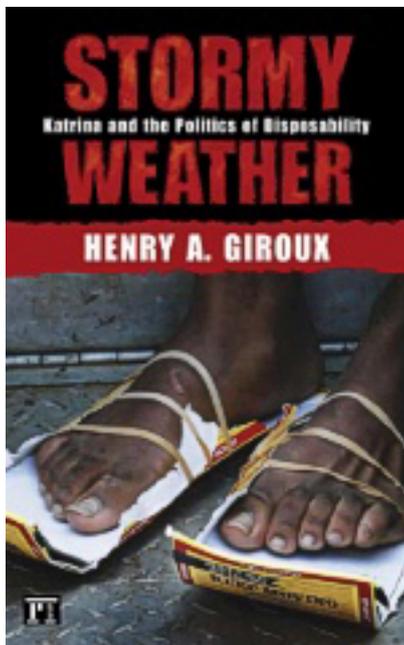


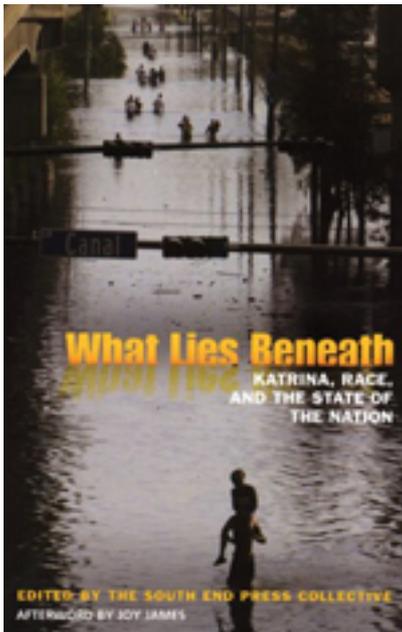
Henry A. Giroux's *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* and South End Press Collective's *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race and the State of the Nation*

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Giroux, Henry A. *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*. Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2006. \$67.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Ed. South End Press Collective. *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race and the State of the Nation*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2007. \$14.00 paper.





Before the waters receded in a post-Katrina New Orleans the inevitable questions arose: How could this have happened? Did the levees merely fail, or might they have been intentionally bombed? Was it evidence of global warming? Government neglect? Blatant racism? The blunder of a President more occupied with war than saving people in his own nation? These are the questions the collected authors ask in *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*, edited by the South End Press Collective, and in *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*, by Henry A. Giroux.

In *What Lies Beneath*, the South End Press Collective makes their interpretation of Hurricane Katrina clear: what happened before, during and after the storm was a direct reflection of a nation that does not care for the poor or people of color. A major strength of the book is that it brings voices into dialogue with each other that might not otherwise be in communication. In some cases, repeated themes and quotations become more resonant as they are invoked by multiple authors: Barbara Bush's horrific assertion that displaced residents were better off than they were before the storm became more infuriating as I read it over and over again in multiple essays. In other cases, the editors place contradictory opinions back to back. For example, in a self-reflexive analysis of the group Common Ground Relief, Sue Hilberbrand, Scott Crow, and Lisa Fithian acknowledge their outsider status and ask when it is time for volunteers such as themselves to leave New Orleans. In another essay, Alisa Bierria, Mayaba Liebenthal, and the collective INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence are forthright in their opinion that though well-meaning, many volunteer groups headed and mainly staffed by whites, such as Common Ground Relief, do not reach out to pre-existing community-based organizations of color. With the juxtaposition of these two essays in one collection, these two organizations speak to each other in a way that it appears they could not in public discourse, at least in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

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The book places no emphasis or priority on one article over the other, so that poetry, sociological studies, first-person narrative, and collectively written essays have equal weight. Contributions cover the following topics: socio-economic factors; relief efforts post-storm; visions for a post-Katrina New Orleans and the dangers of gentrification; the role of race, class and gender before, during and after the storm, media coverage and intimate accounts of people's experience surviving the storm. Throughout the 16 essays, poems, and musings runs a through-line of palpable love for New Orleans, dedication to exposing the causes of the disaster and preventing them from occurring again, and willingness to be self-reflexive and vulnerable. Some accounts describe unimaginable horrors and lead me to wonder, "Can this possibly true?" (Charmaine Neville's "How We Survived the Flood" is one harrowing example.) But the book's dialogic structure reveals that substantiating truth isn't the point; rather, readers must be self-reflexive about the desire for that truth and the biases that create skepticism toward those more "unbelievable" stories of what happened to people "down there."

