

Spinning the Dream

Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970

Anna Haebich

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Spin

1. [verb] **a.** turn or cause to turn or whirl around quickly: *the girl spun around in alarm.* **b.** give a sensation of dizziness: *the figures were enough to make her head spin.* **c.** give (a news story or other information) a particular interpretation, esp. a favorable one. 2. [verb] draw out (wool, cotton, or other material) and convert it into threads, either by hand or with machinery: *they spin wool into the yarn for weaving.* 3. [noun] a particular bias, interpretation, or point of view, intended to create a favorable (or sometimes, unfavorable) impression when presented to the public: *he tried to put a positive spin on the president's campaign.*

Phrases and phrasal verbs

spin one's wheels (informal): waste one's time or efforts.

spin a yarn: tell a long, far-fetched story.

spin something off (of a parent company): turn a subsidiary into a new and separate company.

spin out (of a driver or car): lose control, esp. in a skid.

spin something out: make something last as long as possible:
they seem keen to spin out the debate through their speeches and interventions.

Origin

Old English *spinnan* [draw out and twist (fibre)].

Introduction

More than any time in history, mankind faces a crossroad. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.

Woody Allen¹

The good old days were not always so good in Australia. They were not so good if you happened to be an Australian Aboriginal. Or, indeed a woman. Or an Asian confronted by the White Australia policy. Or a homosexual Australian. A homeless person. A person with little English.

Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG²

Nostalgia for an assimilated nation haunts current public debate on national identity and nationhood, and spills over into related issues of race, ethnicity, Indigenous rights and immigration. Commentators on both sides of Australian politics deny that the pages of government are being turned back to the assimilation policies of the 1950s, and they are right, of course. We celebrate cultural diversity and acknowledge Indigenous rights, cultures and histories. Yet while the word assimilation is rarely mentioned,

more than a trace of its essence remains in official pronouncements on national values, citizenship and the practical integration of Aboriginal communities. This paradox of public denial of assimilation and hidden allegiance to its tenets can be explained in terms of 'retro-assimilation'.

From the perspective of retro-assimilation, current visions of the nation can be seen as yet another example of nostalgia and clever marketing. Retro-assimilation mixes 1950s dreams of an assimilated nation with current ideas of nationhood using today's spin to create an imagined world based on shared values, visions and agreements where all citizens will be treated equally and the same and share fully in the benefits of Australian society, once they agree to cast off their differences and *become* the same. Like other retro products this imagining uncritically exploits the surface of the past without regard for original meanings and significance. Retro-assimilation has strong appeal in today's climate of social turmoil, transformation and global threats: we are irresistibly drawn to its retrosapes, its nostalgic memories of safer and simpler times.

As we respond to the rosy glow of this imagined past, few recognise the deliberate tactics of promotional campaigns in the scenes of happy Australian families and responsible citizens juxtaposed against the bogeymen of war, terrorism and other alien 'isms' encapsulated in such expressions as 'of Middle Eastern appearance'. Like all quality retro products, retro-assimilation has a time-tested lineage. It dates back to the 1950s when the Menzies government avidly promoted the vision of an assimilated nation of Australian families living the 'Australian Way of Life'. Many senior conservative politicians grew up surrounded by these images and fifty years later some remain in their thrall. In a world of retro-assimilation the past is a grab bag of clichés used to sell the present. Nostalgic memories peddle solutions for current issues or camouflage unpalatable political agendas. While this may be ethical for designers and marketers, it makes for dodgy

politics when governments adopt retro tactics to manufacture anxiety about threats to national security, to encourage complacency about the treatment of refugees, and to undermine Indigenous rights of sovereignty and self-determination. Our national history deserves to be respected as more than just a marketing ploy for the use of later generations. The retro past never really happened.

This book is a response to the urgent need to set the record straight on these distorted imaginings. At first glance the word assimilation looks familiar and straightforward. Many Australians recognise it as the policy adopted in the 1950s to transform Aboriginal people and new migrants into Australian citizens. They also know it was officially abandoned in the 1970s in favour of policies of multiculturalism and Aboriginal self-determination. From this time assimilation became something of a 'dirty word' among 'people of progressive opinion',³ yet for many ordinary Australians it retained a nostalgic appeal of memories of simpler times when we were one nation, united by race, culture and our dreams of Dad, Mum and the kids nestled cosily in our suburban homes.

Assimilation's meanings, its application and genealogy, are far more complex than our potted policy histories suggest. Even during its heyday in the 1950s, politicians, bureaucrats and academics argued over what it meant and used it to push often-conflicting agendas. Today Indigenous Australians assert that rather than referring to a distinct policy governing a specific slice of time, assimilation has persisted as core doctrine in policy-making over the generations from first contact to the present. Political historian Tim Rowse suggests that assimilation is 'built into the very fabric of Australian society' and that 'we cannot say that it came to an end'.⁴ Academic historians now address assimilation as a global ideology and strategy, one that swings in and out of fashion in colonial, national and international contexts from the Enlightenment to the present, with antecedents stretching back to

the Roman practice of the Latinisation of invaded peoples.

