The Empty Chair Is Not So Empty
Ghosts and the Performance of Memory in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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An empty chair. An empty chair with faded peach upholstery. Tarnished metal buttons connect it to a wooden frame. The wooden frame curves. The wood is carved with ornate designs in the arms and in the feet. The wood is scratched. The peach material is scratched. Cut and stained. Damaged. Weathered. An empty chair sits in the middle of a living room. The fake brick wall behind it is cracked. The white bricks are like blocks a hasty child did not push together all
the way. The wall looks like it may collapse. Peeking from the corner of the photograph is a moldy couch that was perhaps at one time white. No cushions. The floor is not a floor anymore. Broken glass. Soggy cardboard boxes. Bits of ceiling. Bits of earth. There is a window in this living room. Large curtains flop onto the distressed couch. Weighed down by mold perhaps. Or muddy water. They do not seem to move. They do not even flutter. The light is trying to penetrate this room. But it cannot. Not all the way. There is darkness. Shadow. There is an empty chair (fig. 1). And in that empty chair there is a —

An empty chair. The photograph is somewhere between sepia and gray tones. There is no color. The chair’s back is pleated. It has buttons, maybe metal, holding its skin and its stuffing to the wooden skeleton. A throw pillow lays flat atop the seat cushion. The mold and water stains have bloomed and bled into a pattern that at first glance looks as though it could be stitched into the fabric. The chair sits in a front yard dusted with leaves and fallen branches. There is a car in the street whose back end is dented. The windows are shattered. A large oak tree has fallen onto the two-story house in the background. Its roots jump and splay angrily from the earth. The chair shares the yard with the massive trunk of another oak tree. It looks as though it has snapped in half. There is a stillness here. There is an empty chair (fig. 2). And in that empty chair is a —

An empty chair. In the middle of a field of bright green grass. A choppy lake. The chair is wooden. Unfinished, or maybe light oak. It swivels atop a cross with black wheels. The bleached wooden seat kisses the bright green grass. The chair’s back and two of its wheels reach for the sky. It has dirt marks like dark scars along its edges. There are concrete pavers, almost puzzle pieces, scattered around the field. Some of the gray stones are piled and some are solitary. But none are connected. There is the twisted wreck of a bike in the background and a lighthouse that leans too far to the right, as if it wants nothing more than to topple into the water. The sun is setting and smoke from a fire in the distance mixes with the clouds of evening and the shape

Figure 1. (facing page) Tabitha Soren, 456 40th Street 31124-2. (Courtesy of Tabitha Soren)

Figure 2. Mary Laigast, Chair in the Yard. The New Orleans Museum of Art (New Orleans Museum of Art: Gift of the Artist, 2007.166.85)
of a low-flying helicopter. There is destruction here. There is an empty chair (fig. 3). And in that empty chair is a —

In the empty chair there sits a ghost.

These photographs are captured images of empty chairs in the devastated homes and community spaces of post-Katrina New Orleans. They have been moved and broken and marked by the winds and water of a hurricane. The water of Lake Pontchartrain has stained them. The humidity of late-summer Louisiana has covered them with mold. The wind that forced its way through windows that were not boarded up has whipped them around and tossed them about. The chair has become as weather-beaten and nomadic as those people who fled and survived the storm; the chairs, as Margaret Gibson observes, “too have travelled, losing and changing their place of housing” (2008:13). The chairs have traveled. Moved from room to yard. From upright to upside down. From here to there. The chairs now occupy places of disaster, of trauma: a broken living room with its cracked and crumbling wall, the front yard with fallen trees, the empty streets, and a field that looks like the resting place
of an exploded building. The chairs have also witnessed. They have seen. The evacuation. The flood. The return. Designer Akiko Busch argues that, “we persuade inanimate objects to be our partners in experience,” and by doing so we transform the everyday object of the chair into an extraordinary place for the potentiality of memory, of memorialization, of haunting, of ghosts (2005:21).

