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When the Sportswriters Go Marching In: Sports Journalism, Collective Trauma, and Memory Metaphors

Michael Serazio

This critical essay examines the intersection of sports, journalism, and collective memory through a case study of media coverage of the National Football League's (NFL) New Orleans Saints’ unexpectedly successful 2006 performance following Hurricane Katrina. I argue that sports journalism invoked and negotiated the memory of Katrina and produced a largely uniform media narrative—one which relentlessly employed a winning team as the trope for metaphorical recovery and a means of the collective simultaneously coping with and escaping from traumatic memory. Moreover, I problematize the fact that, at a time the city was still in need of real—not just mythic—solutions, a storyline of triumph was diffused with little critique.

Keywords: Sports; Journalism; Collective memory; New Orleans Saints; Hurricane Katrina

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina unleashed upon the Gulf Coast one of the costliest and most deadly natural disasters to ever hit the United States. New Orleans bore the brunt of Katrina’s fury, when its levees broke and inundated much of the city. Displaced refugees took shelter at the Superdome, New Orleans’ Football stadium, and media reports seared into memory the chaos and catastrophe that had befallen the city. Much like fans of the city’s National Football League franchise, the New Orleans Saints, the team was displaced and nomadic that fall, playing “home” games in out-of-town stadiums like Baton Rouge and San Antonio. In 2006, however, the Saints returned to New Orleans; the Superdome reopened with a jubilant Monday night game and the team unexpectedly dominated regular season competition on its way to a record of 10 wins and 6 losses and nearly reaching the Super Bowl. On the
field, New Orleans was told it had found a redemptive beacon of hope; off the field, the city’s condition remained decidedly less celebration worthy.

In this critical essay, I will argue that sports journalism invoked and negotiated the memory of Hurricane Katrina through coverage of the team. Using an exploratory, inductive approach to textually analyze articles in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* as well as national and sports outlets, I assert that a largely uniform media narrative emerged—one which relentlessly employed a winning team as the trope for metaphorical recovery and a means of the collective simultaneously coping with and escaping from traumatic memory. Moreover, I hope to problematize the fact that, at a time the city was still in need of real—not just mythic—solutions, a storyline of triumph was diffused with little critique. Through a return to the dome, this story held, traumatic memory could be expunged with almost religious fervor. Through their bodily performance of strength, the Saints enacted a renewed civic virility on the same dome floor that had been a site of collective powerlessness. For the nation, a feel-good, comeback story from New Orleans could absolve guilt over the tragedy and its neglected aftermath. The proxy resilience of the Saints facilitated a convenient vehicle for symbolic transfer; the state of the local body politic could be measured more obligingly in the wins and losses column than in homes repaired and businesses reopened. Sportswriters played a key role in helping construct this substitute success—and yet, when the lights went out on the 2006 Saints, New Orleans still faced calamity not so easily assimilated into athletic metaphor.

**Memory, Media, and Trauma**

Memory traffics in metaphor, even if, given its power, we commonly confuse it for something more corporeal: “When we speak of collective memory, we often forget that we’re employing a metaphor—an organic metaphor—that makes an analogy between the memory of an individual and the memory of a community” (Novick, 1999, p. 267). The metaphorical texture of collective memory—abstracted, operable, homologous—bears great relevance not only to the specifics of an analysis of sports journalism, but to the field of memory studies more generally. Here Peter Novick underscored the wisdom in reifying collective memory cautiously; that we might take it as literal or tangible risks obscuring why a given memory metaphor was pressed into service in the first place. Such is the task of these efforts—to illuminate the constructed “memory for” workings beneath the objectivist “memory of” sheen.

Other contributors to the field of memory studies draw upon the importance of metaphor. Barry Schwartz (1991), in defining collective memory, emphasized that it is essentially “a metaphor that formulates society’s retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting” (p. 302). Maurice Halbwachs (1951/1992), from whose pioneering work much memory scholarship has sprung, established certain traits and tenets of collective memory: It is dependent upon group affiliation and reenactment; springs from a subjective experience of time; selectively magnifies or truncates as needed; and offers a way of reconfiguring the past (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) through the lens of present
(e.g. the Saints). Steeped in shared consciousness and communal activity, collective memory offers contrast with psychology, which frames memory as an individual act. By “graphing . . . the past as it is used for present aims,” collective memory discloses a vested contrast with its positivist twin of inquiry, history (Zelizer, 1995, p. 223). Modern machinations therefore motivate memory’s metaphors; unlike history, which purports to impartiality, ubiquity, and permanence, social remembrance acknowledges contingencies of the collective and circumstance of the contemporary. Barbie Zelizer (1995) highlighted the “usable” dimension of collective memory; Michael Schudson (cited in Zelizer) explicated it as alternately “bankable,” or “mobilizable.” This paper asks how the Saints proved mobilizable in relation to Katrina.

Collective memory takes shape through texts, bodies and celebrations (Connerton, 1989). Within these arenas of human life, social memory is inscribed and performed. “Arena” can also be taken literally, because, as Zelizer noted in her review of memory studies, space has held a central function in the formation of collective memory—particularly “mnemonic sites . . . which embody concrete traces of the past” (p. 223). Pierre Nora (1996) termed these “lieux de memoire,” which dot the memory landscape through material reference.

The Superdome can be considered a mnemonic site which binds the trauma of Katrina and the redemption of Saints football—as later evidence will demonstrate—transforming that shorthand (from mnemonic marker of loss and death to triumph and life) was portrayed as essential for the city and people of New Orleans. Spatially, the mnemonic dome necessitated a cleansing—not just a cleansing of the literal detritus of human suffering once housed there (although that was achieved as well), but a cleansing of the spiritual detritus that lingered for the collective. And, of course, only with the assistance of the press—sports journalists more specifically—could this performance be cast in usable terms.

