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What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/keidrachaney/17/
According to the Library of Congress, more than 200 books on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have been released since the storm hit in August 2005—a staggering number for such a short amount of time. Though mainstream media coverage has leveled off since the disaster, it’s understandable that the public dialogue has continued, what with much of the Gulf Coast still in ruins and demands for government accountability still unanswered.

It’s also no surprise that many of these books look at Hurricane Katrina through the lens of critical race theory, and *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* continues this interrogation of race and class from a multi-voiced perspective.

At a readable 180 pages, *What Lies Beneath* mostly avoids repeating expository details of what happened or what went wrong. Instead, it highlights marginalized perspectives and reveals fresh points of view on Katrina from academics and evacuees, outsiders and lifelong Gulf Coast residents. In the transcript of a widely viewed television interview, Charmaine Neville voices the desperation of those left to rescue themselves in the wake of the storm, while in “Nature Fights Back,” environmental journalist Ross Gelbspan looks with grim hindsight at both the extreme weather events that
predicted the devastation, and the negligence of the Bush administration in not acknowledging the dangers of global warming. In the wearied-yet-hopeful “Wade in the Water,” activist Tiffany Brown struggles to maintain her optimism despite post-Katrina fatigue: “I am honestly tired of recounting my feelings about Katrina. I want to get back to a sense of normalcy. I am tired of feeling hopeless and useless in the face of the daunting task of rebuilding a community.”

*What Lies Beneath* is particularly notable in acknowledging the fault lines of sex and gender privilege exposed in Katrina’s wake. Mandy Carter’s “Southerners on New Ground” details the grassroots response to the mistreatment and discrimination faced by the Gulf Coast’s LGBT community as they sought temporary housing. “To Render Ourselves Visible,” coauthored in part by members of INCITE! New Orleans, highlights the organizing efforts of women of color, and adds razor-sharp feminist analysis to the often sensationalized media portrayals of sexual assaults against female survivors during the storm’s aftermath.

*What Lies Beneath* is a recommended read for anyone seeking a new take on Katrina that looks beyond the event to systemic issues of racism and poverty, but avoids both the detached perspective of experts and the maudlin tone of much mainstream journalism. This skillful alignment of the personal and political goes beyond status reports and lessons learned to paint a damning portrait of this low point in America’s legacy of inequality. —KEIDRA CHANEY