Attention to the influences of these broader global intellectual and social movements and shifting political and economic imperatives brings new perspectives to the study of the post-war vision of an assimilated Australia. Constructed as an inevitable unilinear process of cultural and structural absorption into the host society, assimilation is in fact a powerful act of national imagining. It has been the dominant vision of nationhood and the preferred model for incorporating disparate migrant and Indigenous peoples into united settler democracies like Australia. The threads of assimilation are interwoven in our national history with colonial Indigenous policies, with early twentieth-century nation building and the mid-century dream of a unified world family, and with our own vision of a modern assimilated Australian nation in the 1950s.

Forged from successive waves of immigration into Indigenous lands, Australia is a society where whiteness — defined in terms of Anglo-Celtic culture and ancestry — has determined rights of citizenship, status, and belonging. We are the heirs of an unequal triangulated relationship where ‘settler Australians’ — defined here as the generations of migrants of Anglo-Celtic ancestry and their descendants from colonial times to the present — have been privileged over other immigrant groups and over Indigenous people. For generations our core British-based institutions and their networks of power and privilege have worked to advantage the settler Australians who fitted the ideal Anglo-Celtic racial and cultural profile. They are represented as the principal actors in our national histories. They are the citizens who *truly* belong. This hegemony of whiteness dominated visions of a White Australia in the first half of the twentieth century. Assimilation operated side-by-side with segregation to render Aboriginal people invisible in the national landscape and ‘coloured’ migrants were barred from entering the country. Immigrants from European nations were discriminated against in selection and resettlement programs

according to shifting hierarchies of preference shaped by changing race stereotypes and national enmities. They might find acceptance as Australian citizens but they could never *truly* belong.

The race-based discriminatory practices that upheld this White Australia were seriously challenged following the Second World War by the new international discourse of universal human rights and racial equality promoted by the United Nations. Reeling from the horrors of race genocide during the war, Western nations sought peace and security in new visions of cultural homogeneity and a united attack on racism and the biological explanations of race. Nations like Australia that excluded people from participating as citizens according to distinctions of race and ethnicity now faced the threat of international condemnation. It was in this new world that Australia moved to embrace assimilation, largely in response to international pressures to meet the new expectations of modern nationhood. There was also a new public sentiment of humanitarian concern at home.

In these stormy seas the vision of an assimilated Australia appeared as a safe haven for an anxious nation. The dream was of a modern, prosperous Australia, united by culture rather than race, which could stand tall in the world for protecting the rights of its citizens. Assimilation was heralded as the mechanism to sweep away racial and cultural differences and divisions and to absorb all Australians — Indigenous, settler and immigrant — as equal citizens sharing a common way of life. And while the vision of assimilation fitted international imperatives of opposition to racism against minority groups, the paradox that its promise of universal equality came at the price of their cultural obliteration was conveniently overlooked.

The Australian government had more pressing considerations. As it embarked on the nation's first mass immigration program to include a significant proportion of European migrants, it was eager to reassure its citizens that Australia would remain essentially white and British. The vision of an assimilated nation

also glossed over contradictions between Australia's status as a settler nation and its negligible performance on Indigenous rights and sovereignty — a performance that attracted international criticism in the United Nations General Assembly. Drawing on new models of advertising and political spin from the United States, the government sold its vision of a new White Australia to the public. It created carefully planned propaganda campaigns using images of European migrants and Aboriginal people living the Australian way of life to persuade settler Australians that they would quickly assimilate. Given the widespread public ignorance and misinformation about migrant and Aboriginal people, these claims went largely unquestioned. Clever marketing diverted attention from the continuing inequality and discrimination, despite the government's glowing promises of a better life for all.

Assimilation promised equal citizenship rights to Aboriginal people through the abolition of discriminatory laws and practices and improved living conditions, symbolised in images of Aboriginal families living in conventional suburban homes. In return they were required to abandon their distinctive cultural values, lifestyles, customs, languages and beliefs and conform to the national way of life. What was presented as 'benevolence and tolerance' for individuals became in fact 'intolerance aimed at collectivities, their ways of life, their values, and above all value-legitimising powers'.⁵ As anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner pointed out at the time, for Aboriginal people this was yet another instance where they were being asked to 'give up something as the price of good relations with us ... [with] no promissory note of good to come in return'.⁶ No wonder then that many began to 'suspect that the old, old story [was] being told again'⁷ as the snail's pace of reform and the miserly services drew families into new webs of welfare dependency and a 'Groundhog Day' nightmare of never-ending preparation for assimilation.