As such, the Superdome as collective memory space has to be considered within the confines of sports journalism as collective memory narrative, for it is sportswriters (in collusion with players, political leaders, franchise officials, and, indeed, fans as well) who (re)positioned the dome as a mnemonic site of recovery. The stories told and retold about the space animate our understandings of and relationships to it. More broadly, newspapers and television serve to mediate social memory in this way (Nerone & Wartella, 1989). Communication, as Jill Edy (1999) wrote, is an indispensable component of collective memory: “It is what transcends the psychological aspects of memory and makes the concept sociological” (p. 72). Edy argued that journalism offers an authoritative voice of collective memory because it claims to provide factual reports of the past. National and civic memory is warehoused, catalogued, and repurposed through news (and entertainment) media construction. And, yet, as Zelizer (2008) pointed out, relatively limited research to date has explicitly explored the news media’s role in collective memory study (see, for examples, Carlson, 2007; Lang & Lang, 1989; Schudson, 1992; Zelizer, 1992, 1998).

If, as Edy (1999) argued, journalism’s use of the past has consequences for how a community accommodates it, sports journalism—with its routinely mythic invocations and tireless recordkeeping—presents a fertile sub-site for this analysis. Carolyn
Kitch (2002) argued that magazines offer a medium of “meaning-making, community-building, and reminiscence” and that journalism presents a product through which memory is “inscribed” (p. 45). Sports pages, I would argue, seem to offer even more opportunity for community, memory, and identity—because the object of this journalistic coverage and adoration (sport) is itself a platform for collective memory. The shadow of trauma can only heighten the stakes.

I would argue that sports journalism’s coverage of the 2006 New Orleans Saints was not at odds with its typical role in the wake of tragedy. Following the September 11 attacks, for instance, sports were cast in language that sounded familiar notes: “[Sports] makes us feel strong . . . It gives us something to discuss with the neighbors we barely know, or the guy sitting next to us on the Metro. It brings us together. It makes us a team” (Frey, 2001). For morale purposes, President Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraged baseball not to cancel its 1942 season after the Pearl Harbor attacks and the United States’ entry into World War II. The New York Yankees playoff run to the World Series—just weeks after the World Trade Center attacks—was constructed by reporters as a “playing for a grander purpose: to bolster the spirits of a city still immersed in the pain and sorrow” (Topkin, 2001). Similarly, in 2007 in San Diego, following wildfires that forced homeowners to take refuge at the local stadium (much like the New Orleans Superdome), the reopening game there was cast as a collective renewal—a “part of the healing process” (Kinsman, 2007). Yet even in light of this historic context, perhaps no previous sports reporting has invoked trauma so consistently and thoroughly as the 2006 Saints—likely because of the trauma that took place on their home field.

Jeffrey Alexander (2004) located cultural trauma occurring when “members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness” (p. 1). Simultaneously binding groups and fracturing their bonds, trauma has long been central—and centrally problematic—within memory studies, stretching back to its Freudian roots. One can find in the sports journalism coverage that a traumatic event such as Katrina requires “working through” (Freud, 1914/1958). Yet, as Dominick LaCapra (2001) argued, “A crucial issue with respect to traumatic historical events is whether attempts to work through problems, including rituals of mourning, can viably come to terms with . . . the divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses of a dire past” (p. 45). Extrapolated beyond the individual—Freud’s framework—and projected at the collective level, the therapy provided (by the Saints’ performance, for instance) is constructed as metaphor toward psychological resolution. As Randall Collins (2004) documented, intense, emotional expressions by crowds—cheering at sporting events, for example—provide palpable illumination of Durkheimian functionality: “The ingredients of group assembly, emotional contagion, and mutual focus generate respect for symbolic objects and solidarity within the larger group” (p. 67). Collins, in his study of American solidarity rituals in the wake of September 11, noted how routine entertainment events such as concerts and sports matches effortlessly absorbed commemorative ceremonies. Importantly, Collins detected a note of self-affirmation to these rituals: “[They] were not merely enacting national solidarity but...
also were indicating claims to the importance of the sporting event and thus of its participants” (p. 68).

That is, the grandiose, commemorative narrative affixed to otherwise routine events legitimizes the self-importance of the events; NFL football, carrying the mantle of New Orleans’ psychic recovery, gets to claim to be about something far more than “just” diversionary sports entertainment. It self-appoints as a symbolic instrument of healing and unity; sports journalists are complicit with this institutional self-congratulation as it is primarily they who carry forward and give voice to that storyline. Carolyn Kitch (2003) has shown how news coverage operated in the manner of a funeral following September 11—guiding audiences through communion and catharsis to achieve a sense of collective consensus. Building upon scholarship that argues for journalism’s social functionality toward community and casting it as a civil religion, Kitch diagrammed a three-stage “transition ritual” process—including separation, transformation, and aggregation—for covering a traumatic event such as the September 11 attacks. Much of the journalistic coverage of the Saints’ season fits in the third stage, whereby the traumatized collective is renewed and shock and fear morph—with the sports news media’s careful guidance—into inspiration and pride.

