

STADIUMS AND NATIONAL REMEMBERING THE

T

THE 2011 LOZANO LONG CONFERENCE, *From Natural Events to Social Disasters in the Circum-Caribbean*, which took place at the University of Texas at Austin February 23–25, 2011, was a stimulating cross-disciplinary conversation

about the multiple effects of so-called natural disasters for the peoples of the Caribbean, the coastal regions of the southern United States, and Central America. As a region linked together by U.S. imperial power, the circum-Caribbean has been an area where environmental disasters have often been catalysts for social and political transformation. Inspired by the striking parallels between the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, the conference explored how disasters expose historical and ongoing forms of social inequality, environmental hazards, and political crisis that have plagued the circum-Caribbean region. Organized by Prof. Jossianna Arroyo and myself, LLILAS's annual signature conference was a genuinely cross-disciplinary, cross-national endeavor that included participants from the U.S. National Weather Service and the U.S. Geological Survey, along with scholars and activists from universities and NGOs in Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and the United States.

My own research on the social and political impact of natural disasters stems from an interest in the relationship between sport and society in general, and more specifically, the social and cultural functions of stadiums within and beyond the arena of the sporting world. These concerns prompt an analysis of the ways the Louisiana Superdome, the showcase sporting venue of the city of New Orleans, became an iconic symbol of the Hurricane Katrina disaster of August 2005. If New Orleans shares a long history of linkages to the circum-Caribbean—from its shared Spanish and French colonial heritage, to its role as a key port city in the region's economy (recall that U.S. fruit companies imported Central American bananas through New Orleans) during the twentieth century—its geographic location as part of a prime zone of hurricane activity also links the city to the broader circum-Caribbean

region. Hence New Orleanian history is shaped by its connectedness to the Caribbean and Latin America as much as its geographic location within the boundaries of the United States. Moreover, the Katrina disaster showed that the city's shared similarities with the region also include its similar forms of racialized social inequality.

The Louisiana Superdome opened its doors in August 1975 with much fanfare and celebration. The opening was a dedication “to the people of Louisiana who built this magnificent structure—the largest enclosed stadium-arena-convention facility in the world.” Promoters encouraged New Orleanians to “bring your family and friends to share in the historic celebration.”¹ The dome project was a hefty public investment, costing the state of Louisiana \$178 million, a price that more than doubled after subsequent renovations to the stadium following Katrina.² Despite the Superdome's exorbitant cost, the stadium became part of the city's attempt to make New Orleans into a “major league” city, both in the sport world and in the convention business. Constructed at the tail end of the Civil Rights era, the stadium also was a site of athletic achievement and spectatorship for African Americans in the city and the state, serving as a stage for black stars of the local professional football team, the New Orleans Saints, as well as the “Bayou Classic,” the annual college football game between regional black college football powers Southern University and Grambling State University.

Thirty years later, the Louisiana Superdome transformed into what one journalist called an “epicenter of human misery.” On August 28, 2005, thousands of New Orleanians, the majority of them African Americans, converged on the stadium not to cheer for the Saints, but to seek refuge from Hurricane Katrina. Municipal authorities made the Superdome a “refuge of last resort” for city residents who were unable to evacuate the city. After the storm battered the city and the stadium itself, ripping a hole in its roof, knocking out power and its plumbing system, the city's landmark quickly turned into a horror scene for the nearly 25,000 people who were trapped within it. After the city's fragile

TRAUMA: KATRINA DISASTER

by FRANK A. GURIDY

levees broke and millions of gallons of water flooded three-quarters of the city, evacuees suffered through inadequate food and water, unbearable humidity, and an equally unbearable stench generated by the building piles of human waste and filth throughout the stadium. When relief workers finally arrived two days after the storm had hit, they transported 150,000 evacuees to Houston, Texas, relocating almost 20,000 to yet another domed stadium: the Houston Astrodome. Thus, the sight of tens of thousands of evacuees stranded in these sporting venues vividly symbolized the utter disregard for the region's poor, and predominantly black, population by the neoliberal U.S. state.

My research is revisiting these moments of despair at the Louisiana Superdome during the first week of the Katrina disaster in the late summer of 2005 in order to underscore the multiple ways the Superdome became a public monument to the Katrina disaster. The fact that a sporting venue became an iconic symbol of the catastrophe reveals the workings of the neoliberal state in contemporary U.S. society. In an era when state and federal governments are slashing budgets to public services, stadiums remain one of the few areas of public investment, due to their ability to generate profits for owners of professional teams and other businesses that benefit from the sport industry. The Katrina disaster, however, transformed the Superdome, and the Houston Astrodome, where evacuees were also housed, into something beyond their function as entertainment venues. Although these stadiums became improvised emergency shelters, they also became public monuments to the suffering created by the government's inadequate response to the crisis. But like all monuments, these

stadiums, particularly the Superdome, serve as sites of forgetting, a process that has become clear in the city's effort to make the renovation of the stadium (and the recent success of the Saints) a symbol of New Orleans's "comeback" from Katrina.

