trash there. However, this detail about the "rubbish," or trash being dumped onto the bora ring, is also [symbolic](#).

Trash is what people discard or throw away—what they least value. Here, the speaker reveals that the white colonizers view the land with such disregard that they have made the most sacred area of land into a trash heap. The rubbish in the poem, then, symbolizes the colonizers' relationship to the land they have taken over, and to the Aboriginal Australians who inhabited it. While these people lived in the land with reverence and respect, the white men who now live here treat it in the opposite way, disrespecting and destroying everything that is most meaningful and beautiful within it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here.' / Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"We Are Going" [alludes](#) to several important aspects of Aboriginal Australian culture and tradition, including the bora ground and bora ring, the corroboree, and Dream Time. The poem also alludes to a local hill, establishing the importance of this specific landscape.

Bora ground is sacred ground in Aboriginal culture. A bora ring is a ring built into the ground out of earth and stone, where ceremonies would be held. The speaker alludes to both bora ground and the bora ring in several moments.

At the start of the poem, the speaker says that the group of dispossessed Aboriginal Australians come into a small town (now inhabited by white men) that is the "place of their old bora ground." This means that white colonizers have built a town on top of Aboriginal sacred land. The poem further says that the colonizers have set up a sign saying that trash can be dumped onto this area of land, and this trash "half covers the traces of the old bora ring." Here, the speaker shows the degree of disrespect and disregard that the colonizers show to the Aboriginal people and the land itself.

Later, the speaker asserts that they "are [...] the bora ground," revealing how their identity is inextricably connected to the sacred land and its meaning. Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker says that "[t]he bora ring is gone," implying that this most important aspect of Aboriginal culture has been lost as a result of colonialism.

The speaker's allusions to the corroboree are similarly

important. A corroboree is a traditional dance or gathering within Aboriginal culture. The speaker says that they "are the corroboree," but at the end of the poem mourns the fact that the corroboree, too, is "gone." Implicitly, these most important aspects of Aboriginal culture—along with the land to which this culture is inextricably tied—have been destroyed.

The speaker also refers to Dream Time, an important concept in Aboriginal culture. Dream Time refers to the beginning of time, when, in Aboriginal thought, everything was created by the spirits and the ancestors. Traditions, ceremonies, and understandings of the sacred are believed to have come from this time, passed down by the ancestors of the modern-day Aboriginal people. Importantly, too, Dream Time is thought to have never ended and to be ongoing, as modern-day Aboriginal people, too, participate in it.

In the poem, the speaker says that they are the "wonder tales of Dream Time," referring to the stories and legends passed down over generations. This allusion is important in the poem, because it shows the speaker asserting the unique dignity, sacredness, and meaning of their culture. In the face of the destructiveness of colonialism, the speaker shows that Aboriginal culture is deeply rich and profoundly meaningful.

Finally, the speaker alludes to "Gaphembah Hill" when describing the lightning striking within this landscape. This allusion to a specific local landmark shows the connection between the speaker's identity and this specific setting. By naming something so local, the speaker shows their knowledge of this place, which has been passed down over thousands of years.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "They came here to the place of their old bora ground"
- **Line 7:** "Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring."
- **Line 10:** "We are the corroboree and the bora ground,"
- **Line 12:** "We are the wonder tales of Dream Time,"
- **Line 14:** "We are the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The bora ring is gone. / The corroboree is gone."

SIMILE

Two [similes](#) appear in "We Are Going," both toward the beginning of the poem. First, the speaker describes a town, once sacred land to the Aboriginal people, where "now the many white men hurry about like ants." This simile helps to subtly shift the point of view in the poem. After the beginning, in which the speaker described a group of dispossessed Aboriginal people in a distanced, almost detached way, here the poem allows the reader to see the colonizers as this group of

Aboriginal people might have seen them.

The simile is also important in its meaning, conjuring an image of white men who, like ants, are completely occupied in constructing their town, regardless of what was there before them or even the land that they are building on. Their hurried activity and apparent obliviousness to the harm they are causing [juxtapose](#) powerfully with the Aboriginal people who watch them, “subdued and silent,” and aware of the full implications of the white men’s actions.

Shortly after this, the speaker uses a simile to heighten this juxtaposition between the Aboriginal people and the white colonizers. “We are as strangers here now,” the collective speaker says, “but the white tribe are the strangers.” Importantly, the speaker says that they are “as” strangers, meaning that they are not truly strangers; it is the white men, the “white tribe,” who are truly the strangers, the speaker asserts. This simile, then, establishes the gap between how the Aboriginal people are viewed and treated, and who they understand themselves to actually be.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.”
- **Line 8:** “We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.”

