

**lower ninth ward
new orleans, louisiana**

1

introduction prologue

IRA GLASS One of my coworkers here at This American Life, Robyn, was visiting New Orleans two years ago on a family vacation. And they had never been to New Orleans before. And they took one of those bus tours of the city—you know, where it would show you the sights and the French Quarter. And then there was some, you know, look at this telephone pole. You can see the mark for how high the water got during Hurricane Katrina. The tour guide was an older black man, a local. She said he was really good. And there's this one moment during the tour that really stuck out. It was late in the tour. They're driving to the Lower Ninth Ward.

ROBYN SEMIEN And as we were coming toward it, our tour bus guide says, so look. We used to go down into this area, the Lower Ninth Ward. It was really badly hit in the storm. You know that. But we stopped going down there because we learned that the people there just really—they didn't like the tours. They don't like the tours. They don't want people to come in and look at them and stare at them and look at how bad it is. And so we're not going to go in there. And it stuck with me. I just believed that he was saying something that meant something to him. It seemed like he was saying something sincere, like we don't do this, and we're not doing it for the right reason. And so I'll show you some other stuff. But this is off-limits.

IRA GLASS The tour guide may have been sincere. But in addition, it's illegal for tour buses to go into the Lower Ninth Ward. The city council made it illegal starting in 2006, because buses were in the way of cleanup crews. But the rule was widely ignored till 2012, when homeowners went to the city council to finally get it enforced.

GWEN ADAMS It really made me angry. I felt as if you're looking at me through an eye that says, oh, look, there's another little animal in the zoo.

IRA GLASS Gwen Adams is one of the homeowners who went to the city council about the bus tours. Kim Ford's another homeowner.

KIM FORD I'm not saying that they will come in here to gawk at people, no. I don't think there's anything mean spirited about it at all. I think they have a genuine interest to want to know how are the people doing, what's going on with them. I get that. But guess what? That's not the way you do that.

IRA GLASS It was just so impersonal, people say. That's part of what felt so weird.

JAMAL PRESTON Back when I was in school, like, every day I look outside, there's like a tour bus coming through. And there's like 50, 60 people on the bus—the big, air-conditioned, super comfortable ones. You would never see who was on the buses, because they wouldn't get off. They just come through, and then leave.
Like they're coming through just for the sake of, like, oh, look at how terrible—sympathy, aw. But your sympathy is because something bad happened to people. Your sympathy is not based on the people that you actually met in the neighborhood that had to deal with it. It's a whole different level.

IRA GLASS The 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina is this month. You probably heard that. There's been a ton of coverage—remembering what happened, and stories about the rebuilding. But the Lower Ninth, this place that the bus tour will not take you into, is a special case, because this is the part of the city that was not supposed to come back. You remember this, right after the storm? City officials said, forget it. Don't let anybody back there. The mayor's planning commission wanted to turn it to green space, basically a public park.

Investigative reporter Gary Rivlin did a nice summary of those stumbling blocks recently. The Lower Ninth was the last neighborhood in the city to get electricity and drinking water. Residents were allowed back months after they were allowed into other neighborhoods. FEMA trailers were slower to arrive here. Only one school was reopened, and that only happened after teachers and parents cut the padlock on the building and marched on the superintendent's office. Meanwhile, money allocated for homeowners to rebuild their houses—\$10 billion of assistance for Katrina victims throughout Louisiana was distributed by the state in a way that discriminated against black homeowners. That's what a federal judge ruled in 2010. And it's black homeowners who are in the Lower Ninth. Because of all this, most people did not come back.

The population of the ward is a little less than half of what it was before the storm. So half the homes are back. And they're bunched up at the bottom end of the ward, the high ground near the Mississippi, with bit patches of nothing in the top half, where Mr. Irvin

lives.

HENRY IRVIN They started working on that house. This house has been totally repaired. This house, they haven't done anything on it.

IRA GLASS I'd seen pictures of the Lower Ninth Ward—probably you have, too. But they didn't prepare me for what it's like to drive around the north half of the ward, the part above North Claiborne Street. It's like wilderness. But it's a very orderly wilderness—a grid of streets laid out like a town waiting for developers who never showed up—which, you know, it is—tall grass filling the space between lots.

HENRY IRVIN So there was a grocery store here on this corner one time.

IRA GLASS Now it's just a foundation there.

HENRY IRVIN It's just a foundation, that's all. This used to be a school right here. It's just an empty piece of land.

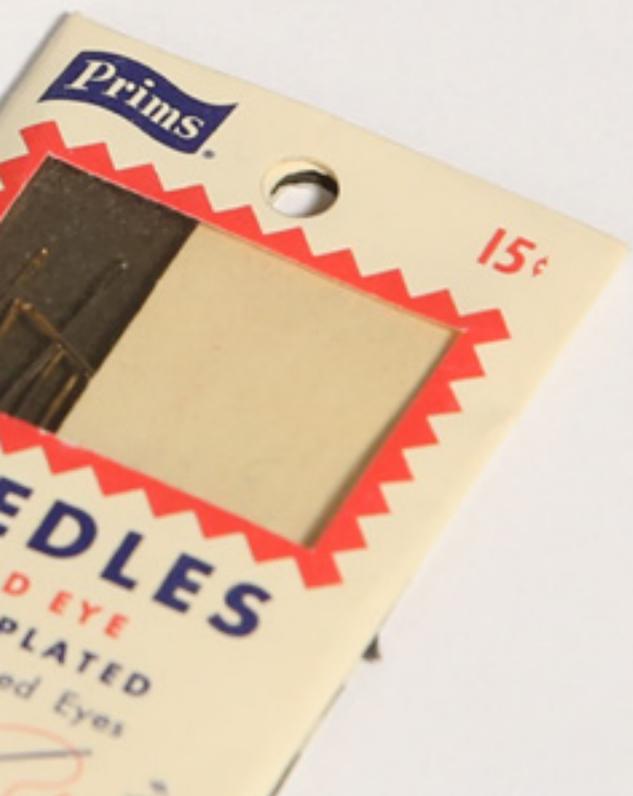
IRA GLASS Outside the Lower Ninth, in the rest of the city, the population is 90% back to what it was before the storm. Who you meet when you travel around the Lower Ninth are just some very willful people who've dealt with some of the worst destruction in the city and who are dealing with a lot of ghosts. It's still not clear exactly how many people in New Orleans died in Katrina. The official count is about 1,000, a third of those by drowning. More of those were in the Lower Ninth than any other neighborhood.
Today, we're going to take you on a walking tour of the Lower Ninth. We're going to make four stops. And at each stop, we're going to do what the bus tour cannot do. We're going to meet some people. And think about this for a second. This is the neighborhood that the city did not want to exist.

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