A chair is made purely for the purpose of being filled by a body. A chair is even sometimes described as a human body: “Chairs have legs, feet—some with claws—knees, arms, knuckles, and even, occasionally, ears” (de Dampierre 2006:8). So when a chair is empty, it beckons us to sit. It calls us to fill it. And once in the chair, we animate wood and steel and bolts and fabric into our selves and the selves that make up our family, our home, and our community. And when we stand up, when we leave the chair, our “body leaves its imprint on the chair, which holds the memory of the body in place” (Rayner 2006:112). The life of the body, the memory of the body is captured in the layers of memories made in the chair; by the sagging cushions, worn chair elbows, and scratches on the chair’s legs. These layers build a body that is both absent and present. One cannot look at the empty space of a chair without the desire to fill that emptiness with a full presence, with a complete body, with a fleshed-out memory. But in the photographs of empty chairs in post-Katrina New Orleans, “what has been destroyed [can]not be replaced, what is missing [can]not be filled in” (Baer 2005:118). The displaced or dead body has indeed left its imprint, but it wavers between complete and incomplete. Between here and not here. The chairs should have bodies in them. But they are empty. The chairs are empty. And each time an imaginary body is placed in the chair, the body disappears. It is unable to stay, unable to fill the emptiness for longer than the span of a single moment of memory. This inability to fill the void, this disappearance of what once was forces the spectator to reckon with a body that is between the real and the imaginary; they must reckon with a presence that is ghostly.

This ghostly body/presence is magnified by the medium, so to speak. The photograph mediates between the spectator and the intangible presence of an absence. It helps us, like the fortune-tellers and crystal-gazers of New Orleans’ French Quarter and Jackson Square, to see with a new set of eyes. Eyes that can see silence and absence and the “nothing that nonetheless triggers a response” (Baer 2005:70). Yet one may stop here to question the particular power of these photographs of empty chairs. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, images flooded out of the city as fast as flood waters gushed in from breached levees. Why, out of all the photographs documenting this major disaster, am I drawn to the empty chair? Roland Barthes finds the Winter Garden photograph of his mother as a child to be his “Ariadne” in Camera Lucida; the spectator must also find “what [constitutes] that thread which draws [one] toward Photography” (1981:73), and more specifically to the photographs of empty chairs.

Jazz singer and New Orleanian Banu Gibson took several photographs upon her return home after the storm. The one that pricks me most fiercely is one of a small white house (fig. 4). The black iron-barred outer door is swung open, but the inner door is nowhere to be seen. You can peer into the darkened doorway to see the silhouette of discarded objects gleaming and reflecting the light from outside. A single front light in the shape of a mason jar is mounted to the side of the doorway. Weeds and debris have overtaken the yard. A thin rust-colored water line marks where the water, at its peak, reached almost to the top of the doorway. There

Figure 4. Banu Gibson, 9th Ward Aftermath-Possible Body. (Courtesy of Banu Gibson)
is blue graffiti on the white walls of the front of the house. The now iconic square with an “X” inside it, marking that the home has been checked by the National Guard after the storm. The “9-13” indicates the home was visited on 13 September 2005. The “1/8” might be the number assigned to the group or team searching homes. But the punctum, the prick for this particular spectator is “Possible Body” scrawled along the bottom of the wall. “Possible Body.” There may have been a dead body in this home. The punctum, according to Margaret Olin, is “the detail that is not there, or that one wishes were not there” (2003:144). In this photograph, the punctum is the phrase that I wish was not there. I wish it said “No Bodies.” And in all the photographs of empty chairs I have compiled and viewed over and over again, my Ariadne, the bright red string guiding me through the labyrinth of images, my punctum, is the detail that is not there—the people, the bodies.

The empty chair was present when the photograph was taken, but the spectator cannot be sure about the location of the chair in the present moment of viewing. As Barthes remarks, “the Photograph does not necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been” (1981:85). The chair has an air of mystery, much like the home marked as one possibly housing a body. There is no denying that there once was a chair, but there is no way to confirm that the chair and all the memories and bodies that occupied it can be named or viewed or remembered. The photographs of these empty chairs are haunting because the photograph “may remind us of something, someone or somewhere that, at present, is forgotten and irretrievable” (Gibson 2008:81). We cannot retrieve those bodies; we cannot fill the empty chair. The photograph is as much about what is not there as what is developed on film. The photograph grants the spectator the ability to witness the “absent presences who are and are not here” (Rayner 2006:48). It is in that uncertain space between absence and presence, between empty chair and missing body, that ghosts appear.