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) plays an important role in “We Are Going.” First, at the start of the poem, the speaker repeats the phrase “They came,” describing the group of Aboriginal people coming into a town now inhabited by white men. This anaphora emphasizes the dispossession the Aboriginal people have undergone, since they come into a town, an area of land, that is no longer their own. At the same time, the anaphora shows how this is still their land, since, in its second iteration, the speaker says that “They came here to the place of their old bora ground.” The anaphora, then, shows that even though a white, colonial town has been built on this land, it is still bora ground, sacred ground, to the Aboriginal people.

Then, as the poem shifts and the collective “we” begins to speak, the phrase “[w]e are” repeats in lines 8-14 (“We are as strangers [...] Gaphembah Hill”) and again in lines 17-19 (“We are the quiet daybreak [...] all the old ways”). This anaphora drives the poem, creating a sense of authority and strong identity, as the speaker asserts, over and over, who they truly are. The repetition of “[w]e are” also creates a powerful contrast with the depictions of erosion and destruction connected with colonialism. It suggests that despite all the destruction and violence they have endured, the Aboriginal people who remain are still resilient, present, and deeply connected to their identity and all that it means.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker repeats “[t]he” when listing all that is gone as a result of colonialism. This word repeats in lines 21-24 (“The scrubs are gone [...] The corroboree is gone”) and emphasizes how many aspects of Aboriginal life and the land itself have been lost. It suggests, too, that the Aboriginal people who remain will also be lost, if something doesn’t change in how they, and the land, are regarded.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “They came”
- **Line 4:** “They came”
- **Line 8:** “We are”
- **Line 10:** “We are”
- **Line 11:** “We are”
- **Line 12:** “We are”
- **Line 13:** “We are”
- **Line 14:** “We are”
- **Line 17:** “We are”
- **Line 18:** “We are”
- **Line 19:** “We are”
- **Line 21:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 22:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 23:** “The”
- **Line 24:** “The”

REPETITION

In addition to the [anaphora](#) that drives much of the poem, “We Are Going” contains numerous other instances of [repetition](#).

For example, take the [diacope](#) of line 8:

‘We are as **strangers** here now, but the white tribe are the **strangers**.

The speaker also repeats the word “tribe” in this line, which first referred to the Aboriginal people in line 3 yet now refers to the colonizers. In these instances, the direct repetition of “strangers” and “tribe” emphasizes not the similarity, but rather the difference between the Aboriginal people and the white men who have taken over their land. The Aboriginal people, the poem makes clear, might be *treated* like strangers, but they are the ones who truly belong.

The poem also repeats the phrase “old ways,” and the word “old,” in lines 9 (“we are of the old ways”), 11 (“[w]e are the old ceremonies”), and 19 (“all the old ways”). This repetition emphasizes the importance of the past and tradition in Aboriginal culture, and also highlights the difference between the past—in which the Aboriginal people lived in the land with respect and care—and the present, in which white colonizers have destroyed so much that was sacred and beautiful within this setting.

The speaker also repeats certain words to show how those very things that are crucial to Aboriginal identity have been lost because of colonialism. For instance, the speaker says in line 13, “[w]e are the past.” The word “past” then appears again in line 19, but in this iteration the speaker is describing what is “[g]one now and scattered.”

Similarly, the poem repeats the words “bora ground,” “bora ring,” and “corroboree” toward the beginning and ending of the poem, showing how these things that are so fundamental and sacred within Aboriginal life and to Aboriginal identity have been permanently altered and lost.

These patterns of repetition come together in the poem’s ending, when the speaker repeats “is gone”/“are gone” throughout the last lines of the poem (an example of [epistrophe](#)). Here, the direct repetition emphasizes how colonialism has destroyed such diverse aspects of the natural world and of Aboriginal culture. The repetition of the word, here, imbues these lines with music, rhythm, and the falling rhythms of mourning.

The combination of epistrophe and anaphora also creates [parallelism](#) in the final three lines of the poem, which in turn create a moment of [climax](#):

The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going!

The parallel construction here lets readers know that all these events are related and, indeed, that one disappearance leads to the next. The bora ring is where ceremonies would be held, but it “is gone”; as such, those ceremonies—the “corroboree”—are “gone”; and now, the people, too, “are going.”

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “tribe.”
- **Line 4:** “bora ground”
- **Line 7:** “bora ring.”
- **Line 8:** “strangers,” “tribe,” “strangers.”
- **Line 9:** “old ways.”
- **Line 10:** “corroboree,” “bora ground,”
- **Line 11:** “old”
- **Line 13:** “past,”
- **Line 19:** “past,” “old ways”
- **Line 20:** “Gone”
- **Line 21:** “are gone”
- **Line 22:** “is gone,” “are gone”
- **Lines 23-25:** “The bora ring is gone. / The corroboree is gone. / And we are going.”

POLYPTOTON

One form of repetition that is especially meaningful in “We Are

Going” is [polyptoton](#), in which a word repeats in a different form. For example, in line 13 the speaker says that “[w]e are [...] the hunts and the laughing games.” Then, in line 21, the speaker mourns the fact that “the hunting and the laughter” are both now “gone.” Here, the earlier “hunts” (a noun) changes to “hunting” (a verb). Meanwhile the other word, “laughing,” changes in the opposite direction, as the verb, “laughing” reappears in the noun form of “laughter.”