From the beginning the vision of an assimilated Australia had its

critics, at home and abroad. Settler Australians soon found that the reality of a new culturally diverse population was irrevocably changing Australia's social and cultural landscape. They could find consolation in being the beneficiaries of the nation's new prosperity, but for European migrants the promise of a happy life in their own suburban homes proved a difficult goal, while for Aboriginal families it was an impossibility. Institutionalised racism at all levels of society made this outcome inevitable. A growing chorus of Aboriginal voices and their supporters, such as Aboriginal leader Pastor Doug Nicholls, West Australian parliamentarian Bill Grayden, Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, and Aboriginal activist and poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), protested first at government delays in delivering on promises of citizenship and better living conditions, and then at the process of forced cultural assimilation. A new pan-Aboriginal protest movement emerged, drawing inspiration from the long history of Aboriginal activism at home and from new international models in the United Nations, decolonising countries in Asia and Africa, and the civil rights movement in the United States. These leaders were developing an alternative vision of Australia as a nation that acknowledged Indigenous rights and cultures, including the right to self-determination.

The conflicting visions of the nation have come down the decades into the present with their own distinct historical trajectories, their champions and detractors. They continue to divide Australians and render elusive the possibility that their differences can ever be resolved. Maori academic Makere Stewart-Harawira asserts that there can be no closure to this 'continuous unresolved contradiction and ongoing provocation' as long as settlers continue to assert control over territories and resources, and Indigenous peoples refuse to surrender their rights.⁸

The central focus of this book is on imaginings of assimilation in the 1950s and 1960s — the period acknowledged as the high

point of assimilation in Australian history and, for many citizens, the benchmark of Australian nationhood. While the book makes little direct reference to more recent immigrants from the Middle East, Asia and Africa or to refugees or current Indigenous issues, it hopes to provide the critical framework with which to assess these and other histories. Certainly, for some readers there will be ‘aha’ moments as they recognise in the historical examples the progenitors of the present-day spin on national policies for Indigenous people and immigrants; on initiatives promoting Australian citizenship, values training and mainstreaming of government services; and on the official stereotyping that undermines the human stories of the most vulnerable people in our midst — refugees, Indigenous people, and the growing underclass of Australians living in poverty.

That Indigenous and migrant histories are considered together might be construed as courting controversy. But the intention is to tease out and compare variations in assimilatory pressures of nation building on Aboriginal people, new immigrants from Europe, and settler Australians. Of course this in no way denies the prior and continuing rights of Indigenous people and the significant historical and cultural factors that differentiate them from ethnic minorities so that they can never be constructed as ‘another tile in the multicultural mosaic’.⁹ However, this approach allows us to compare the treatment and experiences of these different groups who were subject in varying degrees to the assimilatory pressures of nation building at the time.¹⁰ In particular it helps to expose how the tradition of preferential treatment of settler Australians and new British migrants, established earlier in the century, continued on in the new White Australia of the 1950s and 1960s. This comparative analysis highlights the government’s discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal people *and* non-British immigrants in its implementation of assimilation. It also reveals how Aboriginal disadvantage was compounded by government failure to extend to them the

economic benefits that were boosting the material prosperity of other families around the nation.

The book is divided into four sections that explore separate threads in the history of assimilation in Australia, drawing together the varied perspectives of Aboriginal history, anthropology, cultural history, migrant history, the history of representation and my personal experiences of living in migrant and Aboriginal communities. Through local case studies, comparisons with other settler societies, and analysis of transnational influences, the discourse of assimilation is addressed in its articulation and implementation, its legacies, political strategies and resistances, and its persistence in political agendas.¹¹

The first section, 'White nation', situates Australia in relation to mid-century global tensions and explores how these shaped the new vision of an assimilated nation. Chapter one begins by peeling away the retro clichés of the 1950s as a golden time of prosperity to expose an anxious nation gripped by a mix of contrasting forces — global change and personal conformity, optimism and fear — that resonates with tensions today. Subject to increasing international pressure to adopt new models of modern nationhood, the Australian government looked to assimilation to deflect criticism of its race-based policies of nation building. The second chapter analyses the bold imagining of an assimilated nation that promised settler Australians that dramatic change would be contained within the parameters of a modified White Australia. To convince the nation, the government looked to the new industry of political and advertising spin and its tools of mass persuasion. Of course, assimilation inevitably brought change. With the entry of one and a half million British and European immigrants between 1947 and 1961, and the government's attack on racial segregation, Australia's demographic, social and cultural landscapes were irrevocably altered. While the requirement to assimilate weighed heavily on

Aboriginal people and immigrants, successful assimilation also depended on settler Australians developing more enlightened attitudes and behaviours.