Ulrich Baer articulates this in relation to Mikael Levin’s Untitled (fig. 5). The photograph shows a simple black door with a small slit in the center. There is a black handrail on the door’s right-hand side and a white handrail on the left. What one does not see in the photograph are the corpses of emaciated Holocaust victims piled up like cordwood. They have been removed. The image hovers just below the surface of a seemingly neutral landscape. The bodies are gone, but what remains is “this sense that we don’t belong here—that we are excluded, that we have arrived après coup, too late and perhaps in vain” (Baer 2005:63). We have arrived at the photographs of empty chairs too late, and perhaps in vain as well. We are left only with the remnants of disaster, only the landscape/the place of trauma. This empty space in Levin’s photograph invokes the tortured bodies of the Holocaust victims much like the empty spaces in the photographs of empty chairs invoke those who have gone, leaving behind a sense of hauntedness, a ghost. The no-place becomes a some-place. A some-place that allows us to see “a trace,

Figure 5. Mikael Levin, Untitled (Buchenwald Doorway). (Courtesy of Mikael Levin)
remnant, of the person who was there,” even if the person/the body is absent from the physical photograph (Olin 2003:135). Something unseen is left behind. This something is the trace, the presence, the signaling—a ghost.

This ghost is polysemous—it can have many different shapes and interpretations. In one sense, the ghost is our memory of the event. Sometimes it is a manifestation of specific people lost to tragedy. The ghost is personal and social, singular and communal. We ask the photographs of empty chairs to bear the burden of the weight of our memories just as we ask the physical chairs in our homes, offices, or cars to bear the weight of our bodies. We ask the photographs to serve as markers/memorial sites/ shadow boxes for the trauma of Hurricane Katrina and the recovery process that followed and continues even into the present.

Alice Rayner argues that:

An empty or uninhabited chair makes obvious the absence of the human body to which it would give rest, so ghosts are especially apparent in an empty chair. With their absences apparent, these examples show chairs serving as memorial devices, as locales for imaginary projections and social critique, and as doubles for death and loss. (2006:xxxiii)

The empty chair is a powerful icon both of public and private trauma and of memory and loss. The empty chair has the ability to be “individually scaled, while collectively monumental” (Linenthal 2001:220). Because the punctum for each spectator is personal and singular, the ghost to be found is different for each spectator. In the photograph taken in 2007 in New Orleans by Daniella Zalcman, there is an empty chair. It is wooden with a cushioned seat. The back looks almost like a shield, with a curved outline and a patterned wooden piece in the center. The back is broken; the curve is not complete. The cushion is dark brown, but it looks stained with the mud or oil that coats the floor. Yellow sunlight shines on the wall, interrupted by the shadow cast by the chair’s broken back. There is a moldy, ripped-up mattress to one side and the paint has peeled off the walls, revealing splotches of brown. The debris on the ground is covered in a dark mud. The only color is the blue from what seems to be a detergent bottle. On the chair sits a pile of clothes or crumpled paper that is several shades of purple and gray. There is a ghost in this empty chair (fig. 6). A ghost that is a fluid entity, changing with each set of magical eyes. This ghost/memory/absent body can be the ghost of a cousin who was swallowed by the waves that broke through the levees. It can be the unidentified man floating face down in the street-turned-river. It can be the whole community of Lakeview or the whole city of New Orleans. It can be the body of memories lost: the photographs that bubbled and melted; the wedding dress ruined, the deeds and tax returns and investments swallowed up by mold and mud. It can be the hot intake of breath when a text message pops up on your phone signaling that someone has been found. That someone is safe. And further still, the ghost can be so silent and subtle that it manifests only as a feeling of loss and destruction, a sense of sadness. The ghost can even be a memory unconnected to the context in which the photograph has been taken, yet triggered by the image. As Rayner observes: “the [empty] chair individualizes each loss with a name and a place” for each viewer; it provides a place for the trauma, memory, and loss to be seated and seen (2006:136).