This polyptoton creates a subtle pattern in the poem and shows what the speaker depicts—the hunting and the laughter—as dynamic and alive, ever changing. At the same time, the shifts enact what the poem describes, as these aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture have been irrevocably altered as a result of colonialism.

These earlier instances of polyptoton set the stage for the end of the poem, when the word “gone,” which repeats throughout the poem’s closing lines, shifts to the gerund “going.” This use of polyptoton emphasizes that the “we” in the poem are inextricably connected to everything they have described; if all of these aspects of their culture, past, and nature itself are “gone,” then they too can’t continue to exist. At the same time, the shift to “going” moves the speaker, and the reader to the present tense, and the crucial urgency of the poem’s message. The “we” at the end “are going,” the speaker says--yet this ending also remains suspended, inviting the reader to imagine a reality in which the “we” don’t have to go at all.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** “the hunts and the laughing games”
- **Line 21:** “gone,” “the hunting and the laughter.”
- **Line 22:** “gone,” “gone”
- **Line 23:** “gone.”
- **Line 24:** “gone.”
- **Line 25:** “going.”

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) appears in multiple places in “We Are Going,” and the device helps develop the poem’s tone. Without conjunction to slow things down, the reader is pulled forward through the poem.

First, in the sequence of lines beginning with the [anaphoric](#) “We are,” asyndeton appears throughout the speaker’s list. For example, in line 9, the speaker says:

We belong here, we are of the old ways.

The speaker omits the conjunction “and” that would normally link these two clauses. The speaker then goes on to use asyndeton throughout this list, in such instances as “We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders,” and “We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.” Throughout this

list, asyndeton emphasizes the richness and diversity of Aboriginal culture and identity, implying that the speaker's list could go on forever. Additionally, the asyndeton in these lines imbues the speaker's words with authority, as each clause gives way inevitably to the next.

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker again uses asyndeton. Here, when listing all that is "gone" because of the destructiveness of colonialism, the speaker omits conjunctions in parts of the list. For example, the speaker says in line 22:

The eagle is gone, the emu and kangaroo are gone
from this place.

Here, the asyndeton recalls the speaker's earlier list, but in doing so only emphasizes how much has changed, since now all the richness and vitality the speaker evoked in Aboriginal life and culture has been eroded and is on the point of being lost altogether.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "We belong here, we are of the old ways."
- **Lines 11-12:** "We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders. / We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told."
- **Line 13:** "We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires."
- **Line 19:** "We are nature and the past, all the old ways"
- **Lines 21-22:** "The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter. / The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place."

IMAGERY

The [imagery](#) in "We Are Going" is clear and vivid, conveying the beauty and diversity of the landscape and traditional Aboriginal life, as well as the stark reality of the present, in which so much has been lost.

The poem opens with imagery of this loss. The speaker describes a group of Aboriginal people coming into a small town, "semi-naked" and "subdued and silent." In this town, "many white men hurry about like ants," and an "estate agent" has put up a sign indicating that trash can be dumped on the sacred bora ground.

These opening images communicate the violence and dispossession the Aboriginal people have undergone. They also show the callousness with which the white colonizers now inhabit this land. Finally, the image of trash covering the "traces of the old bora ring" clearly shows how the colonizers have desecrated and destroyed Aboriginal life and what is most sacred within it.

As the "we" in the poem begins to speak, though, and describes with clarity and authority who the Aboriginal people are, the

imagery changes. Through such images as "the wandering camp fires," "the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill," and "the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon," the speaker shows the beauty and vitality of Aboriginal life and identity, as well as the beauty of this landscape. These images are vibrantly alive, asserting the ongoing resilience of the Aboriginal people who remain.

Even at the end of the poem, when the speaker lists what is now "gone" because of colonialism, the images they invoke—including the "scrubs," or low brush, and animals such as eagles, emu, and kangaroo—make these things that have been lost vividly present. In doing so, the poem becomes even more urgent, asking the reader to consider a world in which Aboriginal life, and this land, were respected and restored.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 4-7
- Line 10
- Lines 13-18
- Lines 21-25

METAPHOR

Throughout the middle part of the poem, the collective speaker lists aspects of who "[w]e are." This list includes such things as "the wonder tales of Dream Time," "the hunts and the laughing games," "the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill," and "the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires die low."

On a first reading, and especially to a Western reader, these lines might come across as [metaphors](#), since the speaker is asserting that they are all of these diverse things and aspects of the natural world. The reader might assume that the speaker means that they are *like* these things or are figuratively similar to them.