Stadiums are prominent parts of cityscapes throughout the world. While commonly known as venues for athletic competition, they have also been arenas of social and political trauma in the Americas. Geographer Christopher Gaffney has described stadiums as semi-public

"sites of convergence," that are "iconographic parts of the urban landscape," akin to the Eiffel Tower, White House, and Golden Gate Bridge. "Because of their size and public character," he writes, "stadiums function monumentally in a number of ways. First, they serve as nodes of orientation in the city. Second, stadiums provide communities with a large public space that can be used for a number of mundane and extraordinary purposes ... Third, because stadiums are huge and attract a

lot of people, local residents tend to identify with them."³

Gaffney's insights are clear not only in his own research on the cultural and spatial significance of soccer stadiums in Latin America, but also upon an examination of the relationship between stadiums and political transformations. In other parts of the Americas, stadiums have served as sites for other social and political "disasters." Perhaps the most infamous convergence of stadiums and politics took place in the immediate aftermath of the military coup that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile in September 1973. In the days that followed the coup, the military government used the Estadio Nacional

THE FACT THAT A
SPORTING VENUE BECAME
AN ICONIC SYMBOL OF THE
CATASTROPHE REVEALS THE
WORKINGS OF THE NEOLIBERAL
STATE IN CONTEMPORARY
U.S. SOCIETY.

as a concentration camp for thousands of detainees. These political prisoners were incarcerated in inhumane conditions as they awaited interrogation, torture, and in some cases death.

In New Orleans, the construction of the Superdome in the 1970s concretized the remaking of the city as a symbol of the new, modern, and desegregated South. Despite the fact that the stadium sought to cater to a suburbanizing white population, it nonetheless provided a space for black athletes and performers in the Gulf Coast region. This history between the Dome and African American population was washed away by the government's mistreatment of black New Orleansians during the Katrina catastrophe, a treatment that painfully revealed the disposability of the black and poor in contemporary U.S. society.

The Superdome Debacle

The class-based and racialized assumptions embedded in the city's preparations for Hurricane Katrina were evident right from the start. On Sunday, August 28, 2005, Ray Nagin, then mayor of New Orleans, belatedly issued a mandatory evacuation order with Hurricane Katrina only hours away. Those who could not evacuate the city were encouraged to seek refuge in the Superdome. The mayor sent buses to designated points throughout the city to pick up residents and take them to the Dome. Nagin ordered evacuees not to bring weapons or large items while recommending that they "bring small quantities of food for three or four days, to be safe." The Mayor's message was contradictory. The Dome would be a "refuge of last resort," which by definition is a temporary shelter that houses evacuees during the storm. Yet, the Mayor's message tacitly implied a rather flexible understanding of "temporary"

when he asked evacuees to be prepared to remain in the stadium for "three or four days." Those who arrived at the stadium that Sunday encountered an hours-long wait at the Dome, due to the extensive weapons searches conducted by National Guardsmen who were on duty at the entrance. The searches unnerved NBC News anchor Brian Williams, who was covering the storm at the Superdome. He recalled that as "evacuees were arriving, some of them with children, some of them with very few belongings ... the National Guard were being quite rough verbally and physically with them." Theron Boldts, a New Orleanian poet who was stranded at the Superdome for five days, described the procedure at the Dome's entrance as being "processed." "Being processed [was] like going to jail or something. 'Put your hands behind your head' they say and they search you. I had a plastic comb they took."¹⁴

Conditions only worsened in the Superdome after the hurricane battered New Orleans and the levees broke, pouring millions of gallons

of water into the city. The storm ripped a hole in the stadium's roof and knocked out the power and plumbing system, which turned the Dome into a dark sauna-like cesspool. Yet in the hours after the storm, the few relief workers in the city decided to herd more evacuees to the Dome, despite the fact that there was no food and declining supplies of water. For Boldts, the situation was clear: "More and more people, and more and more people, and no food, but more and more people." At this point, Boldts recalled, the situation had gotten completely out of hand at Mayor Nagin's "shelter of last resort." "By Tuesday I decided I am not sleeping inside the Dome again," he remembered, "I don't care what they say... they are bringing too many people in. It's getting really, really crowded. The smell was ... I can't even describe it."¹⁵ Desperate for nourishment, many in the Dome raided stadium concession stands and luxury boxes for food and items that might facilitate survival.

The raiding set in motion the racialized and class-based narratives of violence, "thuggery," and rape that swirled inside the Dome and were taken up by the national media. Yet, the media's preoccupation with this "lawless" activity obscured the sheer dehumanization taking place in the Superdome.

