A JOURNEY TO AMERICA’S ELECTRIC PLAYGROUND: ADVERTISING CONEY ISLAND 1890-1910

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By

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In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, ten miles from Manhattan, an adult playground emerged. A visitor’s class, race, or responsibilities did not matter here. One could experience an earthquake, ride on a railway through the Swiss Alps, witness a baby come back to life, and be back home in time for dinner. From 1890-1910, Coney Island was America’s Playground.

My thesis seeks to understand how a space like Coney Island fits into the collective American narrative, as a place that would attract millions despite fierce cultural tensions propagating New York City. My methods required me to explore archival materials of Coney Island advertisements, postcards, and photographs from the Frederick Fried Collection at Columbia University, The Fred Snitzer Collection at the Brooklyn Historical Society, and on site sources at the New York Public Library. I sought answers to the question of how three amusement parks, Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland within Coney Island told their own story through images of park exhibitions, rides, and displays.

Through the creation and exposition of technologies of play, I found that these parks fashioned an image of themselves in which Coney Island represented the technological conquest of and mastery over the natural environment. Through this tension between the natural and the artificial, Coney Island park owners circulated postcards of technology conquering the elements in the form of roller coasters, premature babies inside incubators, and natural disasters reenacted
for mass audiences. While Americans continued to visit the Island after 1910, this twenty-year period marks a time when electricity as a technological achievement in an urban space represented a common allure and fascination in American culture. While millions were able to occupy a shared space aside from any class, ethnic, or cultural differences, the images of the amusement parks tapped into the American imagination where the human power of technology conquers the elements of nature.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: America’s Electric Playground ................................................................. 1
Chapter I: Sodom by the Sea to Beacon of Democracy .................................................. 12
Chapter II: The Electric Eden ..................................................................................... 24
Chapter III: A Mountain Grows in Brooklyn ............................................................... 37
Conclusion: The Fall of the City of Fire ......................................................................... 59
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 64
Appendix ....................................................................................................................... 69
INTRODUCTION

America’s Electric Playground

A fantastic city all of fire [that] suddenly rises from the ocean into the sky. Thousands of ruddy sparks glimmer in the darkness, limning in fine, sensitive outline on the black background of the sky, shapely towers of miraculous castles, palaces and temples... Fabulous and beyond conceiving.¹

So wrote a Russian Revolutionary named Maxim Gorky in 1907 who visited Coney Island after hearing of its strange, cheap, and fascinating amusements. Gorky actually despised Coney Island and described it as an “opiate of the masses.”² Yet even dismissed by this American mass culture, Gorky found himself amazed, impressed, and overwhelmed at the same time. He wondered what was happening in this place just ten miles from Manhattan that was making Americans so intrigued to come back for more. What did subdued elephants, artificial mountains and roller coasters in Coney Island all have in common in the context of New York City in 1907?

In the last quarter of the 19th century in the United States, Americans experienced a transformation in their everyday lives, in which not just children, but adults too, had a time in the week that they could play. European immigrants streamed into New York by the boatloads alongside the millions of Americans already occupying the city. Wealth disparities hit its peaks and urban populations skyrocketed to their highest numbers. In the midst of drastic social and political changes in American life, Coney Island emerged, where millions of Americans flocked each summer to experience its strange amusements. All the while, Brooklyn, New York was economic and architectural changes that would make Coney Island accessible for the poorest of


² Ibid.
the poor and the richest of the rich. Brooklyn from 1890-1910 serves as a snapshot into the changing dynamics of circulating information and experiencing leisure. 

The United States was still a very young country compared to its European brothers, and rallying points of American pride typically fell into wonder in natural beauties or technological advancements. Americans from different socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic locations, or cultural ethnicities rarely occupied a cohesive and collective experience in a shared space. Coney Island, served as a space occupied and enjoyed by millions of Americans from different backgrounds alike. While the specific experiences and stories of Americans who visited Coney speak to a broader narrative of the collective experience within this urban space, the images, texts, and advertisements circulated by park-owners about the island, speak to a greater narrative in what Coney Island represented in terms of American cultural collective identity. 

Through this twenty-year period (1890-1910), this thesis analyzes three different aspects of American life through the lens of Coney Island advertisements: the changing dynamics of circulating information through mass media, the influence of leisure in American life, and the romanticizing of nature and technology. The influence of mass media would allow for Americans from different pockets of the country to obtain the same information circulated, the influence of leisure time out of busy work schedules would allow for Americans from different classes to visit the amusement parks, and the sentiments tied to nature and technology speak to the content of the images and texts within the postcards and posters in the Coney Island advertisements.

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This thesis shows how three amusement parks in Coney Island imagined themselves through their own expression in different forms of media. I argue that between 1890 and 1910, Coney Island, through post card campaigns and advertisements, attempted to fashion an image of itself as a product of a uniquely American technological conquest of nature.

My research began with the overarching question of how did Coney Island imagine itself in its postcard images, posters, and advertisements between 1890 and 1910 in a way that appealed to a collective experience of different Americans? This twenty-year period was not necessarily the most popular time in Coney Island’s long history, but it was the period in which the innovation and newness of these amusement parks caught the eye of the whole world. Furthermore, in this twenty-year snapshot, the urban setting of New York was rapidly changing politically and socioeconomically, and the city lacked a large shared space for the wide range of New Yorkers occupying the city. In 1890, Coney Island was a place in which many feared swindlers and criminals, but by 1910, Coney Island would be the magnet of attention to the world. I wanted to understand what exactly happened in those twenty years to create this change.

Since the foundation of my research lies within the advertisements and archives of Coney Island, I would need to understand what was physically in the parks and how this compared to what was publicized. In the weeks leading up to my archival research of primary sources, I examined the background of Coney Island park owners, Fred Thompson, architect of Luna Park and George Tilyou, architect and owner of Steeplechase Park. Through looking at the missions of Tilyou and Thompson and the way they spoke about their parks, I noticed that they were calling on Americans to work less and play more, which seemed to contradict traditional American ideas about the relationship between “work” and “leisure.” I then began to notice
certain elements of the parks that the owners advertised and the specific rhetoric they used. Specifically, they emphasized concepts of “newness” and their exhibits alluded to adventure and play. For example, in Steeplechase Park, George Tilyou boasted about his main attraction, an electrical horse, that Americans would find relief from the stresses of their work day. He claimed, “What attracts the crowd is the wearied mind’s demand for relief in unconsidered muscular action. We Americans either want to be thrilled or amused, and we are ready to pay well for either sensation.” These findings were very important for what I subsequently looked for in the archival images and texts. Since many of the accounts of Tilyou and Thompson were their own promotional mechanisms in newspapers or interviews and testimonials, I needed to go one step further and understand how materials were being dispersed to the masses about the park, all while looking for these same themes of newness and the adventures of play.

I then began to reach out to museums and archives that had the resources and could grant me access to materials on Coney Island. Through the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Historical Society, and the Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts at Columbia University I asked both how the park would be marketing itself to immigrants and marginalized communities, while also looking at the larger storyline of adventure on the frontier in American culture and how these storylines might have a potential relationship. These archives granted me access to their digital collections, which gave me a breadth of knowledge prior to the information that I’d soon learn at the archives.

It was through the New York Public Library’s digital collection that I discovered the impact of postcards in creating a narrative of the different amusement parks. In learning the

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4 This quote was taken from an account written by Frederick Fried in the Frederick Fried Collection at Columbia University, Series III Box 13 Folder 8. The context of the quote was not recorded within the collection but was likely stated between 1897 and 1908.
history of postcards, in which specific images had a way of reaching millions of people, I discovered one of my principal primary sources in understanding the story that the parks were trying to tell about themselves. My initial reaction to the postcards showcased the grand use of electricity and technology in the amusement parks. Specifically, the postcards emphasized Coney Island at night, focusing on the grandeur of lights and birdseye views of long skylines. In addition to technology, I noticed the influence of nature. I saw images of mountains, live animals, and pastoral landscapes.

This discovery, in the emphasis on the technological advancements within the parks combined with this pastoral narrative, was a crucial finding in how I would go forth in looking at the next primary sources. This seemed like a strange tension. Typically technology and nature are two dichotomous factors when looking at the development of civilization. Moving forward from these initial findings, first, I realized that my initial time period of 1890-1910 was too broad and this large breadth of advertisements on Coney Island was not circulated until the amusement parks were underway in their construction, as well as when postcard technology took off. I needed to study what was happening in Coney Island from 1890, but I would not be able to find tangible advertisements until 1898.

Furthermore, after I got my first taste of looking at primary source materials, I looked at the American fascination of technology from the work of scholar David Nye, *The American Technological Sublime*. This text would help explain both the enduring ties that Americans have to natural landscapes (the Jeffersonian ideal), and the nation’s cultural fascination with technological advancements meant to tame the natural world. This would provide an important framework before looking at the archival materials, many of which seemed to blend a
preoccupation with the imagined space of the frontier with a romance of new technologies of transportation and electrification.  