Yet it is important to note that within the poem, the lines are not *presented* as metaphors. In fact, the speaker lets the reader know that it is a mistake to read their assertions as *only* figurative. For instance, the speaker insists that they aren't just "of the old ways," as they say in line 9; they also "are [...]" the old ways." The speaker, then, makes clear that they truly *are* all of these things that they list, and that Aboriginal identity is finally inseparable from the aspects of tradition, culture, and the natural world that the poem evokes.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-20:** "We are the corroboree and the bora ground, / We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders. / We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told. / We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires. / We are the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill / Quick and terrible,

/ And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow. / We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon. / We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low. / We are nature and the past, all the old ways / Gone now and scattered.”

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line in “We Are Going” is [end-stopped](#), creating a somber, steady march throughout. While some end-stopped lines have no terminal punctuation whatsoever, others conclude with the unmistakable finality of a full stop. For example, take lines 5-7, when the speaker describes what things are now like in this town that was once Aboriginal land:

Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.

Each of the lines is end-stopped and also full stopped, the line endings coinciding with the ending of a sentence. This emphasizes the sense of finality and loss that the opening scene evokes, suggesting that the erasure brought about by colonialism is permanent.

Then, as the collective “we” begins to speak, asserting who they are and the meaning and importance of their culture and identity, the poem uses end-stopped lines a bit differently. Here, the end-stops emphasize the speaker’s authority, conveying the sense that what the speaker says is true and inarguable. These end-stopped lines imbue the speaker’s words with power and meaningful presence. For example, take lines 9-10, where the strong, steady end-stops leave no room for questioning the speaker's assertions:

We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders.

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker again uses end-stopped lines to a different effect. Here, as the speaker lists everything that is “gone” as a result of colonialism, each line ends with a full stop. These end-stopped lines convey the sense of irrevocable loss that the speaker describes—the sense that once these things are completely gone, they can't come back.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 6-13
- Lines 15-18

- Lines 20-25

ENJAMBMENT

While the vast majority of the lines in “We Are Going” are [end-stopped](#), the poem also uses fleeting moments of [enjambment](#). For example, near the beginning of the poem, the speaker says:

They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.

Here, the enjambment between “ground” and “Where” enacts the sense of disruption and change the speaker describes, as what was once sacred Aboriginal land has now been so radically changed.

The enjambment toward the middle of the poem has a different effect. As the speaker lists who “We are,” in phrases driven forward by [anaphora](#), most of the lines finish with full stops. However, when the speaker says “We are the lightning bolt over Gaphembah Hill,” the line ending is, arguably, enjambed:

We are the lightning bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,

It's *possible* to read this as end-stopped, given that there's an implied pause after “Hill.” But the line is certainly more ambiguous in its ending than the very strongly end-stopped lines that surround it. This helps to evoke the image the speaker describes, making the suddenness of this lightning strike all the more present within the poem.

In line 19, the speaker uses enjambment again. Here, the enjambment again appears as it did at the start of the poem, when the speaker describes how colonialism has profoundly ruptured and destroyed traditional Aboriginal life. The speaker says:

We are nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered.

The enjambment between “all the old ways” and “[g]one” again enacts what the speaker describes. As the reader must navigate the enjambment to the following line, the poem creates a sense of that scattering, and of the completeness of this loss.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** “ground / Where”
- **Lines 14-15:** “Hill / Quick”
- **Lines 19-20:** “ways / Gone”

ALLITERATION

"We Are Going" contains several instances of [alliteration](#). These instances create music in the poem and also contribute to its meaning.

First, in the opening lines of the poem, the speaker uses [sibilant /s/](#) sounds when describing the dispossessed group of Aboriginal people coming into the town now inhabited by white colonizers. These /s/ sounds, which appear in "semi-naked," "subdued," and "silent," create a kind of hush within the poem, emphasizing the feeling of silence in the face of such overwhelming loss.

Later, the /w/ sound in "We" at the start of line 12 is echoed in "wonder," conveying the sense that this "We" is inseparable from these wondrous stories. The sharp alliteration of /t/ sounds in "tales," "Time," "tribal," and "told" then adds more musicality to the line, subtly evoking the "wonder" of the Dream Time, or beginning of time, being described.

Similarly, in line 17, the /d/ sound of "daybreak" repeats in "dark," subtly conveying the interconnectedness of this natural landscape. In the next line, the hard /c/ sound of "creeping" repeats alliteratively in "camp fires." Here, the alliteration again emphasizes the wholeness of Aboriginal life, as the shadows around the camp fires are connected, at the level of music, to the fires themselves.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "semi," "subdued," "silent"
- **Line 12:** "We," "wonder," "tales," "Time," "tribal," "told"
- **Line 17:** "daybreak," "dark"
- **Line 18:** "creeping," "camp"
- **Line 20:** "scattered"
- **Line 21:** "scrubs"
- **Line 22:** "eagle," "emu"

CONSONANCE

In addition to the moments of [alliteration](#) in the poem, "We Are Going" also uses [consonance](#) to create music. In the poem's first line, for example, the sharp, quick /t/ of "to the little town" makes the line feel like something from a fairy tale or legend, setting the stage for the lyricism to come. That /t/ sound appears as consonance throughout the poem, in fact, punctuating its smooth lament with bits of electricity and sharpness. For example, take "white tribe [...] strangers" and "hunting and laughter."

