

## Editors' Introduction

In the summer of 2019, the Mississippi River, the largest river in the United States and the fourth largest in the world, had its highest water levels in modern records.<sup>1</sup> Looking out from the levee, the entire span of the slow-moving brown river stood almost completely level with the low-lying land. The border between land and rushing water was knife thin. The rising water originated from flooding in the Midwest, snow melt in the North, and the rainiest year on record in the United States. The waters reached their peak in the early Louisiana summer, right at the beginning of hurricane season. The river, which has been restrained for more than a century by the works of the Army Corp of Engineers, reminded residents that it is ancient and alive. If the river had risen just a few more feet or if there had been a large storm surge, the river would have drowned towns and cities in a disaster on a scale unseen since the 1927 flood, described in excerpts in this volume from Richard M. Mizelle Jr.'s *Backwater Blues* and John Barry's *Rising Tide*.

The Mississippi River is a primordial example of the ways the Gulf South's natural systems are changing quickly and profoundly. The Gulf of Mexico tidal marshes encompass the largest collection of wetlands in the United States, spanning Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, and all are in ecological crisis. The rapid increase of atmospheric carbon, uncontrolled toxic emissions, and industrial development without equal concern for the people and ecology of a place, among other human follies, have led to the present moment in which the waters are high and little room is left for error.

Yet, there is hope. This anthology points to the artists and writers whose work engages the active relations between people and the Gulf South. How do stories about the land influence the way humans interact with it? How have those stories and relations changed over a century? How does language simplify or complicate the vibrant ecologies of the

Gulf? From whose or what perspectives are they told? Are they narratives that embrace an inherent relationship between humans and the Earth, or do they encourage a dominion over it? What impacts do art and literature have on political and social behavior toward the environment? This anthology seeks to rectify a gap in the collective literature and understanding. There has never been an anthology of environmental writing about the Gulf South, a region with a rich history. The question may be asked, Why publish one now?

The Gulf Coast, one could argue, is one of the front lines of climate change in the United States. Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Bob Marshall warns in a 2014 article titled “Losing Ground,”

Scientists now say one of the greatest environmental and economic disasters in the nation’s history is rushing toward a catastrophic conclusion over the next 50 years, so far unabated and largely unnoticed. At the current rates that the sea is rising and land is sinking, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists say by 2100 the Gulf of Mexico could rise as much as 4.3 feet across this landscape, which has an average elevation of about 3 feet.

Marshall’s words are confirmed through media images of flooding in Texas and ocean rise in Florida. Furthermore, the consequences of such a significant rise in the Gulf of Mexico will be dire for the entire country. More than 15 million people live along the Gulf Coast (Cohen). Many of those residents are vulnerable to potential displacement due to hurricanes or land loss. A third of the country’s oil and gas supply comes from the Gulf, and the fishing industry supplies more than 40 percent of US domestic seafood. Finally, the slow loss of the diversity of culture as well as animal and plant populations along the coast would be a massive loss of historic proportions. The Gulf Coast cannot be a sacrifice zone.

This anthology looks at the impacts of climate change through the lens of regional environmental writing. By looking at the regional, one can place it in context with a planet-wide conversation, creating a dialogue that makes the scales between the vast and the small a bit more understandable and interconnected. An event as massive as climate change can be paralyzing: What can be done in the face of such enormity? Breaking down the impacts of climate change through a smaller lens can find the human-scale stories. Mike Tidwell’s *Bayou Farewell* is an example; he takes an issue of mammoth proportions, the loss of the Louisiana coastline, and tells the story through people who live on the coast. Through this

narrative, we can easily see the implications for the future, although how we choose to confront and address the situation is still up to us as readers, voters, and residents.

Climate change is a global fight, but the impacts on local environmental systems manifest in vastly different ways. Even within the Gulf Coast, the opportunities and issues of the Mississippi coast are notably different than those on the Texas coast. Natasha Trethewey's observation of the denuding of mangroves along the Mississippi coast tells a different story of coastal erosion than Roger Emile Stouff's contemplation of the criss-crossing oil pipelines that funnel saltwater into the wetlands around his home in Louisiana. Yet by uniting the various impacts climate change has on this region, we can gain allies and colleagues in the fight.

An important undercurrent in this anthology is that we consider the Gulf South a postcolonial space where environmental history entwines with the history of colonization. From the arrival of Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León in Florida in 1513, the project of colonization was predicated on the exploitation of natural resources and domination of people. Kathryn Yusoff writes, "In its brief tenure, the Anthropocene has . . . failed to do the work to properly identify its own histories of colonial earth-writing, to name the masters of broken earths, and to redress the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake. It has failed to grapple with the inheritance of violent dispossession of indigenous land under the auspices of a colonial geo-logic" (1). We have tried in this anthology to address the entangled nature of the environment and colonial history. Joy Harjo's poem "New Orleans" points to the ways the expansion of the United States allowed settlers to claim resources while American Indians were pushed to the edges of the swamps or forced to reservations.

An important question to consider is who has been the benefactor of the harvesting of natural resources in the Gulf South and who has not. Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty, referring to the Anthropocene, asks, "Who is the we in this process?" For many, violent and catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological systems have been deeply entangled. Zora Neale Hurston, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reveals that environmental disaster and the disaster of Jim Crow-era policies are equally fatal. Taking our inspiration from the scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey's definition, climate change "refers to a world-changing rupture in a social and ecological system that might be read as colonization in one context or sea-level rise in another" (7).