As I entered the three different archives, I looked at an array of images, paintings, songbooks, newspaper articles, and posters in the original twenty year time period. In order to analyze each piece in the context of my research, I asked a series of questions for each image: What story is being told in each image? Are there consistencies? Are there elements of the frontier? Are there elements of technology? What is the purpose of the ad or post card?  

After photographing many objects and texts from the archives, I thought back to my original research question in what exactly do these advertisements and images reveal? The images did not reveal the people who were going to the parks, but rather focused on the large structures and pieces of manmade power.  

The wide array of images does not necessarily champion the pastoral American culture. The images within the advertisements show the power of technology to control nature, and reproduce nature. I found that Coney Island’s park owners were creating an image, in which the amusements were the technological masteries of nature. While water, sand, and lightshows coexist on this beach, it is the creations of Coney that control these natural spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The works of other scholars about Coney Island were crucial in my understanding of the historical influence of the parks, as well as how everyday Americans experienced the parks over the course of one hundred years. In addition to scholarly works providing a historiography of Coney Island, other secondary sources were crucial to understanding the changing dynamics of

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mass culture and the circulation of media during the early 1900s, as well as the leisure time occupying American lives.

John Kasson’s *Amusing the Million* served as my foundational secondary source. Kasson paints the picture of Coney Island as an escape from the standard social codes of industrialized urban life in New York. He argues this by comparing Coney Island to other forms of amusement at the time (in particular, Central Park in New York and the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago), as well as examining the attractions and specific amusements that made up Coney Island (games, exhibits, rides etc.). His work allowed me to contextualize and understand the history of the park, as well as what people experienced when they visited. While this information is crucial for understanding how Coney Island broke down existing social structures and represented a change in leisure in American culture, my research was not as focused on personal testimonies of the different range of experiences of the park. Furthermore, Kasson focuses more on the actual contents and the historical breakdown of what was within the parks, while I focus my research on the narrative that the park creates about itself through its own images. I do not necessarily try and answer the question of what Coney Island did to existing social and Victorian values that were hindered through the amusement parks.

My second historiographical source, Kathy Peiss’s *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York*, provided a historical analysis and context for my own understanding of the interactions between men, women, and families from 1890 to 1910 within Coney Island. This source analyzes working women’s culture in New York City from

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1880 to 1920 and argues that young women’s new pursuit of leisure did not lead to the traditional realm of working men, but rather to a more commercialized recreation like amusement parks. She points to a “New Woman” in changing dynamics of social and sexual freedom for working class women in public life. In one chapter, Peiss specifically analyzes Coney Island and argues that the Amusement Park illustrates a change in society from traditional Victorian roles to a rise in “heterosocial culture.” This heterosocial culture is one in which women did not have to be held to the social norm of socializing with their male counterparts, but could socialize publicly with other women. In her methodology, she analyzes the specific elements of the park, as well as the new way in which men and women interacted within the exhibits and attractions. She briefly mentions how working class groups had organized excursions and transportation means to get the working women and men to Coney Island. While the crux of Peiss’s research lies within the changing social dynamics and the work that Coney Island was able to do to create this social change, my work and research looks at the way in which the images of Coney Island itself fashioned an image, so that the people in which Peiss describes, could go and experience Coney.

While Kasson’s Amusing the Millions and Piess’ Cheap Amusements focus more on the changing social dynamics at Coney Island, Woody Register’s The Kid of Coney Island offers perspective on the transformation of commerce in entertainment as America was moving into an “era of mass marketing and large scale corporate enterprise.”8 This book specifically focuses on the life of Fred Thompson, amusement park tycoon at Coney Island and his work in different carnivals, world fairs, and Coney Island. While I want to look at how park developers marketed Coney

Island and the ideas they highlighted to the consumers, I focused more on the elements within the specific images that the park owners were creating. This piece of literature offered a peripheral string to the transformation of entertainment in America to “mass marketing and corporate enterprise,” while it also provided important background information on the construction of Luna Park and the competition among other amusement parks. Furthermore, I was able to use this source to understand the thought process of the park owners. In order to get an idea of the image that Coney Island created of itself in these ad campaigns, this source was crucial in that it provided actual accounts and journals of Frederick Thompson and George Tilyou.

An important source in terms of visualizing and understanding the narrative of Coney Island was the documentary Coney Island, part of the Public Broadcasting System’s ongoing American Experience series. This film focuses on the history of Coney Island, while including actual images, videos, and the narration of accounts of authors and visitors to the parks. While the documentary provides a wide history of the park, its main focus is on the same era in which I focus on the snapshot of the parks when Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland attract the most visitors. The documentary emphasizes that fact that the park was able to attract the masses, regardless of their race, class or ethnicity and hone in on the specific exhibits and amusements within each amusement park. While this documentary provided me with important images and videos, as well as a historical lens to the culturally significant years of the park, my analysis on Coney Island is more on the perspective of the park itself, rather than the perspective of those

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9 Ibid., 121
who are visiting the park. Moreover, I am trying to imagine why this “beacon of democracy” may have been created through the park’s own circulated images.¹⁰

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This thesis is divided into three chapters, in which images and advertisements of the park will be featured in each chapter in accordance with an appendix. The order of the thesis is designed to first give the reader a contextual framework in understanding the development and growth of Coney Island. The subsequent chapters will feature the archival postcards, advertisements, sheet music, and posters found in the Frederick Fried Collection at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Irma and Paul Milstein Division of the New York Public Library, and the Fred Snitzer Collection and Michael Jacobsen Collection of Coney Island at the Brooklyn Historical Society.

In the first chapter, I will trace how Coney Island transformed from a hidden territory only known to Brooklynites as a place to avoid crime, to the most visited and one of the most wondered at locations in all of North America. In addition to a brief history, this chapter touches on the growing influence of mass media printing technologies, which exploited the uptick in tourism for a wide spectrum of Americans. This is crucial for the reader to understand the explosion and reproduction of advertisements of this new era. I go on to assess the transformations in technology and how Americans were working, since the period led to more leisure time for all classes. The narrative of this first section, intended to explain the context of work along with the growth of mass media technologies, provides a backdrop to the account of the natural and artificial reproduced in the advertisements of the amusement parks.

The second chapter explores images of the parks that encapsulate the technological advances present throughout Coney Island, whether it be through light, architecture, or new invention never seen before. I use David Nye’s idea of the “technological sublime”—America’s long-standing fascination with technological achievements that seem to triumph over the natural world—to explain a wide variety of images of Coney Island’s parks that celebrate spectacular manmade structures. The objective of this chapter is to show the reader the theoretical significance of technology impacting American culture and nationalism, while tying this to the narrative of technology that the parks created in its advertisements and images.

The third chapter works to show how images of Coney Island often combined natural and the technological motifs. The goal is to show that it is not just the technological images nor the images of nature that structure the narrative of the park, but rather it is the technological control of nature within “America’s Playground” that is intended to draw the masses. I will draw from theory of this confluence between the natural and the artificial on the intention that the reader sees the technological conquest and mastery over nature through the Coney Island images. I will provide descriptions and interpretations of the images and texts, while also providing the reader with a freedom to view and interpret the images themselves.

These three chapters will provide the reader with an understanding of this technological narrative in American culture, and the way in which entertainment and leisure were influenced by a collective manipulation of nature. I conclude the work by looking at the concept of memory and Coney Island. The way we remember the park now is not how Americans remembered it in the 1930s. This shift in the popular imagination of “America’s Playground” shows us how technological innovation is able to grasp the attention of a culture until the newest technologies of play emerge.
Chapter 1: Sodom by the Sea to Beacon of Democracy

When you bathe in Coney, you bathe in the American Jordan. It is holy water. Nowhere else in the United States will you see so many races mingle in a common provision for a common good. Democracy meets here and has its first interview, skin to skin. Here you find the first interpretation of the real Declaration of Independence with the most good: tolerance, freedom.  

A painter and printmaker of New York City in the 1920s, Reginald Marsh, imagines Coney Island in its heyday in the year 1908. The way that Marsh describes this shared space of tolerance and freedom would have been unimaginable to anyone visiting the Island twenty years prior. The same place that became the “first interpretation of the real Declaration of Independence” had been, decades earlier, widely associated with crime and moral decay. The social, political and economic forces at the turn of the twentieth century created a climate for the American people of different backgrounds to visit the same place at the same time. From the fierce competition between individual investors with competing visions to tap into middle and working class, to the increased leisure time in the work day, to the larger and cheaper means of transportation throughout the New York area, Coney Island would completely transform from being known as “Sodom by the Sea” in the 1880s to becoming a “Beacon of Democracy” by 1903.

Coney Island at the beginning of the 20th century represents the focal point of American popular culture and technological innovation. Known as “the people’s playground,” one economic reformer noted Coney Island’s collective personality of “. . . pushing, plodding,


12 Ibid.

laughing, jostling, shrieking, sweating, posing – shedding their identities, with their inhibitions, in the voice, the smell, the color of Coney Island.”