Consonance also connects words together in their sounds and meaning—and can even emphasize difference. For example, in the opening scene of the poem, the speaker describes a town where white men "hurry about like ants." In this town, the speaker says, the white colonizers have put up a sign indicating that "Rubbish May Be Tipped Here," meaning that the

colonizers' trash has been dumped onto sacred Aboriginal land, the "old bora ring."

In this description, the /r/ sounds of "hurry," "reads," and "[r]ubbish" (all words used to describe the colonizers and their actions) repeat consonantly in "traces," "bora," and "ring." Yet here the consonance only emphasizes the radical *difference* between these things and what they represent. Where the colonizers see this area of land as a place to dump their trash, the Aboriginal people understand that it is the most sacred land within their culture and history. The fact that only "traces" remain of this ring emphasizes the erosion of Aboriginal culture that colonialism has brought about.

Later, though, consonance works differently, showing the interconnectedness of Aboriginal culture with the natural world. In lines 14-17, when the speaker describes elements of the local landscape and how all of these things are part of who they are, /l/ sounds connect the images, appearing in "lightening," "bolt," "Hill," "terrible," "loud," "fellow," "paling," and "lagoon." When the speaker describes the power of a lightning storm, the /l/ sounds soften the image, suggesting that it is not frightening to the speaker. And the repetition of these /l/ sounds in the lines that follow link these lines and their meaning together, suggesting that all of these aspects of the land and of Aboriginal life are inseparable from the speaker and from each other.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "to," "little town"
- **Line 2:** "semi," "band," "subdued," "silent"
- **Line 5:** "hurry"
- **Line 6:** "reads," "Rubbish"
- **Line 7:** "traces," "bora," "ring."
- **Line 8:** "strangers," "white tribe," "strangers"
- **Line 10:** "corroboree," "bora ground"
- **Line 11:** "old," "laws," "elders"
- **Line 12:** "We," "wonder," "tales," "Dream," "Time," "tribal legends told"
- **Line 13:** "past," "hunts"
- **Line 14:** "lightening," "bolt," "Gaphembah," "Hill"
- **Line 15:** "terrible"
- **Line 16:** "loud," "fellow."
- **Line 17:** "quiet daybreak," "paling," "dark," "lagoon."
- **Line 18:** "creeping," "camp"
- **Line 20:** "scattered"
- **Line 21:** "scrubs," "hunting," "laughter"
- **Line 22:** "gone," "kangaroo," "gone"

ASSONANCE

The [assonance](#) in the poem is subtle, but nevertheless adds to the poem's rhythm and musicality. The poem does not have a steady [rhyme scheme](#) or meter, but assonance (as well as [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#)) ensure that the lines still feel

deeply lyrical and poetic.

Often a vowel sound will repeat across many lines, lending the poem a sense of unity and cohesion. For example, take the long /ay/ sound that infuses lines 1-9. While some readers might not consider this *true* assonance, given how spaced apart these vowels are, the sound still clearly echoes throughout nearly every single line here:

They came in to the little town
 A semi-naked band subdued and silent
 All that remained of their tribe.
 They came here to the place of their old bora ground
 [...]
 Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be
 Tipped Here'.
 Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
 We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are
 the strangers.
 We belong here, we are of the old ways.

The /ow/ sound repeats too, in "town," "ground," "now," and "about," adding to the sense of music further still.

Sometimes assonance works with other sonic devices to simply make a moment stand out for the reader. In lines 14-15, for example, short /ih/ sounds combine with consonant /l/, /t/, and /b/ sounds to draw readers' attention to the striking image at hand:

We are the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill
 Quick and terrible,

Finally, towards the end of the poem, assonance again creates a sense of melody that subtly disappears along with all the other marks of the tribe. Note the /ah/ sounds of "shadow-ghosts creeping back [...] past [...] scattered," and the long /ee/ and /oo/ of "eagle," "emu," and "kangaroo." These clear moments of assonance are a like final flourish before everything is "gone."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "came," "in," "little," "town"
- **Line 2:** "naked"
- **Line 3:** "remained"
- **Line 4:** "came," "place," "ground"
- **Line 5:** "now," "many," "hurry," "about"
- **Line 6:** "estate agent"
- **Line 7:** "traces"
- **Line 8:** "strangers," "white tribe," "strangers"
- **Line 9:** "ways"
- **Line 12:** "Time," "tribal"
- **Line 14:** "Hill"
- **Line 15:** "Quick," "terrible"

- **Line 17:** "daybreak paling"
- **Line 18:** "shadow," "back"
- **Line 19:** "past"
- **Line 20:** "scattered"
- **Line 22:** "eagle," "emu," "kangaroo"



VOCABULARY

Band (Line 2) - The word "band" refers to a group of people who have joined together out of a shared experience or for a shared purpose. Within the context of the poem, the word suggests that this is a group of Aboriginal people who are together because they are from the same tribe and the only ones who remain.

