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After the Flood

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“We’re all wondering now what will become of New Orleans,” Nicolas Lemann wrote in the *New Yorker* a week after the levees were breached last September. “A big American city has never before been entirely emptied of people, and had most of its housing rendered useless, and had all its basic systems fail at once.”¹ Three months later the *New York Times* warned, “we are about to lose New Orleans...the moment is upon us when a major American city will die, leaving nothing but a few shells for tourists to visit like a museum.”² We know now that New Orleans will not die. But six months after Katrina, the city is a very different place, a specter of its former self, a “Smaller Easy.” One study, released in March, forecast that in 2008 the city will be smaller by 212,000 residents than pre-Katrina, returning it to its 1890s population.³

Many of the neighborhoods devastated by floodwaters were ones few visitors knew—at least before Katrina: New Orleans East, Lakeview, Gentilly, the Ninth Ward, Mid-City, Broadmoor. Photographer Lisa Silvestri is a native of one of these neighborhoods, Gentilly. Although she now practices in New York and has not lived in New Orleans for 26 years, Katrina brought her back to photograph in the floodwaters’ wake. Silvestri’s photographs document the post-Katrina emptying out, the elegiac stillness and Chernobyl-like quiet of the city months after the floodwaters receded. There are no children here, no people at all, no pets, and only one or two cars. The “resistless volume of water” is gone, but the record of its destruction is everywhere. In Gentilly and the other neighborhoods of New Orleans’ flood bowl, her photographs give us, poignantly, what historian Grace Seibeling once called “a feel for the current condition of things.”⁴

“Life in Gentilly is very peaceful,” Binx Bolling observed in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*. “Except for the banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was part of New Orleans.”⁵ Binx preferred Gentilly’s bungalows to the New Orleans the world knew, the “old-world” French Quarter or the genteel Garden District. In her work, Silvestri has recorded the bungalows and other commonplace structures found out beyond the historic center. “Canal Boulevard” shows a neatly-trimmed and stuccoed house like many others in Mid-City, its iron door and porch grates raised against intruders in a neighborhood that has had more than its share of crime. A normal-looking house, perhaps—but for the high-water marks and the familiar hieroglyphics of search-and-rescue patrol teams sprayed across the front.

Apart from the door awning it has shed, “Lakeview House (1)” shows another structure with an ordinary, everyday appearance, as if its occupants may have just gone to Dorignac’s to buy groceries. But on closer inspection we again see a water mark and a creeping mold on the inside blinds. “Gentilly House” shows another such scene. Here animal rescue has passed inspection, and the swamp oaks in the back have lost their leaves, as did most in the inundation. But the house next door is renovated, with new windows and siding, and new leaves are appearing on the tree there. In “Lower Ninth Ward Church” debris has been deposited at the door like an offering, but the flock has not returned. Neither has the owner of the satellite dish clamped to the house next door.

St. Bernard Parish, sacrificed in the famous 1927 Mississippi River flood, was devastated again by Katrina’s

floodwaters, and in Silvestri’s portrait of a house here a family, apparently forced to vacate, has repossessed their home—their waterlogged portrait propped by the door publicly proclaims, “We are here.” The armless mannequin in “Lakeview House (2)” provided the photographer some levity in a sullen survey of destruction and displaced lives; but it is enigmatic, too. The sunglasses with missing lens, and the letter—if it is a letter—in the mail slot suggest a return to dailiness. But a look into the darkness of the empty interior says otherwise.

As she photographed, Silvestri thought “where are all these people? They have lost their homes, their family photographs, their recorded history.” She began a project to provide portrait sittings without charge to those who had lost family photographs and were committed to staying. “Renee Tervalon in Her Wedding Dress” is one of these, taken in the family house on St. Bernard Avenue, heavily damaged by floodwaters and now stripped to the studs. The portrait is a surrogate for a wedding that could not take place, like many other events for many other families. “Chunks of our souls have been snatched away,” Tervalon told the photographer. “It’s a horrible desolate thing, to look around this once vibrant place and feel the stillness that permeates our lives.”