Coney Island was the very birthplace of prized elements of American culture like the hotdog, the rollercoaster, the amusement park, and some even claim the waffle cone. However, the three parks that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century transformed what was known to Americans as machines used for work and industrialization, to technologies of play and amusements. “America’s playground” emerged “directly south of Brooklyn and nine miles from Manhattan” in the early 19th century. One day before Henry Hudson discovered Manhattan, he landed on a beach filled with sand dunes, grass weed, and “Coneys,” small rabbits that would give the island its name. The beaches would still be a wasteland two centuries later. On the east end of the island, picnics filled with criminals and swindlers made the Coney known as the place where those who care about Victorian values avoid. Dead bodies would often appear in the surf. It was nicknamed “Sodom by the Sea.”

On the eastern end of the island, three large hotels emerged that would draw on wealthy and respectable families from different corners of the United States throughout the summers. Unless Americans drew from the upper echelons from society and could afford to go to the eastern end, they were advised to stay as far away from Coney Island as possible, as it was “a

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16 Kasson, Amusing the Millions, 22.

place where both sexes are polluted.” One New York Times reporter called it a place “that can’t exist without prostitution . . . . this aint no Sunday school.” One real estate reformer describes the Island in the 1880s and why it is not desirable for middle class families to visit. He describes how lack of structure of the Island fails to popularize with the right crowds.

The western end of Coney Island is naturally the finest section of that watering place, but it has always been disfigured by small houses, booths, and so-called hotels. The beach is obstructed by bathing-houses irregularly placed; there are no roads or paths, and a view of the sea is almost unattainable from behind the beach.

While Coney Island could not attract the masses for most of the 19th century, social forces in New York would soon transform the accessibility to the island. By the 1890s, there were more than 3 million New Yorkers, of which over 1 million were living in slums and were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. In the midst of this massive immigration influx, at Coney Island, on the average summer Sunday, hundreds of thousands would be found on the beaches. The middle class New Yorkers, whom consisted of “clerks, professionals and managers,” praised the code of the “Yankee-Protestant political tradition,” meaning that they prized traditional Victorian values of morality, tradition, work over leisure, and discipline. The industrialization of New York created a large dichotomy between the upper, middle, and lower classes, one which could be seen between the east and west ends of the beaches of Coney Island. Middle class patrons found the excesses of leisure and pleasure in the bars, dance halls, and

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Kasson, Amusing the Millions, 24.


Ibid.
brothels, to be disturbing and step away from what it means to embody the traditional and moral American way of life.  

1893 marks a turning point for the development of Coney Island. John McKane, the corrupted politician who had control of the island, was ousted and put in federal prison for election fraud. The removal of McKane would open up the possibility for new investors and business owners to claim their stake in the beaches. In the same year, accidental fires plagued West Brighton Beach, home to the large hotels for the wealthy elites. And the more New York grew, the more the city pressed for greater means of transportation throughout the five boroughs of the city. These investments in transportation would allow Coney Island to grow and become more accessible including bridges and tunnels, ferry boats, elevated trains, and electric trolleys to connect the five boroughs. By 1895, any New Yorker could access Coney Island for just 5 cents. Anyone could “vacation” for a day because distance, cost, and time were completely eliminated.

The American acceptance of taking a “summer vacation” began after the Civil War, largely due to the increase in a disposable income. Between 1880 and 1890, Brooklyn’s population grew by 42 percent and the national consumer price index slowly declined. It was possible for working men and women to go to Coney Island without saving money or planning. New labor laws furthermore reduced daily hours and created Saturday half-holidays, that would

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24 Ibid., 78.
allow industrial workers to spend their off days at resorts, like that of Coney Island. Since visitors could expect to return to Manhattan, Brooklyn, or other parts of New York by nightfall, there was no incentive for investors to build large hotels along the shores of the Island.  

In the changing social and political climate of Coney Island, business owners saw value in connecting with the American middle class and changing the reputation of “Sodom by the Sea” to a shared space to enjoy a vacation. This concept of changing leisure patterns to draw on different classes subdued to more traditional Victorian middle class values was not new in the 19th century. In 1858, Frederick Law Olmstead built Manhattan Central Park, which was meant to change leisure patterns among the working class. He described the park as “democratic recreation” and was meant to be an escape from the chaotic city life. The creation of this Park helps to explain the strong aversion that middle class Americans had to the bars, brothels, and dancehalls of Coney Island. 

In addition to the changing patterns of working class leisure in New York, the amusement parks demonstrated an ability to alter what was considered to be appropriate social behaviors through men and women either going to the parks alone in pairs or even women going to the parks in groups. Coney Island fashioned a sentiment with “a non-threatening sexuality that excited but never crossed ‘forbidden limits' which would alter and shape a new kind of cultural expression.” This changing cultural expression included men willing to hold women in public

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on a ride, or women willing to go to amusement parks without a husband or family accompanying them.

In 1895, Paul Boyton, a businessman and showman arrived at Coney Island and had an expertise in entertaining international crowds with water shows. He was driven to Coney Island in its business potential. His idea is one that might seem simple, yet was considered to be an innovation for leisure in American culture. His idea was a water themed park surrounded by a fence. By putting up fences, charging admission, and banning alcohol, it would keep away any of the gamblers and prostitutes that Coney Island was known for and would explicitly attract families. Sea Lion Park had a water circus with trained sea lions, a water slide called “Shooting the Chutes,” along with simple rides and games. While the Worlds Fairs were enclosed, Sea Lion Park is credited as the first ever enclosed amusement park. While it emulated Manhattan Central Park in its escape from chaotic urban life, it differed in its goal to entertain and to profit. While the “Sodom” of the island remained outside of the park’s fences, inside was very controlled, clean, and family friendly.28

Boyton would then inspire the three grandest amusement parks of their time to pop up on the Island. In 1895, the first would be George Tilyou. Boyton’s ability to create respectable leisure through a themed park inspired Tilyou, but he wanted to take it one step further. After witnessing the use of electricity at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, Tilyou wanted to create something large and grand that not only appealed to middle class family, but to any American looking for wholesome entertainment.29 After two years of developing the amusements, “Steeplechase Park, The Funny Place” was born in 1897. The main attraction was a mechanical

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28 Immerso, *The People’s Playground*, 121.
29 Ibid.
horse race, which served as a thrilling experience as men and women held onto each other while racing on a horse around the track.\textsuperscript{30}

The park was known for its whimsical attractions. Tilyou believed that the work should be done for the visitor while visiting the park. He believed in spectator participation. When passengers on the horse track entered the ride, they had to pass a stage with a dwarf and clown, known as the “Blow Hole,” which would become the longest running show in New York history. As a couple walked up onto the stage, air would blow up the woman’s skirt while her date would be shocked by an electric stick. Other attractions would include the “Funny Stairs,” “The Human Earthquake,” “The Skating Floor,” “The Falling Statue,” “The Human Cage,” “The Dancing Statue,” “The Dancing Floor,” “The Electric Seat,” and “The Human Roulette Wheel.”\textsuperscript{31} If a couple visited Steeplechase Park, they expected to be rocked by the electrical “Dancing Floor” when they stepped onto the moving platform. They could expect to be spun when they curled inside of “The Human Roulette Wheel.” They could expect to be shaken and to be knocked over by the “Human Earthquake.” What all these attractions had in common were their ability to make the visitors laugh in its bold use of electricity like no one had seen before.

Steeplechase attracted masses of couples and transformed the concept of the American “date,” as the motions in the rides gave men and women a reason to touch each other.

Tilyou described his park as “the most enchanting and magnetic fun-making resort in the world.”\textsuperscript{32} While he had many attractions, the lay out of the park would resemble that of any non-amusement park in New York meant for strolling about filled with gardens and pathways. In

\textsuperscript{30} Kasson, \textit{Amusing the Millions}, 94.

\textsuperscript{31} Margulies, Donald, and Grace Paley. 2014. \textit{Coney Island Christmas}.

\textsuperscript{32} Immerso, \textit{The People’s Playground}, 19
1898, a fire struck Steeplechase, destroying it entirely. However, nine months later Tilyou would open a new enclosed park impervious to the weather known as “The Pavilion of Fun.” As the new Steeplechase took its place on the island, new parks and rivals would appear in an attempt to create this same “paradigm of mechanized leisure.”