On the morning of 19 April 1995, Timothy McVeigh parked a truck containing a large homemade bomb in front of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which housed several governmental agencies. Fueled by anger over the Waco tragedy, in which a standoff between the Branch Davidian cult and the FBI went horribly wrong and left several civilians dead, McVeigh lit the fuse and jogged away from the building. The bomb went off at precisely 9:02 in the morning. It destroyed the building and claimed 168 lives, including those of 19 children in the building’s daycare center. After much community debate, the decision was made to create a memorial at the site of the bombing. The winning design was a set of 168 empty chairs in the Murrah Federal Building footprint (fig. 7). Designer Hans Butzer believed his design to be a “very simple yet powerful portrayal of someone not being there [...] Like an
empty chair at a dinner table, we are always aware of the presence of a loved one’s absence” (in Linenthal 2001:218). Each chair is marked with a name. The chairs are placed between two large stone doorways called the Gates of Time. One gateway displays 9:01 and the other shows 9:03. The chairs, forever marking the time of the event, are situated in a frozen moment before and after the blast. This liminal space is the territory of the ghost. As private and public markers/memorials, the chairs are “the traces of the dead in the form of furniture,” the memories and ghosts of the people who were lost, and the trauma suffered by those who survived (Gibson 2008:1).

There is an empty chair. A wheelchair. The air seems heavy. Hazy. Filled with dust. Humidity. The chair’s metal skeleton and cushion are deep blue. Or used to be. The tire we can see is gray. And flat. The back of the chair is crusted with water damage. The pattern looks almost like waves caught in action. The seat of the chair and its arms are smeared with mud that has dried. Now it is black and cracked. There is only one footrest; on it is a slipper. The floor under the wheelchair is covered in mud and dust and mold. There is a wooden wardrobe in the background. Nothing is on the crossbar. There is a pile of clothes spilling out onto the floor and the grime. Everything looks old and dusty. A drawer is thrown on the floor, stuffed with unknown, moldy things. There is a small splattering of mold in the right corner of the room. An indistinguishable white mass is draped over the back of the empty chair. A
shirt? A garbage bag? There is light coming from the upper right-hand corner of the picture. It may be a window. There is no way to know for sure. There is an empty wheelchair (fig. 8). With a body missing and a single slipper in the footrest.

There is an empty chair. It is a rocking chair. You can see the two bowed pieces of wood that give it movement. It is in the background, floating on slick wet mud that almost looks like water. It sits in front of a window. The light is so bright, the back of the chair is reflected in the glass. It is partially hidden behind a table that has not toppled. And a lumpy couch where someone has stacked framed paintings. One frame is gold. Or golden. The light from the window makes it shine. There is another empty chair in the left-hand side of the photograph. Simple. Wooden. With geometric shapes making up its back. Hidden by a pile of debris and discarded furniture, it is easy to miss. Mold splotches almost to the top of the ceiling. The water stopped rising “at just about seven feet above the floors” (Friedman 2010). There is an empty chair in a room with a floor made of water and walls made of mold (fig. 9).

There is an empty chair. It is beige and metallic. It folds up. There is a thin piece of plastic for the seat. And a small piece of plastic for the back. Both the same strange beige color. The chair has no arms. Bright yellow caution tape is twisted around the metal bars of the back and the legs and spirals out onto the concrete. There is a pair of black and tan rain boots just behind the chair. Or fishing boots. One is standing. The other has fallen over. The opening where the foot goes is facing us. There is a black car, a white truck, and a green car parked along a warehouse on the top-left. There is a pile of garbage on the right. The telephone poles and wires stand against a bright blue sky. The shadow from a building nearby is encroaching upon the empty chair. The concrete is cracked and stained. There are clear plastic garbage bags in the lower left-hand corner. Two white and blue boxes sit next to the chair. A bright yellow, square sign declares in uppercase, black letters: CONTAMINATED AREA. KEEP OUT (fig. 10). There is an empty chair in an empty place that may not be full again.

The empty chairs allow us to see the “things and the people who are primarily unseen and banished to the periphery of our social graciousness” (Gordon 2008:196). The empty wheelchair was photographed at St. Rita’s Nursing Home in St. Bernard, Louisiana, on 14 September 2005. The singular and communal ghost that occupies this chair had a tragic fate:
The owners of St. Rita’s Nursing home, Mable and Salvador Mangano, were formally charged with 34 counts of negligent homicide after they allegedly failed to evacuate patients at the home prior to Hurricane Katrina. Thirty-four people died after they drowned in the rising flood waters. (Sullivan 2005)

This chair bears witness to a violent death. We call upon the chair to witness in place of absent people. An elderly person, limited to movement afforded by a wheelchair, has drowned. The slipper perched on the footrest once cradled his or her foot. The garment flung on the floor but still on the hanger clothed his or her body. De Certeau discovers that “objects and words also have hollow places in which a past sleeps,” but the past would have nightmares in the hollow places of this wheelchair (1984:108). There is no rest for the past; it is wide-awake. It is this vivid presence of the past that pulses through the photograph. It is the ghost.