Subdued (Line 2) - If someone is "subdued" this means that they are quiet, withdrawn, and somber. Additionally, to "subdue" someone or a group of people means to conquer them by force. Both meanings are important in the poem, as the Aboriginal people have been "subdued," or overcome by the violence of the colonizers. In the poem, they are now also subdued, or withdrawn and quiet, in the face of this violence and loss.

Bora Ground (Line 4, Line 10) - Bora ground is sacred land in Aboriginal culture, where traditional ceremonies, including coming of age ceremonies, would be held.

Traces (Line 7) - "Traces" are the slight remaining or visible aspects of something that used to exist. In the poem, the speaker describes how the dispossessed Aboriginal people come to their old sacred land, but now only "traces" remain of the "old bora ring." This indicates that what had once been vital and present in the land, including the sacred ring they had built out of stone in the ground, has almost completely disappeared so only remnants of it can be seen.

Bora Ring (Line 7, Line 23) - A bora ring is a sacred site in Aboriginal culture. Built out of earth and stone on sacred land, the ring would be the site of important ceremonies and traditions.

Corroboree (Line 10, Line 24) - A corroboree is a traditional dance, gathering, or assembly in Aboriginal culture.

Dream Time (Line 12) - An important concept in Aboriginal culture, Dream Time is generally thought to be poorly understood by people who are not Aboriginal. However, Dream Time can be understood, in part, as the beginning of time, the time of creation which is also never-ending and exists to this day. Dream Time is when everything was created, and also when the ancestors of the modern day Aboriginal people came into existence. These ancestors, in turn, passed down stories, legends, and knowledge of the sacred to their descendants, and Aboriginal people today also participate in Dream time.

Gaphembah Hill (Line 14) - "Gaphembah Hill" refers to a local hill or landmark within the setting of the poem, highlighting the importance of this specific landscape to the speaker.

Lagoon (Line 17) - A lagoon is an inlet of ocean water, separated from the rest of the ocean by a reef or other natural barrier.

Scrubs (Line 21) - "Scrubs" refers to low brush, or underbrush, in the Australian landscape.

Emu (Line 22) - An emu is a large bird, similar to an ostrich, that is native to Australia.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"We Are Going" is not written in a fixed or traditional form. However, the poem creates its own form that is important to its meaning.

Most notably, the poem is written in a single, 25-line stanza. Though there is no overarching form here, the line lengths themselves are thematically interesting.

- At the start of the poem—lines 1-3 ("They came [...] tribe.")—the speaker describes a group of dispossessed Aboriginal people coming into a town now inhabited by white men; the lines are short, and feel, like this group of people, subdued and almost silent.
- When the poem shifts, and the collective "we" describe who "[w]e are," the lines grow longer, suggesting the richness, diversity, and vitality of Aboriginal culture and life.
- A single short line (line 15) punctuates this part of the poem, when the speaker describes a bolt of lightning as "Quick and terrible"; here, the short line creates a different impression, as it enacts the suddenness of the lightning that the speaker describes.
- Yet as the poem moves toward the ending the lines begin, again, to diminish in length. Here, the speaker describes all that has been lost through colonialism and lists what is now "gone" from Aboriginal life and the land itself. These diminishing lines, then, imply the erosion of this culture and way of life, and suggest that it could be lost entirely.

METER

As a [free verse poem](#), "We Are Going" has no set [meter](#). Instead, it sounds closer to natural human speech, as though the speaker—especially the collective "we" who speaks for most of the poem—is addressing the reader directly.

Yet the poem also uses certain elements to create emphasis

and rhythm. The [anaphoric](#) repetition of "[w]e are" imbues the poem with cadence and authority, driving these lines forward. Similarly, the [repetition](#) of the word "gone" creates music and falling rhythm, conveying the sense of what has been lost and will be if something doesn't change.

Finally, the poem's use of [end-stopped lines](#) creates powerful pauses at its line endings. These pauses ask the reader to move through the poem slowly, taking in each image and considering the full meaning of what the speaker is saying. These end-stopped lines become especially powerful at the poem's ending when the speaker reiterates what has been lost and what is "gone"—before saying that they, too, are "going."

RHYME SCHEME

"We Are Going" has no set [rhyme scheme](#). Much of its music comes from its use of [repetition](#), especially the [anaphora](#) of "We are" and the speaker's lists, which build toward the ending of the poem.