The same year that Tilyou opened Steeplechase, a New York City transportation merger created a new pathway to Coney Island, that would allow middle-class families to journey *en masse* to the parks, unlike their wealthier counterparts in New York who could afford to go to the countryside. At the same time, factories and unions were also able to organize excursions for workers. At one point in 1903, the railway was going to raise its prices and Progressive reformers and park owners objected with long listed petitions to drive the prices down and allow the middle class families and working to lower class groups to experience the parks. As more unions organized excursions, parks made a concerted effort to end the reputation of the nineteenth-century “Sodom by the Sea.” Scholar and creator of the Public Broadcasting Series special, *Coney Island*, Richard Snow believes that the parks were able to do so through the fencing mechanism and the market brand that each park had through its attractions. According to Fred Register, as the growing “consumer capitalism” and “the marvelous array of consumer goods and technologies produced by the new industrial order.” Through purely capitalist motives, the parks were created to ensure that people enjoyed themselves, all while they were

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35 Ibid.
willing to come back and spend money. The parks’ ability to quickly attract the masses while remaining lucrative caught the attention of architects and businessmen.\textsuperscript{36}

After noting the success of Tilyou and the “Pavilion of Fun,” Frederick Thompson, an architect, and George Dundy, a court clerk, underwent the construction of what would be called “the most extraordinary attraction on earth.”\textsuperscript{37} They first partnered in their construction of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. The building and light show revealing the power of electricity at this exposition, would be so extraordinary that it would inspire the fictional “The Emerald City” in Frank Baum’s \textit{The Wizard of Oz}. At the Pan-American Exposition, the architects created a fantastical exhibit known as “The Trip to the Moon.”\textsuperscript{38} It caught the attention of George Tilyou and the park owner tried to convince Thompson and Dundy to bring the exhibit to Steeplechase. While they were convinced and the Trip to the Moon briefly adorned Steeplechase, Thompson and Dundy decided they wanted to create a park of their own.\textsuperscript{39}

They sought to bring this kind of light show and technological innovation that they showcased in Buffalo, NY to the world of American leisure and amusement parks. Thompson wanted the buildings to have “Renaissance detail” and cause “emotional excitement in the air.” They would name their park “Luna” and the gates opened in 1903 on the plot of land once occupied by Sea Lion Park.\textsuperscript{40} 250,000 incandescent lights adorned the many towers and minarets. One park dweller quoted in a \textit{Brooklyn Eagle Review} alluded it an “Electric Eden.”


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{38} Nye, \textit{American Technological Sublime.}, 44.

\textsuperscript{39} Register, \textit{Kid of Coney Island : Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements.}, 23.

\textsuperscript{40} Immerso, \textit{The People’s Playground.}, 106.
day after its opening, journalists basked in the electrical display. One *New York Times* article wrote:

They took the lid off Coney last night and a quarter of a million men and women got a glimpse of a swaying rocking, glittering magic city by the sea. It was Coney Island’s opening day, but Coney Island never experienced such a bewildering opening. First of all, there were more people there than had ever been at Coney sland at one time before. Then there were more dazzling, wriggling, spectacular amusements offered than had ever before been collected together at any one place at any time.41

The rides and exhibits were constantly changing to keep the consumers coming back. The *Brooklyn Eagle* described the “Gilded chariots and prancing horses, and trained elephants and dancing girls, regiments of soldiers and an astonishing number of real Eastern people and animals in gay and stately trappings” on Luna’s opening day.42 In just 6 weeks, the men would pay off the $700,000 cost of the construction of the park, and that is with keeping the park admissions fee as low as that of competitors. The park would become the most popular place on Coney Island for the first decade of the 20th century, catching the attention of yet another businessman on his own venture.

William H. Reynolds, a real estate tycoon and politician purchased sixty acres on Coney Island. He sought to construct the park “that would end all parks” holding 250,000 people at a time.43 He wanted to create a “dream” world with one million lights, dazzling over the Brooklyn skyline out over the sea. The park was to represent the future with the latest sciences, freak shows and people around the world on display, and exhibits meant to emulate that of other

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41 Phalen, *Coney Island: 150 years of Rides, Fires, Floods, the Rich, the Poor and Finally Robert Moses*, 111.

42 Ibid., 112.

constructions in the world’s grandest cities. The center of the park was a 375 feet beacon tower with a beam that jutted 15 feet out into the Atlantic, often confusing ships in the NY harbor. Within the park, a railway moved from exhibit to exhibit and reenactments of disasters such as fire and floods were showcased. The park also reenacted world battles, had shows and comedic acts throughout the grounds, and wild animals like tigers and flamingos walking about. One of the century’s latest technologies had its own exhibit: the Incubator. The parks’ visitors could gaze at the premature “freak show” babies on display.

By 1906, Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland had the attention of the world. Coney Island became more than just three amusement parks, but was known to the world as the “City of Fire.” Before immigrants coming onto the shores of NY at Ellis Island saw the Statue of Liberty, they saw the skyline of the parks. In 1906, Coney Island set a record with the United States Postal Service: Over 200,000 postcards were mailed out from Coney Island in a single day. Spectators had said that what they saw often scared them yet fascinated them. Even Sigmund Freud visited Dreamland to see his theories of psychic pleasure put into action. In 1908, the NY Times called Coney Island “the center of the universe.”

Many credit the technologies of play in the parks for both fascinating and exhilarating the working man that was used to machinery as a diminishing factor in the work day. “Reformers

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46 Ibid.

47 Kasson, Amusing the Millions, 70.


49 Ibid.
argued that workingmen whose lives were devalued by machinery were easily ensnared by the mechanical rides . . . [the] humblest working man [could] master the machine, empowering and exhilarating him at the same time.”

After Coney Island was the magnet of the world for the first decade of the twentieth century, in May of 1911 on the opening day of Dreamland, a circuit error caused a fire in the buildings adorned with a million light bulbs. The fire exploded throughout the park and the tower eventually collapse. With the fall of Dreamland came depletion in popularity of the three parks. Historian Richard Snow believes that the popularity of the three parks was rooted in confusion with technological innovation and fascination in natural disaster declined as WWI began. “The magnet of Coney didn’t need to exist anymore . . . while the beaches became popular, Coney Island no longer had the ear of the world of something that was unique and new.” By 1913, George Tilyou died and Fred Thompson went bankrupt. The popularity in the parks never restored to what it was in that first decade of the 19th century.

Many spectators and journalists believe that the three parks that emerged did what other types of leisure could not do at the turn of the century when ethnic and class tensions were high: create a beacon of democracy. Through the understanding of the exhibits within the park, the social and political climate of New York, and through the changing technological capacities, we can further analyze the image of Coney Island fashioned of itself through post card campaigns, advertisements, and propaganda in interviews with different park owners.

50 Immerso, The People’s Playground., 45.


Chapter 2: The Electric Eden

Great are the powers of electricity… it makes millionaires. It paints devils’ tails in the air and floats placidly in the waters of the earth. It hides in the air. It creeps into the energy living thing.53

As Americans flocked by the masses to see the grand rides and exhibits in the three amusement parks of Coney Island at the turn of the century, each visitor could not be blind sighted by the grandeur of the technology on display within the parks. In this chapter, I will look at the narrative of technology that the parks created in their advertisements and images, as well as the significance that technology meant on a grander scale of American culture.

The European immigrant New York narrative at beginning of the 20th century normally is typified by an image of the Statue of Liberty emerging after a long journey, before finally arriving at Ellis Island in hopes of fulfilling the American dream.54 After the construction of the three spectacular amusement parks of Coney Island, however, a skyline emerged for those arriving for the first time on U.S. soil before they would see the Statue of Liberty. This was the skyline of Brooklyn, when Coney Island was the grand city the existed before that the 20th century Manhattan skyline.55 This concept of manmade beauty in American culture is one that would be a consistent staple. As immigrants would stand in awe of the Statue of Liberty, or the skyline of the amusement parks of Coney Island, according to David Nye’s American


55 Immerso, The People’s Playground., 23
Technological Sublime, this awe of manmade structures would be rooted in a fascination with technological advancements throughout American history.\textsuperscript{56}

When the United States was first establishing a culture for itself as a new country, it lacked standard commonalities that most older nations are able to rally; This includes a “a royal family, a national church, a long history memorialized at the sites of important events.”\textsuperscript{57} Americans would then turn towards landscape as a source of national character, which would then progress to become manmade creations. According to Nye, “mechanical triumphs were said to elevate the moral character of the people.”\textsuperscript{58} While technological innovation in other countries often seemed synonymous with the concept of the changing nature of work, for Americans, changing technology would be synonymous with democratic values. According to John Kasson, while it was suspected that republicanism in America was rooted in capitalism, what were considered to be true democratic values, “developed into a dynamic ideology consonant with rapid technological innovation and expansion.”\textsuperscript{59}

The concept of man-made structures and value placed on American technological innovation is called the “American technological sublime” by scholar David Nye. He theorizes a parallel between American culture and a rallying point behind the fascination with technology. With his work carries the idea that before Americans were struck by the invention of the Iphone, the construction of the Empire State Building, they were struck by the construction of the Erie Canal or the invention of the telegraph.