Notes

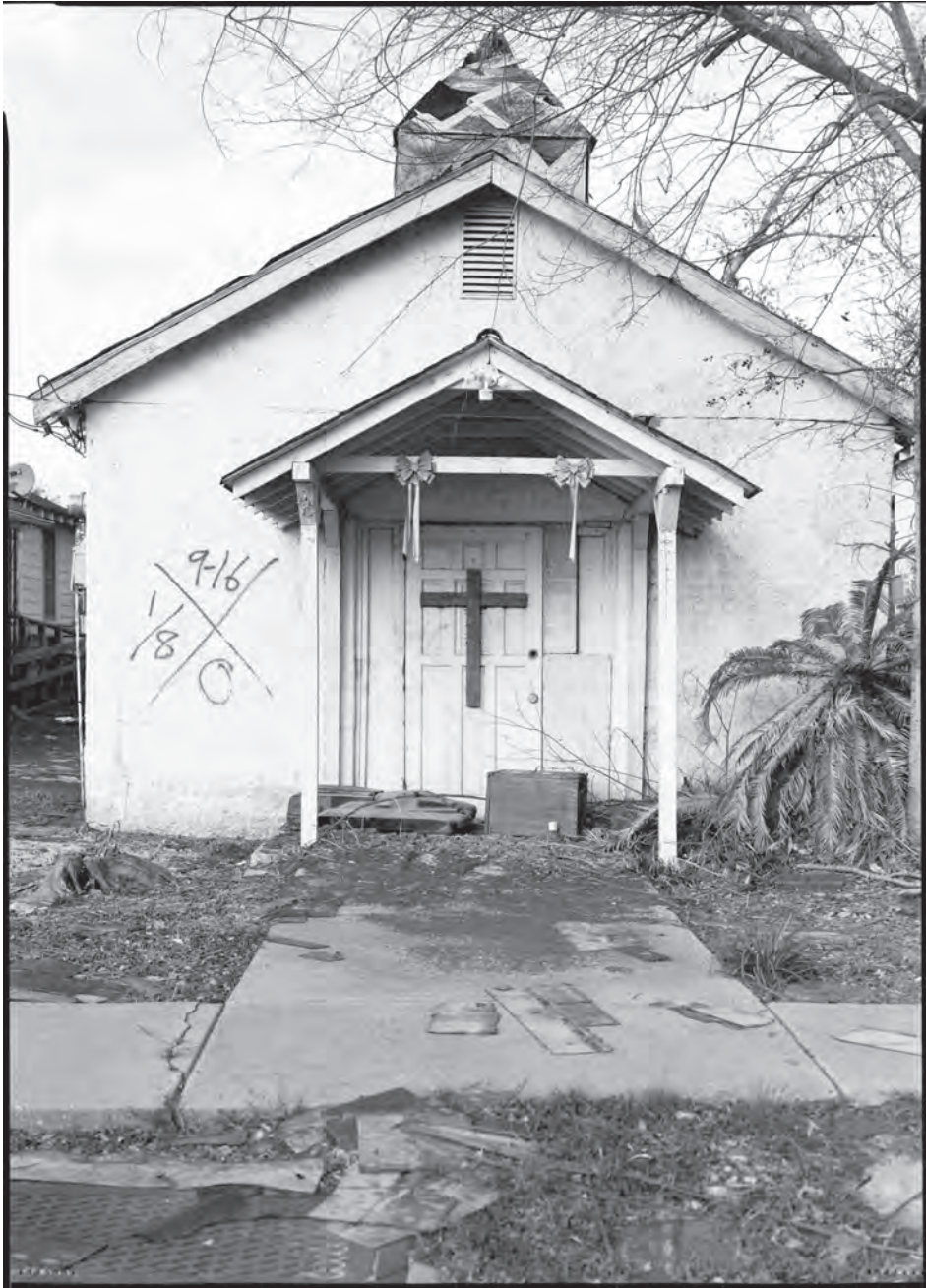
1. “In the Ruins,” *New Yorker*, September 12, 2005, p. 36.
2. “The Death of an American City,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2005.
3. Kevin F. McCarthy et al., *The Repopulation of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, Gulf States Policy Institute, 2006).
4. Grace Seibeling, “Atget in the Collection of the International Museum of Photography George Eastman House,” *Image*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1, p. 2.
5. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Knopf,







Above: Lakeview House (2); Opposite: Lakeview House (1)



Lower Ninth Ward Church





Gentilly House



Renee Tervalon in Her Wedding Dress