The poem does, however, include moments of sound echoes that [allude](#) to rhyme and the music of rhyme. For example, in lines 14-16 the speaker describes lightning and thunder within this local landscape, saying "We are the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill / Quick and terrible, / And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow." In this description, the [consonant](#) /l/ sounds in "lightening," "Hill," "terrible," "loud" and "fellow" help to unify this image, conveying a sense of this setting as intricately interconnected. Importantly, though, these lines also contain a subtle [slant rhyme](#) between "Hill" and "terrible," which is echoed in the long /o/ sound of "fellow" a line later. These sound echoes convey the sense that the world of Aboriginal life and identity the speaker describes was integrated and whole before colonialism.

At the end of the poem, the word "going" also creates a sound echo with "gone." The hard /g/ sounds at the end of these lines emphasize the speaker's connection to all that has already been lost and reinforce the sense of imminent loss at the poem's ending.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "We Are Going" changes over the course of the poem. At the start, the speaker seems to be a more distanced, anonymous observer; they describe the scene that opens the poem in almost a detached way. Importantly, too, at this point of the poem the speaker describes the group of Aboriginal people who come into the town in ways that recall colonial descriptions, remarking on the fact that these people are "semi-naked," and viewing them only as "subdued and silent," as though they can't express their experience or identity. In doing so, the speaker at the poem's start evokes ways in which this group of people would be seen from the outside, by the white colonizers within the town.

Yet the poem goes on to shift. In the eighth line, quotation marks indicate that someone else is now speaking, a collective “we,” and this “we” speaks for the remainder of the poem. Here, it is clear that the “we” is the collective voice of the group of Aboriginal people described at the poem’s beginning. No longer simply “subdued” or seen from the outside, the poem gives voice to this group of people’s experience and culture in all of its richness and complexity. For most of the poem, then, the speaker can be understood as a collective speaker, articulating the experience of this group of dispossessed Aboriginal people.

There is also another way of understanding the speaker that encompasses both of these parts of the poem. The speaker could be understood as an Aboriginal person *witnessing* this opening scene. The speaker understands how this group of people is likely seen from a white, colonial perspective, and [alludes](#) to this in the poem’s opening lines. Yet the speaker then goes on to express, on their behalf, the point of view of these Aboriginal people, from a place of shared identity and experience.



SETTING

“We Are Going” is set in Australia, in the aftermath of British conquest and colonialism. Several elements of the poem establish this setting.

First, the speaker [alludes](#) to aspects of Aboriginal Australian life, such as bora ground, the bora ring, the corroboree, and Dream Time. The bora ground and bora ring are sacred sites in traditional Aboriginal culture, and a corroboree is a traditional gathering, ceremony, or dance. Dream Time is an important concept in Aboriginal culture, referring to the beginning of time, a time of creation that is understood to be never-ending. By referencing these aspects of Aboriginal life, the speaker places the poem in Australia. The speaker also evokes specific plants and animals native to Australia, such as the “scrubs” or brush, eagles, emu, and kangaroo.

At the same time, the speaker also mourns the loss of these aspects of Aboriginal culture and identity, as well as these aspects of the natural world, and describes a scene in which a small group of Aboriginal people, “[a]ll that remained of their tribe” come into a little town now inhabited by white men. These details make clear that British colonizers have taken over Australia, and implicitly reveal that a genocide of the Aboriginal people has already taken place, since only a small number remain.

Additionally, the white men who “hurry about,” are compared to ants, suggesting that, like ants actively constructing their ant hill, the white colonizers are actively building their towns and society on top of sacred Aboriginal land. This suggests that the poem is placed in a time when colonization and its practices are firmly entrenched, and white dominance is ongoing. The

Aboriginal people have been dispossessed of their land and their way of life, and they too are in danger of “going,” if something doesn’t change.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“We Are Going” was first published in 1964 as the title poem of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s first collection of poetry. *We Are Going* was the first poetry collection to be published by an Aboriginal Australian writer. Some critics denigrated the collection as political propaganda, and others even expressed disbelief that an Aboriginal person could have written the poems. However, the collection quickly sold out in several editions, and Oodgeroo Noonuccal went on to become one of the best-selling poets in Australia. She expressed pride in the apparent accessibility and direct nature of her work, saying that she wanted to reach the broadest possible audience and advocate for civil rights through her writing.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal went on to publish numerous other collections of poetry, as well as non-fiction and children’s literature. She won a number of literary awards, including the Fellowship of Australian Writers’ Award and the Mary Gilmore Medal. In 1970, she was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), but she famously returned the award in 1987, in protest of the Australian Government’s celebration of the Australian Bicentenary, the anniversary of the arrival of the first British fleet in Australia.