The next section, 'Selling Assimilation', is a comparative study of federal leadership in selling the assimilation of European migrants and Aboriginal people to the nation through promotional campaigns and its practical programs of change. Part nation building exercise and part spin, the campaigns also sought to convince overseas critics of the government's commitment to positive change. Chapter three critically compares the official discourses of migrant and Aboriginal assimilation as optimistic narratives leading to modern family life in the suburbs — a rapid trajectory for migrants disappearing into the Australian suburbs, and a more gradual path for Aboriginal people. The more lavish attention devoted to migrant campaigns — despite the urgency of Aboriginal conditions — reflected the strategic economic importance of migrant labour for the nation. The fact that Aboriginal people outside the Northern Territory were a state responsibility was no excuse for the federal government's failure to adequately provide for a national campaign to mould citizen attitudes. Chapter four compares federal models of migrant and Aboriginal assimilation and is framed by my experiences growing up in a migrant community in Wollongong and my husband Darryl Kickett's experiences growing up in a Nyungar community near Narrogin in Western Australia. Both communities suffered inadequate provision of much-needed services, resulting in great hardship in a time of unprecedented national growth and prosperity. An explanation for this neglectful approach that has resonances today was the federal government's conviction that special treatment would encourage ethnic and racial 'ghettoes' that would obstruct the process of assimilation. Also familiar today, federal/state bickering over funding responsibilities blocked urgently needed housing and essential services for Aboriginal families living in appalling conditions around the nation.

With the contours of the differential treatment of Aboriginal people, European migrants and settler Australians in the assimilating nation established, the next section, 'Assimilation in Nyungar Country', shifts the focus to the implementation of Aboriginal assimilation. While European migrants were pushed out to survive in mainstream life, the majority of Aboriginal people remained under strict control as state authorities prepared them for assimilated living. The example of Western Australia and the experiences of Nyungar people provide a case study of how one state attended to its obligations to deliver equal citizenship and quality of life to their Aboriginal charges. Chapters five and six deliver a damning account of the obstacles to improvement created by endemic racism, government intransigence, bureaucratic inertia and public and stakeholder self-interest. The accumulated effect was to impose stifling expectations of cultural homogeneity on Nyungar communities while failing to deliver on assimilation's promises of legislative reforms and improved living conditions. When assimilation was finally dropped as state policy in the early 1970s, Aboriginal people could claim equality under the law and equal rights to government services but they remained severely disadvantaged. Tragically, the government and the public blamed *them* for this outcome. Chapter seven tells a different history of Aboriginal people engaging with assimilation, through an account of the history and activities of the Aboriginal-run organisation, the Coolbaroo League, which operated in Perth from 1946 to 1960. This micro perspective highlights the potential for human creativity and adaptability in all nations as people negotiate their way around assimilation in ways that the authorities would never have imagined.¹²

The final section, 'Cracks in the Mirror', looks at ways in which assimilation was refracted in popular culture and public debate, and how an explosion of interest in Aboriginal cultures and histories contributed to the undermining of the vision of an assimilated nation. Chapter eight explores the seeming paradox

that the government's program of assimilation coincided with the fashion for appropriating Aboriginal cultural motifs to express national identity and for use in commercial design and the visual and performing arts. Rather than erasing Aboriginal cultural difference this kept it firmly in the public spotlight. The story of Beth Dean and her 1954 ballet *Corroboree* is examined as a case in point. Chapter nine looks at iconic representations of assimilation in popular culture and the media — *They're a Weird Mob*, *Jedda* and *Fringe Dwellers*; press accounts of the life of Albert Namatjira — and in academic research. Public pessimism about the possibility of Aboriginal assimilation was expressed in the popular trope of Aboriginal people 'caught between two worlds'. The media captured attention with accounts of Aboriginal activism — the 1965 Freedom Rides in New South Wales, Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry, the rise of Black Power, and the setting up of the Tent Embassy (1972). The entry of Aboriginal voices into public discourse challenged the closed loop of white imaginings and began the dramatic change in representation of Aboriginal people and their cultures and histories witnessed from the 1970s. Assimilation now symbolised outmoded approaches to cultural diversity and nation building. Governments formally abandoned policies of Aboriginal and migrant assimilation at different times during the 1960s and early 1970s, however assimilation did not come to an end, but continued on 'in one form or another' in government practice and as the imagined ideal of one nation for many Australians.¹³

Assimilation was a seductive solution to the threat posed by global change to White Australia. While the imagery and rhetoric of assimilation created the impression of a new nation of equal citizens, the mechanics of it reinforced the inequalities of the status quo, and its marketing — through the powerful images of Australian life and Australian families — distracted the public from the fact that there was no level playing field, only players

who always won and those who rarely could. Confronted by our own global fears and anxieties we remain susceptible to the repackaging of this phoney dream as a solution to today's dilemmas. But where will this leave us? If nations who do not know their history are destined to repeat the past, what happens to those who pin their hopes to the retro marketing of a phoney dream?