Sports coverage, perhaps more so than any other section of the newspaper or facet of journalism, lends itself especially effectively to negotiating traumatic cultural memory. In a sense, traumatic experience can be understood as something that “stops time”—an event so collectively profound and devastating that it interrupts all the normal routines and, as we often hear, changes us forever. Storytelling is vital to the project of “moving on”—working through the trauma, repairing the damage, and commencing the healing. Through the myth-making indulged around box scores, the narratives of sports journalism restore those routines and project normalcy perhaps as a consequence of its intrinsic escapist orientation. In the aftermath of trauma, the familiarity of sports reporting helps index that which has not changed.

This may be due, in no small measure, to the fact that sports journalism has license to engage in entertaining its audience as it reports its “news” (given that the object of its news is, ultimately, entertainment itself). In her analysis of American popular memory’s negotiation with the trauma of the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic, Marita Sturken (1997) showed how Hollywood entertainment “not only significantly shapes historical narratives but also provide catharsis for viewers and ultimate the nation” (p. 96). Just as “docudramas and cinematic histories function to provide therapeutic relief for collective guilt” over Vietnam, so, too, might the “docudrama” coverage of the Saints have contributed some therapeutic efficacy—assuaging national guilt over the memory of Katrina, and allowing us to avoid consideration of the suffering that still remains there (p. 113). Sturken also pointed out that the tragedies of Vietnam and AIDS “disrupted previously held popular beliefs about the United States”—a disruption echoed by the dissonance of images from Katrina, where we often heard that scenes looked like they came from a “third-world country” (p. 14). In the next section, I explore why sports came to the forefront as a way of repairing that rupture.
Sports Ritual, Spectacle and Record

Collective identification through sport may occur for clearly discernible reasons; for example, where sport is symbolically implicated in the rivalry between cities in close proximity or between a dominant nation and its dominion... Sport cannot be insulated from the wider sphere of the social, so that sporting success and failure are ideologically transformed into indices of national, racial, ethnic and gender power and prowess. (Rowe, 1991, pp. 81-82)

Drawing upon Durkheim, Susan Birrell (1981) argued that, through the community’s veneration of the athletic totem (here, simultaneously, Saints and Superdome), “individuals indicate affirmation for the abstract values for which it stands” (p. 357). As Birrell pointed out, ancient echoes of religious ritual and fertility rites reverberate in the modern tradition of professional sports.

New Orleans, post-Katrina, was rendered (or at least could be described as) infertile; the Superdome reopening and the strong play there of its civic avatar (the Saints) expunged the traumatic memory of the hurricane disaster and re-established the city’s virility through allegorical means. It exorcised the demons from the Superdome floor and reflected glory upon a collective whose prowess had been repudiated one year earlier: “In such situations, the athlete is an exemplary figure who embodies the moral values of the community and thus serves as a symbol of those values” (p. 373). The totem—that tangible incarnation of the venerated symbol that concurrently binds the group and stands for its unity—can be an American flag nationally or a fleur-de-lis locally (Marvin & Ingle, 1999).

That sport shapes local identities is the broad thrust of Stephen Wieting’s (2001) anthology, which demonstrated sports’ involvement in collective memory, its evocative allure for fans, and its readiness as a figurative vessel of and for remembrance. Wieting contended that sports, in yielding “particularly vivid, compelling, accessible material to be memorialized and ascribed contemporary meaning... serves as an efficient common archive for collective as well as individual memory” (p. 4). Analyzing sport as a means of cultural remembrance has a rich body scholarship; particularly that which deconstructs sport as metaphorical thermometer for the health of the nation. This ranges from France, where 1998s World Cup soccer victory and Tour de France woes alternately conceited and buffeted national self-reflection, to Canada, where 1988s crises with Wayne Gretzky’s trade to the United States and Ben Johnson’s steroid scandal tapped into simmering national anxieties (Dauncey & Hare, 1999; Jackson & Ponic, 2001; Wieting, 2000). The approach of Steven Jackson and Pam Ponic (2001) particularly parallels this paper, as they too looked at journalistic narratives that constructed social memory (for Canadians) as linked to the fate of larger, non-sports issues.

In sports heroes and prized teams, the collective memorializes itself through the journalistic tales spun; sports pages, after all “beyond recounting facts of contests, embody sports events in telling narratives, often with persuasive lessons for readers; and sports stories in magazines do the same, generally with more explicit intent” (p. 8). Sportscasters and sports journalists are in the business of spinning
myth—perhaps more so than any section of news, they have free reign to assign outsize significance to the regularly scheduled, mundane goings-on of sport. Indeed, the ennui that accompanies the predicable routines of sport perhaps makes an outsize storyline all the more enticing.

This fact has contributed to long-simmering tensions about whether sports journalism even qualifies as journalism in the first place. A recent, large-scale International Sports Press Survey measuring the quality of sports journalism worldwide declared the sports press “the world’s best advertising agency” (Rowe, 2007, p. 387). David Rowe’s review of this data—to find out whether the sports desk merited its “toy department” pejorative—also concluded less than favorably: “[There is] little to counter accusations that sports journalists exist in a fairly cozy world with limited horizons, and that they are likely to leave sustained, intensive critical inquiry into sport . . . to others—including journalists from other disciplines” (p. 399).

