

**Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970*,
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In 2007 the Australian federal government introduced two contentious policies that clearly illustrate 'retro-assimilation' – the concept which Anna Haebich explores and seeks to challenge in her latest publication, *Spinning the Dream*. The Howard government introduced the first of these policies in June when it announced a program of medical checks for all Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory under the age of sixteen in response to reports of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities. And in October, a new Citizenship Test was implemented requiring immigrants to pass a twenty-question multiple choice test before gaining eligibility for Australian citizenship, in order to ensure that new citizens shared the nation's values and were therefore able to integrate into Australian society. Loosely reminiscent of the White Australia dictation test and Anglo-Saxon interference to 'protect' Aboriginal children from their families, these policies suggest that contemporary politicians still covertly support policies that seek to assimilate non-white Australians despite the official rejection of assimilation in the 1970s in preference to multiculturalism and self-determination; hence 'retro-assimilation'. Assimilationist policies were at their zenith in the 1950s and 60s, and the Australian government popularised and celebrated them through the use of advertising and promotional 'spin', but as Haebich powerfully reveals in the later chapters of her book, the targets of these policies experienced a different reality to the rhetoric, whereby their integration into society was thwarted by bureaucracy and public prejudice that prevented their acceptance as Australians and denigrated their identity, culture and traditions.

Haebich's aim is to 'set the record straight' on how these policies were experienced by immigrant and Indigenous populations in the 1950s and 60s and to question the present-day nostalgia amongst some politicians for the apparent 'halcyon days' of assimilation in the Menzies era. In this period idealistic images of immigrant and Indigenous families that had integrated into Australian society were relayed to the Australian public to demonstrate the

nation's social cohesion and to promote assimilation, as illustrated by the posters, cartoons and photos which intersperse the book. While *Spinning the Dream* mainly focuses on these two decades, Haebich uses examples to show that assimilationist goals have been pursued by Australian politicians from the colonial era and still continue to influence Canberra. The book is organised topically into four parts. The first provides an overview of the political necessity for Australia to abandon its discriminatory Indigenous and immigration policies following the Second World War in light of diplomatic pressure from the United Nations. It also details the need for politicians to promote how the government's assimilationist policies would ensure that the post-war influx of immigrants would not disrupt white Australians' way of life. Part Two then delves into the advertising spin used by the federal government to promote assimilation to immigrant and Indigenous communities, and in the fourth chapter Haebich uses her personal experiences growing up in a post-war immigrant community in Wollongong and those of her husband Darryl Kickett, who grew up in the Western Australian Nyungar community, to produce a more perceptive account of the realities of post-war assimilation that ultimately challenges the government's rose-tinted portrayal. Haebich's intimate knowledge of the Nyungar community is further utilised in the third section to explore Aboriginal experiences of the government's assimilationist policies, especially highlighting the discriminatory practices that made it impossible for true integration and the Aboriginal community's initiatives and activities in response to assimilation by using the history of the Coolbaroo League as a case study. The final part examines how the Australian public negotiated assimilation through popular culture, and how a greater interest in Aboriginal culture and history challenged the government's program of assimilation.

Haebich, as a renowned Indigenous historian, devotes most of the latter half of *Spinning the Dream* to the Aboriginal experience of assimilation. Whilst this provides a rich source of evidence that neatly highlights the discriminatory reality of Australia's assimilationist policies, the book would have benefited from a deeper exploration of post-war immigrants' responses to assimilation and how they navigated the 'Australian way of life' whilst still maintaining their

culture and traditions. For instance, the post-war history of Southern European immigrants' experiences in Australia is thick with examples, such as the late 1950s establishment of the Italian and Greek language newspapers // *Globo* and *Neos Kosmos* respectively; the founding of community clubs, coffeehouses and language schools; and the organisation of community dances, picnics and excursions that parallel the activities of the Coolbaroo League. In addition, immigrant organisations were established in the political interest of their respective communities to lobby state and federal governments on assimilationist issues. These responses to assimilation and how they were negotiated by immigrants is noticeably absent in *Spinning the Dream* and they deserve a much closer reading than that provided. A more equal consideration of immigrant and Aboriginal assimilation in Australia would have produced a more satisfactory insight into the immigrant experience and would have better explained the 1970s political shift from assimilation to multiculturalism.

Haebich rightly admits that considering both Aboriginal and immigrant histories in the one monograph is contentious, as the Indigenous community is 'not just another minority' in Australia's multicultural society. However, I applaud her courage in doing so as it allows for a greater understanding of Australian assimilationist policies, and the comparison between the two groups helps to tease out the motivations of policymakers during the period, as Haebich deftly does in Chapter Three. Despite the prominence of the Indigenous experience in the book, the personal insight Haebich provides of the Nyungar community is one of its strengths and the examples she uses of her husband's family's disillusionment with government promises add to its poignancy. Her thesis that the government spin concealed the harsher realities of Australia's assimilationist program is for the most part powerfully presented and is a timely warning to readers during the current political climate against the seduction of 'retro-assimilation'.

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