The rocking chair and its simple wooden chair partner were photographed amidst mud and debris on 7 October 2005 in the home of Roy Arrigo, near the 17th Street Canal in New Orleans. In the weeks following the hurricane, one of the residents described his neighborhood “as a scene out of an end of the world movie where there is no lighting, no electricity, no movement” (in Friedman 2010). Out of the 1,800 people who lost their lives in the wake and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, nearly 500 of them died in Arrigo’s neighborhood. New Orleanian and photographer John McCusker wrote as of 13 August 2008 that his “neighborhood is still a ghost town, darker at night than it once was and eerily silent” (McCusker 2008).

The folding chair was photographed on 11 September 2005 in the Ninth Ward District of New Orleans, Louisiana. The Ninth Ward had been home to a sizeable number of low-income families and was devastated with some of the most severe flooding after the levees failed. It has also taken the longest to recover from the storm. Hundreds
of houses have been razed with no plans for rebuilding. Several housing projects still have not been reopened. For years following the storm, people were forced to live in FEMA trailers in their front yards. Some New Orleanians returned home to find that there was no home to return to— only fallen trees, roof tiles, mold, and far-flung furniture. New Orleans was indeed contaminated. With pollutants. With neglect. With loss. It is almost as if that bright yellow sign was warning residents hoping to return home. It tells them: Do Not Enter: This Ain’t Home Anymore. This Town Is Full of Ghosts.

These empty chairs force us to reckon with the things we would rather not see; they bring to the surface what others try desperately to bury: the bloated and floating bodies, people waving from rooftops for rescue, locals in boats searching the flooded streets for those in need of help, the dead animal carcasses, blue tarps, fleeing cars, fallen houses. In the empty chair sits the ghost of flawed governmental policy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the ghost of Gulf Coast citizens stigmatized and subjected to hardships, and denied basic human rights like clean water, shelter, and dignity. The chair is also the haunting ground for the ghost of racial prejudice, classism, and political apathy. The social problems that aggressively floated to the surface of a flooded New Orleans were subject to abjection by society at large. These problems, these people, and this dying city were pushed so far away by newscast/CNN/FoxNews viewers and newspaper/magazine/blog readers that they became other; the problems disappeared from importance. People turned off the television. They skipped the front page and went straight for the funnies. They stopped the conversation. Hurricane Katrina/New Orleans/the Gulf Coast/Nagin/Blanco/Bush/FEMA became a whisper, an afterthought, a trace of something that was tragic in the past. The problems themselves have become ghosts—ghosts that leave their traces in photographs like those of empty chairs, for “an empty chair is always available for a ghost” (Rayner 2006:133).

These ghosts also manifest in those people who have returned to the city after the storm. Survivors haunted by their trauma, by their loss, in turn, haunt us to remember. Survivors are thrown into the in-between space a ghost occupies, trapped between loss and rebirth, destruction and renewal. The ghost is personal and political. It belongs to the individual and the community. It is connected to the specific trauma of Hurricane Katrina and the losses that make up a lifetime. It is one person and every person. These photographs of empty chairs, “instead of promising that the past has been transcended—whether utterly destroyed, properly mourned, or somehow restored [...] that it remains an open wound” (Baer 2005:105). The ghost is the excess of memory bleeding out of the chair. It is becoming impatient to be reckoned with. It calls for a new way of seeing, of attending to the presence in the absence.

The ghost in the chair emptied by the force and floods of Hurricane Katrina performs subtly but powerfully. The ghosts, like that of Hamlet’s father, engage in the performance of memory, of remembrance. The etymology of remembrance clarifies and enriches our understanding of the performance of a ghost. The prefix “re” comes from the Latin re— or red—, which means “again”; and “member” comes from the Gothic German word miz meaning flesh. To remember in this case is “again flesh.” To bring back flesh. To put flesh back together. The ghost is performing a return. A return from absence to presence. The ghost is a revenant of sorts, returning to make sure it is not forgotten. To remind the spectator that remembering is an act meant to be repeated. This also brings to mind the West African Adinkra symbol of the Sankofa. Rendered as either a heart whose upper curves spiral in and whose bottom point spirals out or as a bird whose head faces backward, this symbol means “return and get it” (Adinkra.org 2007). The ghost performs remembrance with the same objective in mind. Return and face the past. See it. Get it. Listen to it. Heed it. Honor it.