\textsuperscript{56} Nye., American Technological Sublime, 24.
\textsuperscript{57} Nye., American Technological Sublime, 24.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{59} Kasson, Amusing the Millions, 54.
When Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland were built, the parks found themselves in a changing New York, one that was creating greater buildings, large bridges, and mass means of transportation: all great forms of technological change that would alter everyday life both on a day to day basis, but also on a visual perspective of the city.\(^{60}\) New York City was taking on a form of the “geometrical sublime,” which “was static and appeared to dominate nature through elegant design and sheer bulk. It found expression first in bridges and soon afterward in skyscrapers.”\(^{61}\) This concept of the geometrical sublime is rooted in what the architects of Coney Island were originally trying to emulate: the American fascination with a synthetic world would have to emerge among the World’s Fairs.\(^{62}\)

Beginning at the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876 and continuing in Chicago, Buffalo, and St. Louis, the “lighting displays [in World’s Fairs] would eclipse the great machines.”\(^{63}\) The World Columbia Exposition, also known as the Chicago World’s Fair, sought to create a spectacle of American technological achievement in celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. By 1894, the Chicago World’s Fair had more lights than any other city in the United States. It was known as the “city of the future [with] a series of Beaux Arts structures of uniform height, surmounted by a few neoclassical domes.”\(^{64}\) However, it was not the exact structures that the park owners of Coney Island would try to emulate, but it


\(^{61}\) Nye., *American Technological Sublime,* 52.

\(^{62}\) Immerso, *The People’s Playground.*, 43


\(^{64}\) Kasson, *Amusing the Millions.*, 23
was the display of the latest technological innovation that would give the Chicago World’s Fair the name “White City:” the display of electricity. The architects in planning the White City sought to construct buildings according to the ideal of neoclassicism. In the architects’ use of European architecture and strong influences from the Italian Renaissance, together with the use of lights, created a forum in which Americans were challenged to join a new electrical “cultural Renaissance.” In addition to the Chicago World’s Fair, The Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901 had a grand court with an electric tower in the center. Scholar Burton Benedict cites that “worlds fairs created a world in which everything was man-made. Nature was excluded or allowed in only under the most rigorously controlled conditions… At world’s fairs man is totally in control and synthetic nature is preferred to the real thing.”

From 1880 to 1920, electricity entered modern urban life in the form of the telephone, radio, household appliances, and cinema. Since electricity is invisible, light displays served as a visual showing of the force and power that electricity has. According to Jill Jonnes in her work Empires of Light, the spectacle of electrical technologies proved a powerful attraction for Americans. Electricity was cited in many journalistic sources, making it a battleground for the two American electrical companies, [Edison’s] General Electric, and the Westinghouse Corporation. Through this constant presence in everyday life, electricity was popularly used by

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65 Ibid., 17.


67 Nye, American Technological Sublime, 44.


politicians and political machines in speeches.⁷⁰ “Great are the powers of electricity… it makes millionaires. It paints devils’ tails in the air and floats placidly in the waters of the earth. It hides in the air. It creeps into the energy living thing,” wrote the Buffalo Morning Express in 1897 describing a banquet celebrating the city’s first electrical display.⁷¹

Due to the stream of images and rhetoric of electricity circulated in newspapers, political speeches and magazines among Americans, this electrical sublime created the idea that if something were to be done, it could be done better if electricity was used. *Scientific America* wrote on March 1, 1990 that the public believed that “if there was anything under the sun that electricity could not do, then it was not worth doing.”⁷² The utility of electricity would inevitably carry to the architects of Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland.

Visiting the Chicago World’s Fair would be the original inspiration for the light shows at Luna Park from park owners Thompson and Dundy. In fact, at the Buffalo Exposition, Thompson would be responsible for the exhibit “Trip to the Moon,” which he would bring to Coney Island after leaving the exposition for Brooklyn. The way in which the amusement parks of Coney Island were designed and the exhibits they had were evidently distinct in their own way from the different Worlds Fairs of the era. However, each park appealed to these similar sentiments of amazement through technology, creating the narrative of electrical and manmade beauties, within postcards, and advertisements on posters and newspapers. Park owners were particularly able to tell a story of manmade innovation through the popularization of postcards.

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⁷⁰ America had been known as the land of the “War of the Currents” as both Westinghouse and Edison put on rival displays of direct currents versus alternating currents. Propaganda against each company would feed into America’s further fascination with electricity.


⁷² Schivelbusch. *Disenchanted Night.*, 74
and the newest artistic mechanisms to display lightshows and manmade buildings on these postcards.

In doing so, Coney Island was capitalizing on subtle change in how communications media were circulated. In 1898, the United States government extended private publishers a one-cent postage rate and by 1901, the term “post card” was allowed. At Coney Island, “tourists, immigrants, residents, and relatives, a souvenir of the sights of the Big City proved irresistible, and postcard publishers responded with an inexhaustible supply of sets picturing New York.”

By the year 1905, thousands of postcards were sent out of these amusement parks per day.

Since sending postcards became popular for Coney’s visitors, designers utilized different artistic methods to depict the newness and electrical displays within the parks. While such postcards emphasized the technological advancements of the park, they also had their own innovative artistic designs that told a specific narrative. For example, the “embossing” method was an elaborate design filled in with bright colors that featured specific structures in the parks. The owners of these cards could also reproduce the image that was on the card by rubbing a pencil across a piece of paper that is placed over the card. Another common method, which would emphasize the glistening nature of the Coney Island lights and skyline was the tinsel and glitter method, which was applied to “emphasize contours of buildings or the outline forms.” This was especially common in emphasizing the glistening buildings of Coney Island at night. The most commonly used method was the lithographic techniques, which brought color to life. The

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74 Ibid.

“technical advances in lithography permitted large print runs of postcards using different hand-colored plates for each color. Imaginative applications of ink sometimes give the New York streets a fairytale flavor.”

In addition to the artistic techniques in depicting New York City on postcards, there was actually a postage rule that there could be no writing or text on the back of the post card where the mailing information is. Hence, the person sending the postcard would be left to only write on the front in small areas around the depiction of Coney Island. Coney dwellers could not write or say anything about the parks. It was up to the park owners to dictate the narrative simply through these images. In a sense, park owners had the power to tell a thousand words in a picture.

Since the three park owners were able to utilize the postcards as a forum for creating a narrative of the displays within their parks, specific advertisements, particularly in the light shows of Luna Park and Dreamland, exemplify Nye’s theory of the technological sublime, particularly in their interest in displaying the wonders of electricity. In fact, many of the postcards of these particular parks are titled “Twilight” or “By Night,” to emphasize the grandeur of the bulbs of the buildings. For example, one postcard titled “Night Scene in Dreamland” appears to look like Paris with strong black and white contrasts of the lights and two extended and lit up bridges over the man made canal of the park. [See Appendix Figure 1] On either side of the bridge there are ornately structured buildings, visible only through the white contours,

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Postcard, “Night Scene in Dreamland, Coney Island, N.Y.,” Undated, Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Emphemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
accentuating the powerful of electricity. Another postcard image, “Views of Dreamland at Night” (1905) is an aerial view of the skyline and beyond. [See Appendix Figure 2] A large tower is situated at the center, with a beam shooting light off of the top. Buildings surrounding the tower are lit up, entirely in black and white, but also containing sparkles, emphasizing the gleaming look of the towers. One postcard sent from Luna Park in 1909 titled “Birdseye view of Luna Park” not only emphasizes the large and glimmering buildings that made up all of the amusements, but also includes the moonlit sky, and the darkness of the ocean in contrast to the illuminated buildings. [See Appendix Figure 3] This particular image is also in color, in which the lights on the minarets of the buildings are able to illuminate the blue, red, and green paint, rivaling the natural moonlight.

Postcards utilizing a “Birdseye” view of a park or the island were a way not only to showcase the different amusements featured, but to depict the distance that the electricity covered. In the 1906 Dreamland postcard, “Twilight, Dreamland,” while the card is completely painted with the beacon tower in the center and with bits of the ferris wheel and other rides in the distance, the artist places actual glitter on the card, on parts of the tower and the other domes and rides throughout to display the glistening light show. [See Appendix Figure 4] The light from

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79 This postcard did not have a date provided through the Brooklyn Historical Society, but it was likely mailed anytime between 1908 and 1911.


82 Postcard, “Twilight, Dreamland,” 1906 Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Emphemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
the beacon tower overpowers the sun setting on the Brooklyn skyline. In another postcard of the Birdseye view of the Island with the 1907 title “Coney Island, NY from Ocean by Night,” a beaming light of the beacon tower of Dreamland shoots out in the Atlantic. While the stars are in view, the light shows of the three parks completely outshine the sky and the illuminated exhibits reflect off of the Atlantic Ocean. [See Appendix Figure 5] The viewer cannot see exactly what is within each park, other than a stream of lit towers, piers, and Ferris wheels.  