The disposability of poor African Americans was painfully clear in the lack of a response by the federal government's disaster relief agency (FEMA). The incompetence of FEMA director Michael Brown and his superior, Michael Chertoff, in the days after the storm has been well documented. Government inaction persisted even as the news media provided extensive coverage of the suffering and death that marked the Superdome and the Norial Convention Center. It wasn't until Wednesday, September 1, that the federal government's evacuation effort showed signs of life. The cen-

terpiece of the evacuation plan was the transplanting of 20,000-plus evacuees stranded in the Superdome to Houston, where local and state authorities established shelters at the Houston Astrodome and the larger Reliant Park complex. Jabbar Gibson, a 20-year-old New Orleanian, did not wait to be rescued by FEMA's buses. He took matters into his own hands by commandeering one of the many buses that lay dormant in New Orleans to bring stranded Louisianians to Houston. Gibson pulled into the Astrodome parking lot, where he was greeted by a befuddled relief staff who initially refused to let Gibson and his fellow evacuees into the shelter. A disbelieving Gibson insisted to Red Cross workers: "We heard the Astrodome was open for people from New Orleans. They don't want to give us no help. They don't want to let us in."¹⁶ Janice Singleton, a Superdome worker who was among the first evacuees to arrive in Houston, conversely, was fed up with the dehumanizing conditions of these shelters of "last resort" for evacuees.

Theron Boldts, a
New Orleanian poet
who was stranded at the
Superdome for five days,
described the procedure
at the Dome's entrance
as being "processed." "Being
processed [was] like going
to jail or something.
'Put your hands behind your
head' they say and they
search you. I had a plastic
comb they took."

She told the *Houston Chronicle*: “I don’t want to go to no Astrodome. I’ve been domed almost to death.”⁷

Remembering Disaster

Stadiums are not only arenas for entertainment and athletic competition, but they are also sites of remembrance. In 2003, the Chilean government designated the Estadio Nacional as a national monument to commemorate the repression of the Pinochet years. In 2009, then-president Michelle Bachelet announced a massive \$40 million project to renovate of the Estadio Nacional. The project included the preservation of a section of the stadium as it was in 1973. This effort serves as an example of a state’s explicit attempt to maintain the cultural memory of a disturbing episode in the nation’s past.

In New Orleans, the effort to remember the Katrina disaster has been pioneered by community organizations and artists who have constructed their own creative memorials throughout the city. At the Superdome site, for example, the African-American Leadership Project, a network of community activists, has been organizing “Hands Around the Dome,” an annual commemoration since 2006. The powerful program features participants holding hands and encircling the Superdome as an act of remembrance of those who suffered and died at the stadium. However, commemorations of the Superdome disaster are almost completely submerged under the effort to make the Saints the symbol of the city. Indeed, the narrative of the Saints’ triumph permeates even critiques of the post-Katrina reconstruction effort in New Orleans, including Spike Lee’s recent documentary, *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don’t Rise*. The Saints’ victory in the 2010 Super Bowl has been touted by many as an indication of New Orleans’s “comeback.” Yet the unfinished business of rebuilding the city and foregrounding the needs of those who suffered the most from the Katrina disaster remains. The ongoing centrality of the Superdome to the city’s political economy should ensure, at the very least, that efforts to remember the suffering in the stadium in the late summer of 2005 will continue to contest the process of forgetting that often accompanies the sporting activity that takes place inside the Dome. ✨

Frank A. Guridy is director of the John L. Warfield Center for African and African American Studies and Associate Professor of History and African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas.

Notes

1. See republished brochure in Dave Dixon, *The Saints, the Superdome, and the Scandal* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2008), 156.
2. *New York Times*, August 4, 1975, p. 31.
3. Christopher Thomas Gaffney, *Temples of the Earthbound Gods: Stadiums in the Cultural Landscapes of Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
4. Theron Boldt, interviewed by Zachary George, in *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project*, Rebecca Antoine, ed. (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008), 25.
5. Boldt to George, *Voices Rising*, 29.
6. *Houston Chronicle*, September 1, 2005.
7. *Houston Chronicle*, September 2, 2005.

LLILAS



SCHOOL OF
information

LLILAS ANNOUNCES NEW DUAL MA DEGREE PROGRAM

The School of Information (iSchool) and LLILAS will offer a dual degree program leading to the Master of Science in Information Studies (MSInfoStds) and the Master of Arts in Latin American Studies (MA) beginning in fall 2011. The program will include 60 total credits: 30 credits in the iSchool program and 30 in the LLILAS program.

Graduates will be qualified to work as information specialists in important cultural repositories such as archives, museums, governmental and nonprofit organizations, and academic, public, and school libraries. They will possess specialized research competencies and a deep awareness of the interrelatedness of technologies and cultural products of all kinds, and they will be qualified to pursue a doctoral degree or other research opportunity, or to work in a professional library or other information-centered career.

Collaboration between the two academic units is already under way at UT. Graduate students in both departments are currently working on such research topics as: development of the Cuban library system, preservation of Maya identity and culture, documenting indigenous land rights, archival practices in Central America, art history and visual culture of racial politics in Brazil, and social, cultural, and economic implications of historic preservation in Latin American cities. The dual degree program will encourage students to develop working relationships with the professional librarians and archivists at some of the outstanding collections on campus and beyond, such as the Benson Latin American Collection, the Harry Ransom Center, the Briscoe Center for American History, and the UT Tarlton Law Library.