

**Hope O'Chin. *An Epistemology of Belongingness: Dreaming a First Nation's Ontology of Hope*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. xix, 231 pages.  
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*Belongingness* and *hope*. Those words jumped out at me when I first received an invitation to review Kabbi Kabbi (Gubbi Gubbi) scholar and artist Hope O'Chin's book. Questions of belonging are of critical importance to Indigenous philosophical thinking in Australia today. This often goes beyond the "purifying" work which seeks to understand belonging solely as it is expressed in the Law and story composing the life of Country. Leave that for the anthropologists of old, I say. On the contrary, out of necessity and refusal, Indigenous philosophers of today have to take on the problem of belonging in response to the histories and continuities of colonialism. It has been that way ever since our ancestors began asking themselves, *what are we to do about these newcomers?* Perhaps such problems would have been simple enough to resolve if those newcomers, "settlers," had not relied upon the denial of Indigenous belonging and the disavowal of our sovereignty (see Aileen Moreton-Robinson). Our old people would remind us that it did not have to be that way. The fact that it is, tells us nothing has ever been settled, especially not the present. The same questions of belonging remain as prescient now as ever.

In *An Epistemology of Belongingness*, O'Chin draws on her standpoint, story and creative practice to explore the complexities and entanglements which constrain and shape Indigenous belonging here today. What is particularly exciting about her work here is the way that she mobilises philosophy and critique to approach Australia's past, present and future. It is not as though O'Chin necessarily sets out to define what belonging must look like for Indigenous peoples in Australia going forward. Quite the opposite. We would all recognise such belonging is a matter of being Indigenous and being here—even if that "here" sees you somewhere else than the Country of your ancestral homelands. Of course, the political realities which sustain Australia the Nation today rely upon treating this belonging with ambivalence, as it is through denial that the settler State can claim its own sovereignty is legitimate.

O'Chin's contribution is framed as an Indigenous intervention. She reminds us there is nothing fixed about the *status quo* of colonialism's continuation here with us in the present. Our hope can be transformative. Rather than being dogmatically prescriptive about exactly what the future must entail, the core argument of O'Chin's book is that Indigenous people should be able to live on their—*our*—own terms, and in ways that the rest of Australia can accommodate and recognise. Broadly, her argument is concerned with finding a meaningful way to coexist with one another. This is certainly an ethic that many other Indigenous philosophers and thinkers share, even though they certainly approach it in different ways.

The hope, the potential, as O'Chin sees it, is for Indigenous people to take their "rightful place" in modern Australian society. Her argument is grounded in the conception of a shared Indigenous, pan-Aboriginal, conception of Dreaming. It is on this basis she conceives of an Indigenous "civility." From this perspective, this book further expands on the possibilities for what the future could hold for both Indigenous peoples and for Australian society more broadly. Reading O'Chin's work, some may gain a greater appreciation of the double meaning behind Dreaming and "dreaming," being something that is grounded in the world (Country) and as being generative, hope-filled, and hopeful. This is certainly something expressed by other contemporary Indigenous philosophers, of course, notably Ngarinyin ancestor David Mowaljarlai (see David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic).

O'Chin's use of the concept of "hope," especially from an Indigenous philosophical perspective, is refreshing and timely. Not to name names, but some corners of Indigenous scholarship and discourse have come to advocate a deep cynicism and nihilism which

thoroughly rejects the generative possibilities which “hope” comes to express. Not that such perspectives are necessarily without reason. Australia the Nation is built on stolen land, genocide and enduring violence. It is sustained with plenty of fictions alongside this violence too. The dream of *terra nullius* (“empty land”) is one of them. Indigenous peoples are not the only ones whose belonging is denied either. It should go without saying, the racialised logics which divide people create asymmetries of belonging among settlers. Those defined as “non-white”—especially Black and Brown folk—are denied their place in Australia as well, in their own way. All the while, every settler is forced to participate in the political realities of Australia’s colonialism (see Aileen Moreton-Robinson; see also Mahmood Mamdani). We have to wonder, then, do we—Indigenous peoples—really want to take our place in *this* society? Is this our Dreaming and dream?

While O’Chin maintains an openness to possibilities for Indigenous belonging in the future, the philosophical position she entertains does lend itself to a particular set of conclusions. The way she approaches the political realities which organise Australia today, as in the past, opens up to a set of paths which others may find challenging to entertain. Grounding Indigenous belonging in a pre-existent “civility” imposes certain limitations on the creative potentials she is able to advocate for. Perhaps more importantly, it limits the options for questioning what is possible. There is a logic behind the argument, certainly. O’Chin appears to call for recognition on the terms set by Indigenous peoples themselves, which is something that can be appreciated in her writing. Yet we know that recognition is a particularly vexed issue here in Australia. The tall tales of Captain Cook have taught us that, as have the more recent machinations of land rights and native title. How does Indigenous sovereignty and the complex ecologies and relations of Country fit into this future? Just as importantly, we have to wonder about those newcomers, the “settlers.” Why is it us, not them, who should be driven by the hope of belonging? Surely, they could join our world, our Laws, our systems.

O’Chin’s book highlights just how dynamic Indigenous philosophical thinking is today. They say that philosophy goes hand in hand with critique, but they both can pull thinking in different ways and down different paths. O’Chin’s work speaks to what is an important moment in contemporary Indigenous philosophical thinking in this sense. The directions our future can take are as multiple as our thoughts and the actions they inspire. Some, like O’Chin, call for Indigenous peoples to find their place in the Nation with a hopeful pragmatism. Then there are those who have been driven to nihilistic refusal and seek to live life on their own terms now. Others still will advocate for the creation of something new beyond the settler State, believing that the only way forward is to unsettle all that is settler about Australia so as to create something radically new with the newcomers.

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