Thompson and Dundy’s Luna Park also had widely circulated posters, as well as sold souvenir books, which would feature the park both by day and by night. They used both the tinsel and glitter method to depict the details and glistening appearance of their displays at night, while using the embossing method to depict their parks by day. One colorful postcard sent in August of 1906, captures a very small snapshot of the park of the glistening buildings in the dark night skies. People are able to move about the park, despite it being night fall. Small light bulbs line the curves on the towers of the buildings, illuminating the red and blue colors on the architecture. [See Appendix Figure 6] The card captures the details in the towers so closely that one spectator thought the painting on the card to be St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow. Thompson and Dundy in souvenir books also featured identical images of the park between the day and night, in which the broad view of the exhibits and the buildings look identical, yet the grandeur and color of the lights transform for the park at night. The postcard, ‘General View of Luna Park at Night, Coney Island” (not dated), has the view of the tower at the center, with a

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83 Postcard, “Coney Island, NY from Ocean by Night,” 1907 Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

84 Postcard, 1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

pool below it, countless lightshows of towers surrounding it, and ten American flags illuminated on the tops of the towers.\footnote{86 Postcard, “General View of Coney Island at Night,” Undated Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.} [See Appendix Figure 7]

Two of the most circulated posters of Luna Park were of the images of the amusement park’s entrances at night. The first is an image, iconic in Coney Island’s history, displaying the eight large moons that lined the top of the entranceway with Luna on the top of the signs in black and white.\footnote{87 Postcard, “Entrance of Luna at Night,” Undated, Snow, Richard. 1984. \textit{Coney Island: A Postcard Journey to the City of Fire}. New York: Brightwaters Press. 79.} [See Appendix Figure 8] There is just barely a glimpse of the tops of towers in the distance beyond the entranceway. The large moons outshine the sky and the people flocking into the entrance. Thompson and Dundy circulated another image of the entryway to the park in souvenir books and postcards. Luna Park in yellow and red lights emerges at the foreground of the image, and below in white lights inside of a heart reads “The Heart of Coney Island.”\footnote{88 Postcard, “Entrance to Luna By Night” 1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.} [See Appendix Figure 9] Park dwellers walk under the archway entry into the park with ornate lights and dazzling chandeliers over their heads. This entryway was one of the most popular and most circulated images in all of the Coney Island.\footnote{89 Ibid.}

While many of the postcards of the parks replicated each other in terms of the park by day and the park by night, the actual snapshots of the structures and buildings rarely looked the same. This was a mechanism of the park owners to show viewers that they were constantly changing the technological displays of their amusements. For example, one postcard titled “Night scene of Luna” (1904) uses green, blue and red to depict the colors of the tops of the
buildings. [See Appendix Figure 10] These lights reflect off of the water at the foot of the tower positioned in the center. The colors of the tower shine as brightly as the moon and the stars above the tower.90 Another postcard, also from the year 1904 of the same exact central tower, has is colorless with the exception of the tinsel and glitter on the center building.91 [See Appendix Figure 11] and it displays a few blurred figures balancing on a tightrope around the towers, with more blurred and lit up buildings in the distance. While the artists behind the images use different techniques to create images that look drastically different, they are similar in their emphasis on the electrical power of light in darkness.

This trend of contrasting light and dark in the use of electricity was one that was first popularized in theatre when lighting up a stage. One showman writes “In dark, light is life . . . campfire in the light of day is as senseless as a film projected in daylight.” 92 If spectators are looking at an illuminated image, they are experiencing “liberation from the darkness.”93 If the park owners did not draw a contrast between the images of the parks during the day and at night, the spectator would not be able to draw attention to the tremendous details and power of electricity in the minarets, towers, and beams constructed.

Since many of the postcards highlight the alluring spectacle of electrical display, many also simply emphasize the power of man to build structures that seem larger than life. For example, one 1908 postcard of Luna Park, is an embossing card of the entrance, highlighted in a bright pink. [See Appendix Figure 12] The archway almost looks like a sculpture from the

90 Postcard, “Night Scene of Luna Park,” 1904, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY

91 Unnamed postcard of Luna Park, 1904, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY

92 Shivelbusch, Disenchanted Night. 221

93 Ibid., 221
Renaissance with ornate and detailed body figures. Small figures are carved into the card tucked away under the ornate and large pink figure. A daytime postcard of Luna Park called “Electric Tower” looks drastically different from the night scene images of the park, yet is a detailed close up painting of the center tower in the park with water shooting out of the bottom. [See Appendix Figure 13] The postcard even captures the details in the fish carved fountain on the towers and the flags on the tops of the domes. This is an example of both the park owners showing their man-made works, as well as the constant changing technology and newness within the parks.

A curious trend in all of these ad displays of technology across the three parks, is that they seldom include images of actual visitors. While there are large crowds in the Birdseye view images and in close-up cards, there are a few men, women or children in the foreground, the people do not appear to have a specific race, since their skin color is often blurred or difficult to make out. Furthermore, the clothing of the park dwellers does not indicate the socioeconomic class to which the visitors might belong. In some postcards, men speak with women, some women speak with women, and some children stand alone. The ads and postcards do not match the traditional Victorian tendencies of how Americans were meant to act together. In these cards, park owners emphasize the technological advances and appeal to the American sensation

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95 Postcard, “Luna Park, Coney Island, Electric Tower,” 1904, Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

96 In Kathy Peiss’ *Cheap Amusements*, she notes that the traditional Victorian values of Americans prior to the last quarter of the 19th century dictated that men and women were to socialize as a family when they engaged in leisurely activities. Women were not to go out leisurely with other women, and men and women were not to “date” in public places such as these amusement parks. She argues that Coney Island blurs the lines of these “Victorian values” by allowing Americans to socialize against the strict norms of husband and wife.
of the mystery within technology and the ability for man to create something larger than humans had before. By not appealing to any specific person, the postcards are appealing to many.

Park owners were drawing on consistent sentiments in mass American culture in using specific images in postcards and posters. Through showcasing dramatic lighting and the ability for man to create massive structures through electricity, the park owners could create solidarity among masses of Americans regardless of their class or ethnicity. Coney Island’s ads and postcards of its light shows represent a snapshot into the American fascination with electricity in its advent. The light displays on these postcards crafted the “visions of an American Dreamland.”

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Chapter 3- A Mountain Grows in Brooklyn

It stands at the very outset of the waste of life that goes on in a population of nearly two millions of people; powerless to prevent it, though it gather in the outcasts by night and by day. In a score of years an army of twenty-five thousand of these forlorn little waifs have cried out from the streets of New York in arraignment of a Christian civilization under the blessings of which the instinct of motherhood even was smothered by poverty and want.98

Jacob Riis describes the experience of the millions of poverty stricken residents of the tenements in the lower east side of New York in How the Other Half Lives. Yet out of the streets filled with “non-breathable air” and “displaced children begging for work,” posters and paintings circulated of a place in New York not too far away of trains moving through scenic prairies and mountains. Elephants walked amongst the people. Crowds climbed the tops of mountains and slid down one by one. While Coney Island fashioned an image of technology in its electrical shows within the parks, the parks’ advertisements are filled with images of nature and pastoral landscapes. However, nature is not in its most pure form. Nature reconstructed at the hand of man. While Coney fashioned an image of itself through these technological advancements and use of electricity, much of its ability to wow its viewers strikes from man’s ability to subdue and manipulate nature.

As addressed in the previous chapter, according to scholars, Americans were impressed by objects that boasted the technological achievements. These objects include the vast skylights and light shows in cities, or the construction of great engineering feats like the Golden Gate Bridge. These experiences of the “sublime” are not just limited to all that is manmade. Before the railroad surged westward, before buildings shot up by the hundreds to create skylines, and before electricity glowed within homes, the most visited sites in the country were the sites

untouched by man. According to Nye, “Americans turned to the landscape as the source of national character.”

The trend of Americans visiting the sites of natural wonders did not evolve organically. During the Jacksonian period, journeying to natural wonders would take on the “character of pilgrimages” for Americans. At the beginning of the 19th century, sites of natural beauty such as Niagara Falls and the Land Bridge became tourist attractions. But dating back to when America was simply the New World, much of the images of the continent through an Elizabethan lens were the images of untouched land:

What fascinated Englishmen was the absence of anything like European society; here was a landscape untouched by history – nature unmixed with art. The new continent looked, or so they thought, the way the world might have been supposed to look before the beginning of civilization.

In 1785 when Jefferson published the Notes on the State of Virginia, the pastoral and natural idea of America had developed from something hinted at from European observers, into an ideology of a way of life, meaning that Americans were meant to be one with nature and away from what Europeans would consider to be civilized. This pastoral idea of America can be rooted in the artistic shift in portraying the landscape, as well as agriculture as the best economic means. According to Leo Marx, it is in the Jeffersonian period that the landscape arises as an object of “aesthetic interest and delight.”

In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson demonstrates in his famous passage on the Natural Bridge, his fascination both in the how it can physically exist, as well as remarking on

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99 Nye, American Technological Sublime., 23.


101 Ibid. 24
the land surrounding this bridge in the Virginia landscape: “The Natural bridge, the most sublime of Nature's works, though not comprehended under the present head, must not be pretermitted . . . It is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime to be felt beyond what they are here!”