One problem, as Rowe (2005) pointed out, is the tension between sports journalist as objective chronicler and biased fan. But even that pales in comparison with the much larger systemic problem of industrial complicity between sports clubs and sports journalism outlets. For this reason, Rowe (1991) earlier noted that academic analyses of sports journalism have often been exceedingly critical—because the sports journalists themselves have not. Whether or not sports journalists’ collusion with the Saints redemption narrative should earn them critical scorn for being “essentially conservative and politically distracting” is a question the reader will ultimately have to judge (p. 80). Raymond Boyle (2006), in one of the few full-length treatments of sports journalism, interviewed one sports journalist who lends the following insight:

Sport is in the hero business . . . so it’s in the hyperbole business. It’s difficult to write calmly and objectively when you are writing about things that move people very deeply . . . It takes a degree of fortitude to go against conventional wisdom, to take on the mob, and sometimes a journalist has to do this. (p. 127)

Candidly, the sports journalist here reveals how two contrasting impulses—two adversarial allegiances even—that jockey for his or her personal and professional loyalty. The inner fan is swept up in the pageantry, the myth, and the hyperbole; the outer journalist, wary of norms, strives to remain coolly professional. Both sports and journalism separately offer productive arenas for memory analysis, because both are sites where the collective finds a way of memorializing. The bodily ritual is frozen in time as text; both stages (the sports act and the journalists’ coverage of it) offer ample and inseparable opportunity for collective commemoration. Yet it is not only journalism that mobilizes sports towards ideological ends; one can think of the long catalogue of Hollywood films—from Hoosiers to Miracle—that employ athletics as a “screen” for dealing with traumatic cultural moments. In many ways, when cinema turns to sport as a means of telling broader cultural tales, it is only extending that which we find daily in sports columns and feature stories. The “fictionalizing” license allowed of the screenwriter is not much more indulgent than the “mythologizing” impulse of the beat writer.
Indeed, modern sport may occupy, as Richard Gruneau and David Whitson (1993) argued in their volume on Canadian hockey, “a central dimension of popular experience and collective memory” (p. 30). It may offer the public “a metaphorical statement about ultimate human possibility,” as Michael Novak argued (cited in Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 13). Its main—perhaps only—contribution to society may be that symbolism, as some commentators have argued (Bernstein & Blain, 2003). Yet how do we know if those metaphors of human possibility ring true for the dispossessed? If, as Gruneau and Whitson (2003) claimed, “The momentary sense of superiority or inferiority experienced when a ‘representative’ player or team won or lost became especially significant to people who didn’t have much power in other areas of social or cultural life,” where does that leave those fans on the margins when the game is finished (p. 69)?

Jeffrey Segrave (2000) diagrammed how, in sundry fields of American cultural discourse (war, politics, business, sex), sports has embedded itself as a ready and productive metaphor. He argues that metaphors, indeed, are not merely creative language or mere embellishment, but contribute cognitively, creating realities on their own. Metaphor, he maintained, is commonplace in these various discourses, but it is also dangerous because, echoing John Updike, “Normal problems . . . have no rules and no end” (p. 54). In 2006, the “normal problems” that plagued New Orleans post-Katrina had few rules and no end in sight. Yet sportswriters hoisted the mightiest of metaphors upon the Superdome and the New Orleans Saints’ performance. In the following sections, I will examine in greater detail the contours and nuances of this journalistic narrative. It may not be possible to discover, as Segrave advocated, “what objectives and whose agenda will be furthered by mediating cultural life through certain sports metaphors rather than others” (p. 57). But this can represent a first step in critically appraising the work of sports journalists in the wake of collective trauma.

Scripting the Superdome as Spatial Metaphor

This struggling, half-filled city, hit a little more than 16 months ago by Hurricane Katrina and now in the midst of a spree of murders, has found an escape route. This time it was toward the Superdome, not away from it. (Branch, 2007)

New Orleans never had trouble staking out distinctiveness in the popular imagination. Born of inimitable hybridity and blessed with charismatic joie de vivre, collective memory of the Crescent City long dotted on familiar cultural tropes: jambalaya and Café du Monde, Mardi Gras and the Superdome, Dixieland jazz and the French Quarter. Hurricane Katrina, of course, violently washed away much of that easy memory beneath a tide of death and destruction. (And, needless to say, that advertised joie de vivre no doubt concealed the poverty and crime that had long plagued the city.) New images replaced the old standbys of merriment: vast tracks of land now swollen with water from broken levees. Stranded residents perched on island roofs beseeching skyward for rescuers. And at the Superdome, which sustained
$135 million in damages, thousands of refugees took shelter—linking, perhaps indelibly, the structure to a symbol of government failure and helpless poverty.

In appraising the coverage (or production) of the Saints as a metaphorical “comeback” story, the traumatic memory of Hurricane Katrina provides the bleak and necessary background. Sportswriters—and those whom they chose to quote—processed this memory through their framing of the Dome’s reopening and the Saints’ on-field performance. As I will demonstrate, there was a persistent effort to contrast the football celebration against the recent historical devastation. This took shape both as a remembering and a forgetting; an opportunity to confront and redress the recalled losses of Katrina—overcoming symbolically—and also a means by which to escape and divert attention from the aftermath of the present—retreating into the spectacle. Sportswriters alternately presented the Saints’ season as a defiant gesture that New Orleans would triumph over the disarray and also temporarily narcotize itself from it; in short, the first draft of history wrote the team down as both balm and opiate, a way to draw strength in looking back and a way to avoid looking.

Using Lexis-Nexis databases, I conducted a systematic textual analysis that looked at all news stories containing some variant or combination of the words “Saints,” and “Katrina” with at least three mentions in the text. This search drew from the New Orleans Times-Picayune between February 1 2006 (the start of the off-season that followed the Saints’ nomadic and woeful 2005 performance) and February 1 2007 (just after their playoff run ended). Some 172 potential texts were whittled down to 39 more substantive texts that addressed the nexus of the New Orleans Saints and Hurricane Katrina. The Times-Picayune was chosen as the publication of primary focus because I believed it was outlet most suited to capturing an authentic pulse of local collective memory vis-à-vis the Saints and Katrina. Moreover, one might expect the paper, which won Pulitzers for its Katrina coverage, to have the best insight into the decorous or exploitative use of disaster memory in sports coverage. However, to capture a wider journalistic lens, I also conducted a search in EBSCO databases using the same two terms for the same allotted period. This drew from a combination of newspapers and magazines national in scope, as well as the sports press: The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, Time, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, and The Sporting News. From 147 potential texts, 15 of the most relevant articles (according to search term references) were selected for in-depth, critical examination. Both the local coverage and the national coverage told a largely cohesive tale of recovery, and will therefore be integrated together in this analysis as the body of journalistic work on the matter. These reflections will be divided into two sections: first, I will consider the scripting of the Superdome as spatial metaphor, and, second, the Saints as a bodily metaphor of New Orleans’ recovery. Let us begin with a lengthy passage from The Sporting News:

And to have the Superdome fixed? The last we saw of the place, it was a symbol of so much that was wrong with the government’s response to Katrina and about the desperation of humans in trouble . . . For most of a week, up to 40,000 people suffered incredible hardship within the facility; no toilets, no air conditioning, little food and water, sewage backed up on the stadium floor . . . Now it’s a symbol of a
new beginning for the city, its roof shiny white again. 'If they can get the dome ready this fast, it should inspire folks to come back and build their homes and open their businesses,' says [Saints’ receiver Joe] Horn. ‘And for a lot of people who will be there, it will exorcise the demons of what they endured inside the dome during Katrina.’ (Attner, 2006)

Two motifs emerge from this tract: casting the event as inspirational motivation and also cathartic expunging. Horn, of course, neglected to point out that, unlike most “folks” in New Orleans, the Superdome had some $182 million in funding in order to rebuild. Yet his choice of words (“exorcise the demons”) is tellingly Freudian: Returning to the Dome offers an opportunity for individuals—and, symbolically, the collective—to work through the memory of Katrina. One army medic in attendance—a first-responder still haunted by the “nightmares about the six days he spent at the Dome” where he treated a Katrina refugee who leapt 50 feet to his death and who has colleagues still “unable to function in real life”—described the psychotherapeutic upshot of attendance: “I dreaded this at first when they asked me to come back [to be honored] . . . But I realized, having seen so much negative here, I had to see some positive” (Jenkins, 2006a). The Monday Night Football reopening game was cast as an exercise in collective therapy. Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco voiced the script: “I realize it may be hard for some people to come back here . . . The very best thing those people can do for their inner healing is to walk this walk again, and let those memories fall out” (Jenkins, 2006b).

Joe Horn’s invocation above also contains a religious overtone—this spiritual cleansing, this exorcism—one not incongruous with the fact that many would consider sport ritual a mode of civic religion anyway. (Certainly the excesses of American sport and fan devotion approach nothing less than religious fanaticism.) His rendering of the media event parrots the dominant frame put forward in news coverage: the Superdome as a symbol redeemed. Paul Attner’s (2006) reportage, quoted above in The Sporting News passage, was emblematic. He joined a chorus of vested voices that, from very early on, regularly (in)vested the Dome with totemic signification. More than a few surely stood to gain from some positive public relations: the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) federal coordinating officer framed “the Superdome’s rehabilitation [as] essential to New Orleans’ recovery” (Duncan, 2006a). A vice president for the Dome’s management company similarly hailed the transcendence of the space: “The reopening of the Superdome represents so much more than just a football game . . . This is our World Trade Center” (Duncan, 2006c). The producer organizing the pre-game festivities echoed these calls: “It’s a steppingstone in reclaiming, in a positive way, a space and a place from the annals of horror” (Duncan & Spera, 2006). And as “advocates saluted” a $168 million bond plan to renovate the city’s storm-damaged sports facilities as the “symbolic image of the rebirth of the City of New Orleans,” few complicated the media storyline (Scott, 2006a). In particular, Blanco—who, along with President Bush and Mayor Ray Nagin, was popularly indicted for the governmental mishandling of the crisis—rhetorically appropriated the Dome for symbolic means on repeated occasions, so much so that, one writer commented, “the Superdome is in many ways tied to the image of the governor” (Scott, 2006b). Blanco defended this move as deliberate:
When we made the decision to use the building as an example of recovery, I think it was a good decision. I knew that the Dome was the symbol of all of our misery; I saw that in those terrible suffering days, and I knew that it alone had the capacity to be the symbol of our recovery . . . If we had a hobbled Dome sitting there, right there in that city right now, all that national and international focus would still be there, but it would be a negative focus if we didn't stand it up. If we stood it up, and it created a certain kind of energy that continues to prevail, it's an energy that says we can and we will recover from the greatest devastation that a region has ever experienced in the history of this county . . . It's the symbol of rebirth, renewal and recovery that Louisiana can come whole again.

Besides the phallic undertones, this quote should nakedly reveal the dome's function as vessel of totemic repair. Further, one might take note of the luxuriousness of the totem including “renovated luxury suites and open-air club rooms, VIP entryways to club lounges and state-of-the-art electronics, including new scoreboards and a high-definition ‘halo’ boards” (Duncan, 2006a). Lee Jenkins (2006a) of The New York Times highlighted the contrast:

Back then [during Katrina], the stadium was a shelter that smelled of sewage. Now, it smells like a new car. Back then, two out of three lights were out. Now, every bulb is new. Back then, chaos ruled. Now, chaos is limited mostly to the field.

“Mostly” indeed—only occasionally, as I will note in my concluding section, did sportswriters actually take their readers beyond the shiny totem to the decay and chaos of New Orleans that did not comply with the scripted metaphor—memory’s aftermath that lingered in material form. If, indeed, “the National Football League and others hoped the night would wash away some of the Katrina memories that made the Superdome an international symbol of misery,” sports journalism, it seems, overwhelmingly complied (Varney, 2006). Through repeated reference, Dome officials hyped inspiration as their raison d’être for fast-track renovation: “When [people] leave that building maybe some people will say, ‘If they can do that a year after all that destruction, then maybe I can rebuild my house,” one urged (Duncan, 2006d). “It was sort of like, ‘If we can’t rebuild our own house, let’s try to rebuild this one,” said another (Triplett, 2006a). Arthur Danto (cited in Sturken, 1997) separated memorials from monuments: The former “ritualize remembrance” as “a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead” (p. 47). The latter “embody the myth of beginnings” and “honor ourselves.”

Poetic as this dichotomy may be, I would argue the Superdome functioned as both memorial and monument in journalistic discourse. As a wailing wall for grief and loss, it memorialized the traumatic memory of Katrina; as a monumental testament to the resilience of New Orleans, it provided totemic inspiration and self-congratulation. But the physical reconstruction of the decimated space could only provide the altar for worship; the metaphor’s bodily incarnation had to execute its performative dimension. The team had to act out, in other words, a scripted retribution against the traumatic memory of Katrina. They had to win for fans so as to overcome the pain of memory. And for a franchise long given to football ineptitude, the 2006 Saints were perhaps miraculous in fulfilling this yearning.
Scripting the Saints as Bodily Metaphor

There is an almost ecumenical devotion here to the local football team. In recent years, its slogans have been single words such as “Believe” and “Faith.” Several cars are still driving around this city with black and gold “Faith” stickers affixed to their bumpers, symbols that have taken on a double meaning in the year after Katrina. “It’s the thing you have that becomes that bright spot,” [one fan] says. “You have lost your house, but you still have faith. You want to be in that number.” (Carpenter, 2006)

In the wake of Katrina and in the midst of their impressive, unexpected run through the NFL regular season, the Saints as a team shouldered two functions in the context of collective memory. On one hand, their bodily prowess served as a proud rebuke and direct contestation to the memory of powerlessness post-Katrina. The city had been walloped by the forces of nature, and its representatives in violent sport could serve as ready metaphor to make right how it had been wronged—tackling Katrina (mnemonically) head on. The team could show strength at a site where the city had lacked it; the metaphor could compensate. On the other hand, equal parts media coverage scripted the Saints’ performance as escapist—bodies of diversion, spectacles of forgetfulness. These reports claimed that the team gave fans a chance to experience welcome distraction—to retreat from Katrina, both as memory and also in the tangible aftermath that still plagued much of the city.

Even those playing on the field registered the bodily metaphor. After his Atlanta Falcons team was mauled in the Monday night Superdome reopening game, a shell-shocked quarterback Michael Vick remarked of his opponent’s defense: “That storm was tough. That was Katrina over there. That was Katrina” (Smith, 2006). Employing this (somewhat awkwardly rendered) metaphor, Vick perhaps meant to express that the Saints had co-opted the force—even channeled the spirit—of Katrina’s power to make it their own. The destruction wreaked upon the city could, through bodily ritual in violent sport, be transformed into a positive, cathartic force. Jimmy Smith (2006), a Times-Picayune sportswriter, scripted the narrative in much this exhilarated fashion in his front page story’s lead paragraph the day after the game:

The forces of nature brought this city to its knees a little more than a year ago, but its football team brought a still-teetering region to its feet Monday night. And the afterglow of a resounding 23–3 nationally televised victory over their archrival not only put the Saints atop the NFC South with a 3–0 record, but quite possibly shook all of New Orleans out of its post-Katrina funk and placed it on a clear path to its ultimate renaissance.

For Smith, this was a triumph over memory—the “ending for which so many had hoped,” as he wrote—the chance for New Orleans to exit the Superdome, a lieu de mémoire of such loss, with declarative victory. Two caveats should be flagged here: First, constructing the Saints’ victory as happy “ending” is precisely the problem Updike warned about (“normal problems ... have no rules and no end”) (as cited in Segrave, 2000). Beyond this premature bookending, there is the matter of a “still-teetering region” that, when fans exited the totem, with its shiny white roof, did not comply with the tidy, celebratory metaphor just enacted there. Smith was by no
means alone in embracing this storyline. Nagin earlier invoked the team as a body of
civic dependency and cathartic projection: “Psychologically, the Saints mean
everything to this community right now” (King, 2006). Bruce Nolan (2006) of the
Times-Picayune recognized that “the emotional reopening of the restored Superdome
was carefully choreographed by the National Football League, the Saints and local
officials as a metaphor for the city itself” and that “the event became a media hymn
that celebrated the city’s comeback along with the 23–3 beat-down meted out by the
Saints.” Yet even when identified as “choreographed” metaphor and media hymn,
sportswriters did little more than sing the chorus.

There were hints of this bodily invocation of “a city rejuvenated” well before the
team took the field that Monday night. Specific players offered themselves up as
metaphorical vessels for recovery. Drew Brees, the star quarterback who signed with
the team for $60 million in the offseason following a serious shoulder injury, lent his
body to the metaphor: “This city and I—we have some similarities. A lot of people
think we may not come back” (Jenkins, 2006c). Reggie Bush, the star running back
drafted by the team in offseason, lent his own vessel for memorializing—donating
proceeds of his jersey sales to recovery efforts and claiming that, by wearing #25, he
would “continue to raise awareness and proceeds for the victims of the hurricane”
and “help keep everyone aware of their struggles” (Triplett, 2006b). “Having been [to
New Orleans] three times, it’s pretty evident that the need is greater today than it was
a year ago,” said Bush’s marketing agent. “I think the country’s forgotten, but we’re
not going to forget it.” Brees constructed his comeback season and recovered body in
parallel to New Orleans’ civic endeavors to revitalize; Bush sought place the memory
of Katrina quite literally on his back.

Through these efforts, both hoped to overcome traumatic memory through
performance; these were acts against forgetting. From the front pages to the sports
pages, journalists complied: “What better metaphor for this community and its
football team than Deuce McAllister, smothered by a pile of defenders, helmet flying
off, carrying the whole bunch on his back for five yards and into the end zone,” a
Times-Picayune editorial gushed (Times-Picayune, 2007). “The play defines persever-
ance and strength and a host of other qualities that are crucial in tough times.” And,
yet, as the editorial board cautions, “Football is not our salvation. It is a glorious
distraction, though.”

Positioning the Saints as distraction functions differently from their embodiment
as cathartic response to traumatic memory. Memory in this dimension is not
something to be confronted, but rather something to be avoided; if their bodily
performance enacted a symbolic “working through” of trauma, it could also provide
the opposite, it functioned as an act of forgetting. Sports Illustrated remarked that the
Saints’ 2006 season represented “an emotional journey that has given New Orleanians
weekly respite” (Layden, 2007). A Times-Picayune sports columnist commented on
the “pleasant, almost necessary, distraction” that the Saints became:

Folks need something—anything—to look upon as entertainment in the aftermath
of Hurricane Katrina. Especially those who have become tired of worrying about
levees, sickened of the sight of Sheetrock, become absolutely disgusted at not knowing whether they can rebuild, or how much longer their ‘temporary’ stay in a FEMA trailer will last or how much higher their insurance rates possibly can rise. (DeShazier, 2006)

There can be no doubt that the healing power of distraction is authentic. Many fans themselves claimed that the Saints enabled them to cope with Katrina’s disturbing memory by withdrawing from it. “When they play, it takes your mind off the rest of stuff around here,” said Eugene Fontenot, who lost his home in the Ninth Ward (Attner, 2006). “For those three hours there will be something else to focus on, just for those three hours it can feel, dare I say it, normal,” remarked another fan (Reid & Fortus, 2006). Indeed, the Times-Picayune twice asked fans to write in and describe what the team meant to them—before the Monday night reopening and during their playoff run. The assortment of letters is far too numerous to quote here, but most referenced the expected themes: the team as more important than ever; a means of unifying the city; a device for forgetting; an uplifting symbol to believe in. To doubt the sincerity of this outpouring would be to play grumpy spoilsport; to problematize the media’s complicity in constructing the metaphor is to ask important questions about the intersection of sports, journalism, and memory.

Imperfect Symbols

Sport has become mobilized in a really instrumental and secularized sense to serve the interests of social domination . . . Regardless of whether our team is winning or losing, the faithful seem compelled by an abstract force, larger than themselves, to go and worship at the shrine . . . Biographically speaking, we generalize the game rules into rules of the social order. Game rules become metaphors for the metanarratives of life. (Ingham, 2004, pp. 25–28)

Why manufacture metaphors of memory? Whose interests are furthered when the Saints and the Superdome offer scripted metanarratives that privilege rebirth over reality? In sports journalism discourse, these two totems, team and arena, offered alternating means for coping with Katrina. At times, writers and their sources told us that football was a direct contestation of memory—a chance for civic polity to flex its muscles vicariously, to live through the imagined prowess of the gridiron after having survived what was not a game, to punish having been punished. At other times, writers and their sources told us that football was a path to amnesia—diversion and distraction, a raft of normalcy for a city plunged into woe. If, in the first trope, the game mattered so much as a declaration of virility, in the second, it mattered so much because—in reality—it didn’t matter at all. It was only, at the end of the day, a mere game.

While journalists helped propagate the resurrection storyline through these two means, the metaphor leaked here and there. Through various turns of phrase, audiences caught sight of what lay beyond the $185 million shiny totem—the lingering memory that football victory could not speak for, that which could not be conveniently cheered away. The following passages offer a few examples—I offer them
in quick succession to contrast much of the whitewash cheerleading heretofore evidenced: “[The Dome] stands in vivid contrast to much of the city’s rebuilding effort … Down the block, dozens of rotting, flooded vehicles are still parked under the Interstate 10 overpass” (Duncan, 2006b).

When Saints and Falcons fans descend on the Dome, they will file past a pockmarked Dominion Tower with dozens of windows still shattered from the storm. The traditional entryway via the Hyatt Regency Hotel and New Orleans Centre shopping mall will be closed, as the buildings remain shuttered. A couple of blocks away, Charity Hospital, another scene of Katrina infamy, stands vacant, its future undetermined. Amid this sea of inertia, the Dome is a totem of progress, a 27-story, 52-acre symbol of the city’s resurgence, officials said. (Duncan, 2006c)

Just a few miles from the Superdome, swaths of neighborhoods remain virtual ghost towns. In the Lower Ninth Ward, below the rebuilt levee of the Industrial Canal, the neighborhood is a mix of crumbled houses and wiped-clean lots, usually with nothing but a concrete slab where a house once stood … The city’s momentum is often undermined, most recently by a rash of murders … It has garnered the unfortunate reputation as the nation’s murder capital. (Branch, 2007)

The juxtaposition between the gleaming Superdome and the ravaged Lower Ninth Ward is evidence of two different New Orleans. (Jenkins, 2006a)

Yet the fleur-de-lis of the Saints’ helmet cannot officially stand for two New Orleans—it has the semiotic bandwidth to accommodate only one. The narrative preferred, of course, is one of jubilation and triumph, not inertia and desolation. Moreover, like the journalists who give voice to the sports symbol, it has its own self-interested motivations. Collective rituals like sport (and sports journalism, which delivers it to audiences) are not only about reaffirming solidarity (or order), but in so doing, they reaffirm the legitimacy, value, and authority of the ritual. Sports teams seek to show that they play a function in terms of civic unity and popular memory; sportswriters ingratiate themselves in that self-fulfilling apparatus. Local leaders find that, in the arena of sport, metaphors can more easily repair trauma—rhetorically, mnemonically—when the political and economic structures cannot. In 2006, it was easier for New Orleans to win at the game of football than the game of life. The journalistic storyline that traced the Saints unexpected success located the collective memory of Hurricane Katrina safely in the past; it tamed what had been controversial and harrowing through discursive strategies of symbolic victory and grief distraction. Eco (cited in Rowe, 1991) argued that sports chatter is, at heart, phatic, wasteful, and de-politicized: “the easiest substitute for political debate” (p. 79). In this case study of the New Orleans Saints, the substitution was itself a political act. And only a few sportswriters really questioned the adequacy of this substitution:

We are asked to believe the memories are being “scrubbed away.” But the reality of refugee apartheid is hardly a memory. The game was held hostage to the awkward fact that the folks starring in ESPN’s video montages of last year’s “cesspool” were almost entirely black and the football fans in the stands were overwhelmingly white. (Zirin, 2007, p. 253)
Collective memory, as we know, is always usable—but it remains to be seen whether, in this sports journalism narrative, the powerful or the marginalized found more use in it. Whatever the consequences, this essay has hopefully identified how sports journalism can offer an arena for negotiating traumatic memory. By turns that negotiation will involve remembering—boldly confronting the past by staging a simulated duel with it. At other points, it will slink into retreat from it—into the cocoon of entertainment that helps us cope by forgetting. Above all, sports journalism operates at the forefront of moving the group through liminal stages of grief and uncertainty by telling stories with unequivocal conclusions (win–lose). Indeed, the fact that the *Times-Picayune* admirably and critically covered the government’s insufficient response in its news reporting shows that a newspaper’s sports page fills in where others do not tread, playing the role of mythmaker and consoler when others leave it uninhabited. Although this study has not directly analyzed how fans engaged with this memory narrative—future inquiry would be well-served to pursue it—one might find a complex mixture of pleasure and pain, suspicion of those scripting the symbol and, yet, an inability to not embrace it. For these fans, indeed, the fleur-de-lis might accommodate multiple meanings.

When, at the conclusion of the 2006 season, the *Times-Picayune* asked its staff writers to reflect on the Saints’ run, John DeShazier (2007) wrote of the electrifying transcendence of the Superdome reopening:

> For that moment, if at no other time, it was fine to stop being a journalist, to not be concerned about showing a bias. For that moment, it seemed that an entire football-watching nation stopped what it was doing and became a fan, of a team that, at long last, was going home.

And, yet, throughout the entire season, I would argue, sportswriters engaged in a kind of well-meaning bias toward the memory metaphor. This was not simply the usual beat writer indulging partisan sentiment toward the institution (that is, team) he or she was employed to cover. This was, for the most part, a full-scale embrace of the “media event” frenzy (Dayan & Katz, 1992). This explains why an unprecedented 1,000 media credentials from 500 outlets were issued to reporters covering the dome reopening—535 to ESPN alone (Hochman, 2006).

To be fair, there were occasional voices such as “Monday Night Football” co-host Joe Theismann who incorporated political critique of the handling of Katrina into his sportscast performance and even voiced caution about the metaphor: “People feel like, ‘OK, Bourbon Street is back up, the French Quarter is back up, New Orleans is back.’ It’s my job and it’s our job to tell the world that New Orleans still has a long way to go.” Archie Manning, a former Saints’ player and New Orleans resident, offered similar wariness: “It’s a mistake to say that everything is good because we sold out the stadium” (Attner, 2006).

These hesitations were, however, exceptions that proved the rule of coverage. Sports journalism is not adequately equipped (for reasons of format, norms, professional temperament, or resources) to stem the tide of symbolic exploitation of this sort. It lends itself “naturally” to these metaphors and the 2006 Saints’
reportage offers a case study to illuminate how reporters, sources and fans alike align themselves with them. As Zirin (2007) poignantly notes:

It is cruel to promote the belief that the drowned city will experience rebirth in a football stadium. The answer begins not with ‘scrubbing away memories of the Superdome’ but in amplifying those memories so they fuel a movement to bring back not only the city but every last resident who wants to return... It ain’t the Saints who need to go marching in. It’s the rest of us. (pp. 255–258)

His may be a worthy invocation, but it is unlikely given the pseudo-therapeutic treatment that sports journalism provides. When complex, even intractable problems that follow in the wake of traumatic chaos are scripted in this way, we tend to “move on” without properly accounting for conditions that remain. The remedy for the crisis of Hurricane Katrina was not a glossy sports media package to be shelved in popular memory, but substantive critique and political consequences for the tragedy that continues to haunt us. There can be no doubt that sports operates as a balm that can heal wounds and stitch community back together; we must not, however, allow the medicine of myth to narcotize us from the social and political realities that are not so easily cheered away.

References