Today, Oodgeroo Noonuccal is understood to be a major Australian poet and leading figure in the movement for equality in Australia. Her work, beginning with *We Are Going*, laid the groundwork for other Aboriginal writers as well as activists in the movement for Aboriginal rights.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal published *We Are Going*, and a number of her other books, under the name Kath Walker; she was born Kathleen Ruska, and Walker was the last name of her former husband, Bruce Walker. In 1988, after returning to her ancestral island, Minjerrabah (also known as North Stradbroke Island), she took the Aboriginal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Oodgeroo meaning “paper-bark tree,” and Noonuccal the name of her tribe).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In a way, the historical context of “We Are Going” begins over 60,000 years ago, when Aboriginal and Indigenous people began to live in the islands now known as Australia. The Western term “Aboriginal Australians” refers to the diverse peoples who lived in many of these islands over this period of time, while “Indigenous Australians” encompasses both Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, who have a distinct ethnic lineage. Prior to colonization, over 500

Indigenous peoples lived in the continent, speaking over 250 different languages.

The imposition of British colonialism began in 1788, when the first fleet of British ships arrived in Australia to establish a penal colony. The colonizers immediately began a brutal, deliberate campaign to exterminate the Indigenous population, through the intentional introduction of fatal diseases, poisoning, widespread massacres, pervasive sexual abuse of Indigenous women and girls, and the violent displacement of Indigenous people from their lands. In the 10 years following this first arrival of British ships, the Indigenous population in Australia was reduced by 90%.

Over the centuries that followed, British colonizers and their descendants continued to attempt to annihilate and erase Aboriginal Australians, claiming that the land had been “empty” when they had arrived. The White Australia policy, which was formalized at the beginning of the 20th century, included a set of policies advocating for a white-only Australia, prohibiting immigration to Australia of non-white people, and continuing the displacement and marginalization of Black Aboriginal and Indigenous Australians. White Australia policy continued to exist officially into the late 20th century and still shapes dynamics of race in Australia today.

It was within this context that Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote *We Are Going* and published it in 1964. As an Aboriginal woman, she had left school by necessity at the age of 13, and worked for years as a domestic servant, one of the only areas of employment open to her. While serving in the Australian military during World War II, she met Black American soldiers and later began to advocate for Aboriginal rights. Beginning in the 1960s, she was a leader in the movement for Aboriginal Civil Rights, including the right to vote, and participated in the 1967 struggle to change parts of the Australian constitution that barred Aboriginal Australians from full citizenship.

In 1972, Oodgeroo Noonuccal returned to her ancestral island, Minjerribah, also known by its colonial name North Stradbroke Island. While land rights laws in Australia barred her as an Aboriginal person from owning the land, she leased an area of land which she called Moongalba, or “sitting-down place.” There, she established the Noonuccal-Nughie Education and Cultural Centre, and in the years that followed, thousands of Aboriginal and white students came to the center to learn about Aboriginal culture and respect for the natural world.

All of this context is important to “We Are Going.” The poem begins in the aftermath of colonialism and the genocide of the Aboriginal people, and it articulates what colonizers have permanently altered and destroyed. At the same time, the poem asserts the dignity and resilience of Aboriginal identity. Ultimately, it asks the reader to imagine a world in which the remaining Aboriginal people, and the land they have inhabited for thousands of years, could be respected and restored.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/we-are-going-oodgeroo-noonuccal-kath-walker) – Listen to Oodgeroo Noonuccal read “We Are Going” in this 1986 audio recording. Interestingly, in this reading, the text of the poem is slightly different, including a longer transition between the opening scene and the collective “We” beginning to speak. (<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/we-are-going-oodgeroo-noonuccal-kath-walker>)
- [British Colonialism in Australia](https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/colonisation/) – Learn more about British colonialism in Australia, and the impact on Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples, in this article from Australians Together. The article describes the brutal history of colonialism in Australia, beginning with the arrival of the first fleet of British ships in 1788. (<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/colonisation/>)
- [Biography of Oodgeroo Noonuccal](https://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/noonuccal-oodgeroo-18057) – Read more about Oodgeroo Noonuccal's life and work in this article at the Australian Poetry Library. (<https://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/noonuccal-oodgeroo-18057>)
- [Interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal](http://www.dropbearito.com/dropbearito_006.htm) – In this interview originally conducted in 1981, Oodgeroo Noonuccal talks about why change in Australia will come with the younger generation, and what she hoped to achieve through opening an educational center on her home island of Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island). (http://www.dropbearito.com/dropbearito_006.htm)
- [The White Australia Policy](https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2017/04/10/what-was-white-australia-policy-and-how-does-it-still-affect-us-now) – Learn more about the White Australia Policy, the set of governmental policies that established and maintained white supremacy in Australia. Oodgeroo Noonuccal and other Aboriginal activists struggled against the White Australia Policy to obtain civil rights for Aboriginal Australians. This article discusses the history of the policy, as well as how it still impacts Australian culture today. (<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2017/04/10/what-was-white-australia-policy-and-how-does-it-still-affect-us-now>)
- [Photograph of Oodgeroo Noonuccal at Moongalba](https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2004.45/oodgeroo-noonuccal-at-moongalba) – View a 1982 photograph of Oodgeroo Noonuccal at Moongalba, the educational center she opened on her home island of Minjerribah. (<https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2004.45/oodgeroo-noonuccal-at-moongalba>)



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