He further observes the caves of the area, the waterfalls, and notes in the landscape that there must’ve been a “war between rivers and mountains, which must have shaken the earth to its centre.”

Through the 19th century, natural sites such as the Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls soared in popularity. In 1845, a book was published citing the experiences of those visiting Table Rock, the place above Niagara Falls. One Michigan tourists cites his experience as a religious one: “Can it be that the mighty God who has cleft these rocks with a stroke of his power, who has bid these waters roll on to the end of time . . . and by thy ceaseless roaring, lead the minds of mortals from Nature’s contemplation to Nature’s God.”

According to Nye, rhetoric like that in the Table Rock Album indicates that the way in which people experienced the falls would be expressed in a religious and outer body relationship with the country. He notes that the dialogue on experiencing the Falls and other natural sites would be “woven together with the nationalistic language of exceptionalism, so that Niagara became a sign of a special relationship, or covenant, between America and the Almighty.” These natural sites were more than a vision of beauty, but were a symbol of something greater of the narrative of being American.


103 Ibid., 4.

104 Nye, American Technological Sublime., 21.

105 Ibid., 24.
Movement from the one specific area to a natural landscape has been described by scholars as a “pastoralism,” which is typically represented by an image of completely untouched landscape. According to Leo Marx, it is an impulse to move from the centers of complex civilization to something that is simpler—typically from the city towards the country. He describes the American sentiments towards pastoralism as creating a sense of nostalgia for Americans in an urban area. This sentiment reflects an intensity for the image of “an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness.”

While founding fathers like Jefferson and Adams prompted the intense rhetoric on natural sites, the nostalgia for this pastoral setting was prompted through the greater development of cities and the shift in jobs in the Industrial Revolution from a rural and agricultural economy.

Given the skylines of cities began to pop up, Jefferson’s vision of an agrarian society, free of the diseases, crime, and crowding that plagued the cities of Europe, began to fade in light of the growing commercial industry in the cities. However, artwork and literature on the beauty and nostalgia for westward expansion emerged in greater numbers in American culture. Thomas Cole, one of the first prominent American painters who founded the Hudson River School, became famous for his works such as *The Oxbow* and *The Course of Empire*, filled with romantic realism and the grandeur and natural beauty of American landscapes. He would become a pioneer of American art, but at a point in history when the numbers of Americans moving to cities was greater than the number of Americans moving westward. Rather than an expression of the American experience living in this pastoral setting, his paintings were an

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107 Ibid., 9.
emblem of beauty in an escape from a more urbanized landscape and a changing commercialized country.

At the center stage of American technology, showcasing the power electricity at the Columbia Exposition in 1893 at the Chicago World’s Fair would be the unveiling of an iconic and symbolic piece of literature describing the American west: Frederick Jackson Turner’s Thesis “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” This thesis explores the unique concept of the North American continent, a body of land that has been filled with unexplored wild territory, in which the land and the hardworking hands of Americans were able to build a nation: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”

Turner claimed that the frontier is not a fixed place, but rather a force that is in constant motion. The frontier represents the American character of constant beginnings and developing that which is primitive to that which is civilized. While Turner’s concept of the frontier is moving beyond the west, as it is being presented in the place of technological advancement and the antithesis of a pastoral western setting (at the World’s Fair), he paints this continual glorification and nostalgia for what westward expansion has meant for American character:

This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.

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109 Ibid., 14.

110 Ibid.
While Turner’s Thesis and Thomas Cole’s paintings emphasize the American landscape and this concept of pastoralism, it is not nature in its most pure form, but rather a control over nature. In Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire*, in this first painting *The Savage State*, shows nature in its most natural and untouched state.\(^\text{111}\) The series of paintings progress to the *Pastoral State* in which nature has been settled. In the background there are boats, a man herding sheep, and children playing.\(^\text{112}\) While nature has been touched, it is controlled and civilized. The next painting, *The Consummation of Empire*, recreates a cityscape of ornate buildings, boats, and joyous crowds, resembling that of ancient Rome.\(^\text{113}\) [See Appendix Figures 14 - 16] These first three paintings create the image of human civilization and control over nature. In the same light, Turner’s Thesis suggests the same control over the American frontier through creating civilization on untouched land. While Turner speaks to the settlement of western untouched land, he suggests that controlling the pastoral landscape is a distinctly American characteristic.

Inventors in the last quarter of the 19th century used technology as a triumph over the messiness of nature. They believed that “nature was messy [and] technology was the greater order.”\(^\text{114}\) When nature was impacted or damaged at the hand of technology, it was seen as an example of an American success. In 1890, president of the Stevens Institute of technology Henry Morton claimed that “the future of civilization hinged on the conquest of natural electricity.

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Intelligently managed and controlled, the most powerful . . . agencies become the most efficient protectors and servants of man, and . . . aid him in his mission of subduing and utilizing nature.”\textsuperscript{115}

Through the second half of the nineteenth century, reformers created models of the control of nature in the development of urban recreation. Coney Island falls in the middle of two models: that of New York’s Central Park and that of Chicago’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. These two models provide a common effort in providing social order and conduct, through different aesthetics and construction. In the case of New York’s first public park, Central Park, the architect, Frederick Law Olmstead, wanted “city dwellers [to] shed the fatigue and monotony of New York’s grid of streets as they explored the park’s artfully natural landscapes.”\textsuperscript{116} The park was made up of pastoral meadows, picturesque woods, rolling hills, and crystal clear lakes. Dwellers were intended to enjoy the natural scenery.

While Central Park was intended to distance the visitors from the city, the Columbian Exposition intended to create an even more monumental city, a city that one had not imagined before. Central Park emphasized rural landscapes and losing the sense of the city, while the Exposition “heightened the sense of possibility of what a city might be” including grandeur architecture, impeccable light shows, and large ensembles of statues and artwork. Rather than lose all sense of urbanization, visitors in the Exposition were called on to be more conscientious of the possibilities of technology and American achievement.\textsuperscript{117}

As we look at the images and exhibits of Coney Island, we will find that the park owners sought out to achieve the same goals of Central Park and the White City in creating a model of

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 115.

\textsuperscript{116} Kasson., \textit{Amusing the Millions.}, 13.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 14.
social order and an escape from the “normal” urban and work life, yet the park owners are able to place both an emphasis on pastoral and natural landscapes, together with imaginative and extraordinary architecture and technology. Information about the parks circulated and created an image of both the modern imaginative city embodied at the Columbian Exposition, together with the escape from urban life to all that is natural and peaceful away from technology in Central Park.

In the midst of the developed urban environment in New York City, both in the Penthouses overlooking Central Park, to the tenements of the Lower East Side that Jacob Riis describes, the pastoral landscapes of Thomas Cole, the illusions of the frontier in Frederick Jackson Turner’s Thesis, and the escape into nature from the urban landscape persisted in the advertisements and the paintings of Coney Island. Images of the pastoral landscape of the United States emerged on postcards and posters in ornate artwork.

Coney Island fashioned images of the park in such a way that highlighted the exhibits that reconstructed nature. The viewer is able to see the influence of lights and technology, but in the context of recreated landscapes. One postcard is an exhibit within Luna Park, titled “The Glaciers.” [See Appendix Figure 17] Within this image exhibited in The Brooklyn Eagle, a large ship is literally moving through what appears to be a body of water with glaciers jutting out of the water. Visitors can walk across a wooden bridge through the water and can walk onto a ship surrounded by the glaciers in the water. Since Luna Park is only open during the summers, visitors could experience the icy waters in the context of steamy Brooklyn heat.

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In another image of a postcard from Steeplechase Park, not dated but likely between 1901 and 1908, a large boat sits on top of an artificial rock. A few figures sit inside of the boat titled “Noah’s Ark.” There is also a whale on the outskirts of the entrance to the exhibit and jutting out through the windows of the ark are the images of artificial animals. The existence of this exhibit in the middle of Steeplechase Park alludes to the American fascination with nature that Marx describes, while also capturing the nature controlled and recreated at the hand of man.

In another image of Luna Park, a large mountain stands with a slide streaming down, surrounded by buildings. This image is called the “Razzle Dazzle Mountain Slide” and appeals to the artificial and pastoral images within Thomas Cole’s *The Course of Empire*. In this black and white image, many small figures are enjoying this slide and are observing the beauty of the large and natural rock. However, surrounding his natural scene are large buildings with ornate details and lights on minaret towers. Small figures in the foreground of the painting on the postcard, are staring at this large rock, both pointing at and facing the structure. Men and women wait on what appears to be a conveyer belt moving up the left side of the mountain to a gazebo on the top. On the right side of the mountain men and women one by one slide down the mountain in a zig-zag motion. This image is similar to that of Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire*, in that the mountain resembles the pastoral mountain in the background of the second featured painting *The Pastoral State*. At the same time, this image

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119 Postcard, “Noah’s Ark, Steeple Chase, Coney Island, N.Y.” Undated Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

resembles that of *The Consummation of Empire* through the crowds of people and the towers and minarets surrounding the mountain, resembling European architecture.