Henry A. Giroux's *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* argues that the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina had little to do with the storm itself but were symptoms of a larger disease, what Giroux calls the "biopolitics of disposability." In the first part of the book, Giroux describes biopolitics as a system which not only renders a body an object of discipline, as Foucault pointed out, but also allows particular bodies to be "disappeared." Throughout the book, Giroux argues that the U.S. neoliberal project creates an environment in which the poor, black, elderly, ill, or incapable body becomes unsightly and must be removed. Conservative efforts to dismantle U.S. social-aid programs reveal a desire to cleanse the political body of those who cannot take care of themselves as individuals, the sort of individuals that have been championed by the neo-conservatives as "true Americans." Within the context that Giroux lays out, Hurricane Katrina is viewed as a welcome aide to the administration's attempts to erase the undesired body from the larger national body. Therefore, the administration's failure to implement a rescue effort should come as no surprise, nor should the comments of people like Barbara Bush or the *multiple* congressmen and religious leaders who said that Katrina was evidence that God was trying to "clean up" the city of New Orleans.

The second part of the book, "Dirty Democracy and State Authoritarianism," covers topics ranging from religious fundamentalism to education without much mention of Hurricane Katrina. Though I wish that Giroux had more explicitly connected the points he makes in this section of the book to Katrina, this was also the most inspiring section of the book. Giroux's discussion of the Bush administration's education policies, for example, presents some frightening evidence of the militarization of our higher education system, and the McCarthy-like witch-hunting against professors who do not assimilate. His assertion that professors cannot feel free to assert political opinion in the classroom, let alone to teach to transgress (to borrow bell hooks's term), reminds us that the absence of dissent in the classroom, for both professors and students, leads to a culture which can sit idly by while a city of our own drowns before our eyes.

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Stormy Weather was published in 2006 and *What Lies Beneath* in 2007, and both works possess an urgency, emotion, and honesty that perhaps could only emerge in the immediate aftermath of an event of Hurricane Katrina's magnitude. Like the city of New Orleans itself, writing about Katrina will inevitably "clean up" with more emotional distance from those initial feelings of shock, horror, and outrage that so many of us felt whether we were directly impacted by the storm or witnessed it on television. As those who work with trauma and memory know well, witnessing is precarious to begin with, sequences of events and details are often misremembered, and with time witnesses begin to re-write their memories – both as part of a healing process and under the influence of other narratives, created by close friends, experts, and the media. These books will prove valuable well into the future because in addition to the immediate information they provide, they provide testimonies that directly document the time and context of their writing.

While these books allude to the performative elements of a disaster like Hurricane Katrina from an interdisciplinary perspective, a performance studies lens would no doubt add valuable insight into the events that took place before, during, and after the arrival of the hurricane. For example, in *Cities of the Dead* (1996), Joseph Roach positioned New Orleans as a place where performance serves a critical role in a process of identity formation and surrogation. It cannot be doubted then that, in a place where performance is so embraced as part of the culture, performance will provide a critical and unique space for the continued process of witnessing after an event such as Katrina. In the collective process of documenting what went wrong, attempting to understand why, and trying to prevent another Katrina from happening, performance should be addressed alongside studies of psychology, engineering, and sociological studies. As performance and theater scholars we have an opportunity to add to the literature about Hurricane Katrina and we need to start as soon as possible.

Katherine Nigh holds an MA from NYU's Department of Performance Studies (2005) and is currently pursuing her PhD in Theatre and Performance of the Americas at Arizona State University. Her research concentration is the role of theater and performance during times of national trauma including post-Dirty War performance in Peru, post-September 11th performance in the US and post-Katrina performance. She was the recipient of the David Foster Research Award (2008) and a runner-up for the International Federation of Theatre Research New Scholar Award (2005).