The ghost says to the spectator, “Something is happening you hadn’t expected. It says, Something is making an appearance to you that had been kept from view. It says, Do something about the wavering present the haunting is creating” (Gordon 2008:178–79). The ghost is a performative (non/un)body working upon the memory of the spectator. It is performing a
type of melancholia by which the spectator can (re)construct and (re)name the identity of who and what was lost. The ghost is performing a call-and-response, the traditional musical pattern that, as José Muñoz suggests, is the same pattern performed when a historical moment is forced to touch the present (1999:61). In this touching, there is a rupture and displacement of time. The ghost throws time out of joint and blurs the lines between here and then, past and present, arrival and loss.

The ghosts in the photographs of empty chairs perform the transference of knowledge, of history, of memory. The ghosts play an important part in the process of Joseph Roach’s concept of surrogation, by performing “the [cavity] created by loss through death or other forms of departure, [into which] survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates” (1996:2). The empty chair and the ghost are a question, a void for the spectator to answer and fill with her own performance of memory. The act of surrogation is rarely successful because remembrance and the performance of memory change with each repetition. The question of the ghost changes with each viewing. The ghost can also then perform place for the spectator. In these photographs, the ghost is local. It is performing the chair with the faded peach upholstery, the chair with the broken back, the wheelchair. It is performing this home, this room, this one. It is performing this city. The Bywater. New Orleans. St. Bernard. The locality of the ghost also points to the performance of spatial boundaries in which the ghost is tied to each specific weathered chair and further tied to the photographic representation of that chair.

The secondary performances that this ghosting generates, however, reach far beyond New Orleans and far beyond the time of Hurricane Katrina. In the process of grieving and rebuilding, these photographs of empty chairs can be “treated as if something of the person in the picture is there, not just as an image but as part of the material object” (Gibson 2008:87). The person, feeling, or object lost is palpable in the photograph through the tangible chair; these performances of prosopopeia are “a way of remembering, holding on to, letting go of the absent, the deceased, the voiceless” (Muñoz 1999:65). The photograph, by creating the opportunity for the ghost’s performance, also creates a place of personal and collective mourning for a city and a community that lost so much by “represent[ing] not the lived experience of its maker but the ‘secondhand’ experience of its possessor/owner” (Stewart 1993:135). Regardless of who took that picture or whether it was in a home in one’s own neighborhood, the ghost calls out to be claimed. To be given a name that is specific to the grief and loss and memory of each individual spectator. When we view the photograph together, we can mourn together, remember together, though our ghosts and our experiences are different. Engaging with the ghosts in the photographs of empty chairs reveals “the power of summoning an imagined community into being” (Roach 1996:16). The performance forces us to never forget “haunting’s affliction and its yearning for something to be done” (Gordon 2008:184). Once there is recognition that the ghost is calling for action, there is little excuse to ignore it. In this way, the ghost’s performance incites political activism in the form of rallies, fund-raisers, volunteer efforts, and governmental reforms to curb the chances of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina to happen twice.

There is an empty chair. The seat has been bleached white by the sunlight. It is wicker. Woven loosely to leave a sprinkling of dots and spaces. The seat is round. It has no arms. The back is a thick wooden arch. A stretched-out heart of two thick pieces of wood curls in at the center. The edges have been sanded and rounded out. The wood has scrapes and scratches in it. The chair’s wounds are a bright white against the caramel-colored wood. A fishing pole just touches the top of the chair. Its legs are hidden from view. This chair has been sunk into a pile of garbage and debris. There is another empty chair. It has been shoved into the junk heap upside down. Three of its legs jut out. This chair’s legs are wooden and dark brown. They are braced together. The unfinished bottom is all we see of the seat. Its feet are caked in dried mud and dirt. There is another empty chair. A black office chair. With wheels and curved arms. Plastic and some fake leather skin. It lays flat on its back in the driveway. It is covered in a fine layer of dust. And maybe mold. A branch or a broomstick sprawls across its wheelbase. A piece
of paper peeks from the open space of the arm. Inventory labels are still attached to the bottom. But this furniture is not the only thing in the graveyard of debris. There are tree branches. A basket. A small circular black metal table. A pallet. A lawn mower. One can see the arm of a couch under a pile of clothes and paper and cushions. There is a blue recycling bin with its lid flipped open. Plastic bottles. Cardboard boxes. Blobs and streaks and crumbled up grayish mounds. A green shrub leans against the brick house. There is red graffiti on the white garage door. DIRT CHEAP. FIXER UPPER. WATER FRONT (fig. 11).

