

## Marthe Reed

### Mapping Louisiana



### Chemical Louisiana



Eleven years in south Louisiana allowed me to witness a long period of environmental neglect devolved to crisis conditions. The Mississippi River, bound within the strangling embrace of high levees, sends its coast-building sediments irretrievably out over the continental edge. Beginning more than a century ago, the state government assiduously courted oil and gas exploitation beneath both coastal wetlands and offshore. Without adequate protections to the environment or enforcement of these companies' legal obligations to return the areas to their original condition, the coast, its cultures and ecosystems are precipitously vanishing. Unwilling to forsake the immediate economic rewards of licensing oil and gas exploitation, the state has fundamentally risked the disappearance of the lower half of the state, even attempting to block the Flood Protection Authority's suit against oil and gas companies for compensation. Add to these circumstances BP's Macondo blow-out and its spiraling consequences, the violence of inattention following Hurricane Katrina, the fraught history of race and class in Louisiana as it continues to unfold, the cultural and biological violence of chemical plant placement within or near communities of color, the sprawling Dead Zone in the Gulf caused by industrial agriculture's excesses and inadequate waste treatment upstream from Louisiana. Maps have become for me a means of response and witness to living in that place.

"Open Water" pairs a tracing of Louisiana's rapidly eroding coastline with the names of bodies of water that no longer exist and were "retired" from NOAA's official records in 2011 after a new shoreline survey was undertaken. These bodies of water have vanished largely due to saltwater incursion from access and shipping channels that have been cut through the wetlands and from the laying of oil and gas pipelines, becoming, quite literally, highways for hurricanes storming inland out of the Gulf.

"Chemical Louisiana": From north of Baton Rouge to south of New Orleans lies a section of the Mississippi River known as "Chemical Corridor." Situated within or next to areas of concentrated economic disadvantage, often near communities of color, sprawl a dense succession of petroleum refineries, chemical industries, and hazardous waste containment sites. A long history of lax state supervision of environmental regulation has resulted in an extraordinary number of toxic spills, leaks, and toxic particulate and other air pollution. This region, once the site of sugar and cotton plantations where newly liberated people founded communities after the Civil War, is also known as "Cancer Alley" for the high incidences of cancer and other environmental illnesses in the nearby communities. In the map above, the location of towns along Cancer Alley from north of Baton Rouge to just north of Geismar is paired with the history of chemical spills and water table contamination along the river's course.

Marthe Reed is the author of five books: *Nights Reading* (Lavender Ink), *Pleth*, a collaboration with j hastain (Unlikely Books), *(em)bodied bliss* (Moria Books), *Gaze* (Black Radish Books) and *Tender Box, A Wunderkammer* (Lavender Ink). She has published chapbooks as part of the Dusie Kollektiv, as well as with above/ground press and Shirt Pocket Press. Her collaborative chapbook *thrown*, text by j hastain with Reed's collages, won the 2013 Smoking Glue Gun contest and will appear in Spring 2015. She is Co-Publisher of Black Radish and Publisher of Nous-zöt chapbooks. "Chemical Louisiana" first appeared in *Fell Swoop*. Reed's scholarship on the poetics of place has addressed the work of Claudia Rankine, John Kinsella, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge.