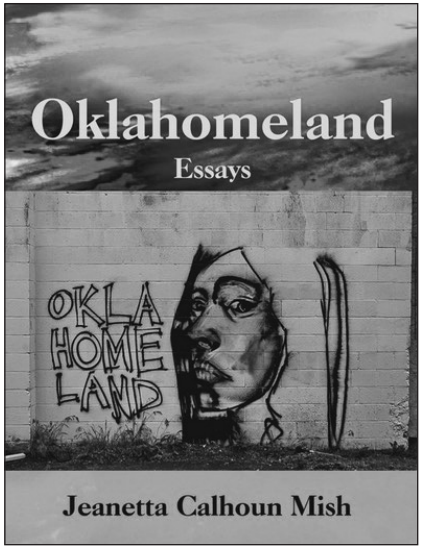
Oklahomeland: Essays
by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish
Beaumont, TX: Lamar University Literary Press, 2015.
130 pp. $15.95 paper.

As Jeanette Calhoun Mish notes, this book has two sections, "The Arts," mostly literature, and "Oklahomeland," about her place as a physical and psychological inhabitant of Oklahoma.

Like anyone who writes about the literary and cultural scene in the state, Mish has to begin by pointing out, with what seems to each defendant both laborious and redundant, that Oklahomans "are not just a bunch of crackers and hicks." While she admits that "It's difficult being a writer in Oklahoma," her list of small presses, literary magazines, and venues for readings indicates that it is not as tough as it used to be for men and women of letters in the Sooner State.

This is in great part due to the conscious efforts of Mish to succeed, with due reverence, Frank Parman as editor, author, and guru for new talent. In Mish's attempt to help a particular kind of Oklahoma writing flourish, she

founded Mongrel Empire Press, edited special issues of Oklahoma literary and cultural journals, and generously supported the work of others, from poets to photographers to the Miss Oklahoma Project—in which, rather like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, an over-dressed mannequin is placed in various Oklahoma landscaped, estranging the landscape. Or in this case being estranged. She didn't found the Rural Oklahoma Museum of Poetry, but her research in and support of working class writing is in the spirit of that institution.



As critic, Mish speaks eloquently in support of vernacular writing in preserving what is distinct and energetic about Oklahomans' brand of English—not surprising, since she sees herself as "one of Woody's Children: a leftist Okie poet who grew up working class in a small town 26 miles from Okemah."

When Mish moves from cultural overviews to particular works, as in her discussions of the poems of Jeanne Bryner and Sandee Gertz Umbach and the photographs of Craig Varjabedian, she manages, without much quoting or, regrettably, reproducing photographs, to convey the spirit of the work in ways that make the reader want to seek it out.

In "Oklahomeland," the second section of the book, Mish moves from a celebration of the state to a consideration of her relationship to people like her grandfather; to her sense of Highway Nine as a lifeline that carried her away and back to Oklahoma; and to her belated learning about her great-great-grandfather's suicide and attempt to link that to her family narrative, including her own attempt.

The final essay, "Like a Fire in Dry Grass," is the only piece not previously published. It traces the history of lynching in Oklahoma, primarily of African Americans, to come to a reckoning of the extent of my state's and my own disfigurement, the many ways in which race and race relations in America are still complex, difficult, and important. A white person with any liberal tendencies will respond uneasily to the history and, still more, to Mish's experience of being called a racist. We might not have a Klansman in the woodpile, but almost everyone has at least a casual racist somewhere in the family tree.

Oklahoma still has its share of crackers and hicks, some of whom are members of the state legislature, but Mish's essays offer hope that the state can produce better, both in life and art. In helping to purify the language of her tribe, she points the way toward a better style not just of writing but of living.

—Robert Murray Davis
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