These empty chairs are headed for the bonfire, the garbage, the dump. To be discarded and forgotten. They are broken. They are moldy. Contaminated. No longer of any practical use. No one can sit in them anymore. But there is a force provoking the spectator. The ghost is calling. Pull the chair from the heap. Save it. Restore it. Do not forget it. As a ghostly empty chair, “it carries within it the sensorial off-print of its human use and triggered desires; when it is discarded and rendered inaudible, an entire anthropology is thrown away with it” (Seremetakis 1996:10). It is not only wood and polyester and wicker. It is a body. A body of memories that has been devastated and is in the process of being forgotten. The ghost is demanding to be heard and heeded, but it is ultimately “the viewer’s responsibility [...] to view the evidence offered in this image [...and] to read, to interpret, to tear open what they think they know, and to respond” (Baer 2005:115). Without a designated, institutionalized space in New Orleans to grieve or mourn or remember Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the empty chair opens itself up as a place for marking and making memory. Spectators have to bravely enter the voided site of the seat of the empty chair. They must listen closely to the whispering multitude of voices that narrate the trauma and loss of Hurricane Katrina. The trauma and loss of the spectator’s own past. Whatever sounds and images burst from that charged space. They must listen to the silence and see the absence that is nonetheless present for, as Eugene Ionesco reminds us in his play, The Chairs, “we will leave some traces, for we are people and not cities” (1958:158). The task
of remembrance is not an easy one for it calls for a putting back together again. For a piecing together of fragments that will never make a whole. But pulling the empty chairs from the garbage pile, even if only in the mind of the spectator, is a commitment to the performance of memory. We will heed the ghosts. We will put together again and again and again. We will not forget.

As Hurricane Katrina swirled from the ocean to the Gulf Coast, it displaced bodies, homes, communities. There was flooding. And the flooding receded. There was a going away from and a coming back to. There was loss and there was rebuilding. The events unfolded like a pair of conjoined spirals, “a steady, unending repetition of the cycle of birth — growth — maturity — decay — death — rebirth” (Meaden 2008:16). When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, those bodies, those people, that city spiraled inwards towards death. As the levees gave way and the help did not come, they slipped closer and closer to the center that is the end. But the spiral did not end in the center. It is connected by a second spiral. Movement outwards and away from death is possible. As people returned home, as the water level fell, as the rebuilding process began, they waded through the water towards rebirth. Engaging with the photographs of empty chairs is much like tracing the lines of a pair of conjoined spirals with your finger. There is movement inward towards self-reflexivity and death and haunting and ghosts. And there is movement outward towards listening and seeing and narrating and remembering.

There is an empty chair. An empty chair with faded peach upholstery.

There is an empty chair. It has buttons, maybe metal, holding its skin and its stuffing to the wooden skeleton.

There is an empty chair. This chair is not upright.

There is an empty chair. The back is broken and the curve is not complete.

There is an empty chair. A wheelchair.

There is an empty chair. It is a rocking chair.

There is an empty chair. It is beige and metallic. It folds up.

There is an empty chair. The seat has been bleached white by the sunlight.

There is an empty chair. It has been shoved into the junk heap upside down.

There is an empty chair. It lays flat on its back in the driveway.

There is an empty chair.

But it is not so empty.
Our bodies imprint the chairs. Our memories fill them. In the empty chair sits a ghost. A ghost that is a loved one, a stranger, a social injustice, a missing answer, a broken city. This ghost sits quietly in the shadows of the photographs of empty chairs pleading with its absence. Pleading, silently screaming, demanding that we remember. The ghost reminds us that a story of rebirth and renewal after a major disaster does not have to be a story of forgetting.

References