In addition to mountainous slides, Noah’s Ark, and glaciers in the Atlantic, the parks’ advertisements fashioned an image of a space in which urban dwellers would be able to visit settings that might look familiar to something from the countryside. Luna Park features an exhibit in its postcards of “The Old Mill and Mountains.” [See Appendix Figure 20] In one image, it shows a large red mill on the right side of the card, but propped on top of a rocky mountain. The style of this mill on a natural feature is one that would not be found in the middle of New York City, but more likely out west or in farm territory. In the foreground of the image, figures in the park look up at the mill and the rocky structure, so that they might be able to wander inside. On the left side of the image, there is a large gray building next to the red mill with white steps leading to the front doors, where park dwellers might be able to journey inside of the mill. In the backdrop of the red mill, there are gray shadowed structures that appear to either be more artificial mountains or buildings. Streaming down the side of the red mill appears to be a yellow slide, which park dwellers can slide down the slide of the mountainous rock around the red mill. A second image of an Old Mill lies in a different park, Steeplechase. [See Appendix Figure 21] It is an actual colored photograph of visitors inside of a boat directly next to the Mill. Water is flowing around them and each of the visitors is smiling. Park owners have transformed the vision of watermills, which were typically used in villages, small towns, and cities in the ancient world to provide power to grind grains, into a technology of play. The

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121 Postcard, “The Old Mill and Mountains,”1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

viewers of the postcards can see the image of water and mountains controlled and recreated not to be controlled by the watermills for the purpose of work, but for the purpose of leisure.

In addition to postcards and images of the park itself, many songs were written about Coney Island, with names and images on the song cards that drew on similar ideas about the park’s relationship to the natural world. On song sheet titled “Afloat On a Five Dollar Note,” a man and a woman stand on top of a ship in the shape of a five-dollar bill. [See Appendix Figure 22] They are waving at the skyline of Coney Island, yet are experiencing the water and adventure of the water. Their backs are to the viewer and are staring forward at the open water. Like the images created in Noah’s Ark and of the Glaciers, this appeals to the visitors’ fascination and adventure from the city within nature or on the water. The lyrics of this 1906 song mention two Luna Park rides and the easy accessibility through the easy New York transportations: “Shoot the chutes, or a trip to the moon . . . It’s so jolly with Dolly by trolley or boat A-float on a Five Dollar Note.” While this song is not a physical advertisement, Thompson and Dundy sold the song cards and lyrics in the Luna Park gift shops.

Coney Island is inevitably positioned in a location where land and water meet. One comedian notes, “there’s nothing more perfect then when sand and water meet… you get a beach!” Due to its location, park owners were able to utilize the terrain of the island to implement water and land into exhibits to create illusions of nature. It could not be just the advances in technology through electricity, nor the allusions of pastoral and natural scenes within

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123 Song Sheet “Afloat On a Five Dollar Note,” 1906, Series 1, Box 25, Folder 11, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

New York City, but the confluence between the natural and the artificial that could create the image that the three parks fashioned of themselves.

Many of Coney Island’s rides and exhibits sprouted from modes of transportation both within cities and within less developed rural settings. Beginning in 1884, the Switchback Railroad would be the primary inspiration for the roller coaster. LaMarcus Thompson, creator of the Switchback, had discovered an abandoned coalmine where people paid to go through the shafts of the mine in the gravity-powered cars.\textsuperscript{127} Thompson saw the potential for amusement parks and created the Switchback Railway, in which a car could hold up to ten people and glide in a straight direction along a track, up and down an incline.\textsuperscript{128} Quickly, amusement park owners at Coney Island saw the potential in the Switchback railroads for their own parks. The Switchback railway within amusement parks at first functioned as a train or trolley car that would move through the park grounds. Park owners implemented artificial scenery to create an allusion of a natural setting on this piece of technology.\textsuperscript{129}

Following the Switchback railway, competitors across the country sought to recreate the trolley cars moving through their parks. Hired by Luna Park, Thompson responded to this competition by creating the scenic railway, a roller coaster that moved through dark tunnels “where tableaux of enchanted grottoes, and alpine scenes and the like lit up as the cars approached.”\textsuperscript{130} A motorman ran each car and on a busy day, there could be up to three or four

\begin{footnotes}
\item[127] Snow, \textit{Coney Island: a postcard journey to the city of fire}, 41.
\item[128] Ibid.
\item[129] Kasson, \textit{Amusing the Millions}., 74.
\item[130] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
cars running at once throughout the Luna grounds. 131 Many historians credit this transformed switchback railway at Luna Park as the first ever rollercoaster in the world.132

These roller coasters were so popular that just 3 weeks after the first scenic railway, a second quickly emerged on Surf Avenue. In one postcard titled “Touring the Alps,” an actual photograph shows ten men and one woman with their backs to the viewer leaning over a wooden bar staring intently at the roller coaster at the top of an incline, an incline that appears to be the top of a mountain, or as it is titled “The Alps.” [See Appendix Figure 23] The mountain appears to be rocky with a contrast between black and white on the crevices of the rocks.133 The viewer cannot see where the car on the railway is headed over the incline on the top of the mountain. Author Elmer Blaney Harris describes his experience on the rollercoaster on this particular postcard and he describes the peculiar experience of racing through cliffs with distant visions of the lights in the park.

We swung free of the cliffs and faced the lights of the park and the straight, narrow parallel drop of the tracks, sagging like tight-ropes. In the canyons below, cars seemed to be shooting in all directions, in and out of the tunnels and around sharp curves or over trestles. We braced ourselves, and our little dwarf of a train shot over. A prolonged, lifting cry broke from the women in the seats in front of us, a cry not of fear, not of joy, not of pain; a cry peculiar, even uncanny, having all of these things blended with something delicious and startling – The Coney Island Cry!134

Another postcard of Luna Park titled “Pikes Peak Railway” is a real photograph, but simply of the entranceway to the exhibit. A man stands outside of the exhibit staring at the large

131 Ibid., 42
132 Ibid.
133 Postcard “Touring the Alps 1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
134 Snow, Coney Island: a postcard journey to the city of fire, 18.
rocky mountain with the sign in the front “Pikes Peak Railway.” [See Appendix Figure 24] There
is neither a train nor roller coaster in sight, but simply the indents in the rocks where the
rollercoaster moves on the incline up the steep rocks. The postcard is a faint color, in which the
crevices in the rocky mountain reveal green and blue metal looking bars where the technological
structure moves through the “natural” site. 135 These postcards showcase two aspects of
technology and nature: park owners are able to recreate these mountains, while still allowing
visitors to embrace forms of technology that they are familiar with, like the railroad.

As the popularity in the scenic railways increased, so did the drive in park owners to
create the most impressive version. One postcard titled “Coney Island Whirl-Fly” shows a
peculiar car with three different levels of what appears to be a railway track.136 [See Appendix
Figure 25] The skyline of the rest of the parks appears in the distance, as the three-tiered roller
coaster cars are bright red, contrasting from the white railroad. Another postcard showcases what
onlookers first called a “centrifugal pleasure railway.” 137 [See Appendix Figure 26] Titled on the
postcard “Flip-Flap” Railway at Sea Lion Park (where Luna Park later emerged), were two
tracks that propelled through a twenty-five foot vertical loop to defy gravity and propel riders
upside down. And with this, the “Loop the Loop” roller coaster that we know today came about.
In the “Flip-Flap” postcard, a single white track curves in a loop, lined with eleven American
flags. The roller coaster is aligned on a diagonal across the postcard, as spectators have their
backs to the viewer and glance their hands up at a small car at the top of the looping roller

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135 Postcard, “Pikes Peak Railway, CONEY ISLAND, N.Y..” Undated, from Coney Island: a postcard

136 Postcard, “Coney Island Whirl Fly,” Undated, from Coney Island: a postcard journey to the city of fire,

coaster track. The invention of the “Loop the Loop” or the modern roller coaster, and the progression to which it was invented, speaks to both the fascination in nature in the parks, together with the desire of park owners to continue to create more advanced and new technologies. What was meant to be a mechanism to showcase artificial nature in the city (the scenic railway), would become the epitome of leisure through advanced technology of a roller coaster.

The most popular of the roller coasters, Shooting-the-Chutes, first created in Sea Lion Park and later center-stage in Luna Park and recreated in Dreamland, popularized as a car that moved on a track over the Coney Island skyline and plunge down a steep hill into a pool of water. This particular ride has three different images highlighted in postcards. One is a water-colored painting with a blue sky on the top of the card, fading to a light sunset. [See Appendix Figure 27] A single man, likely a motorman, stands on the car that is moving up a ramp. The viewer is staring at the ramp, as if we ourselves are in a car moving upwards. The track of the railway appears to be filled with water and the tracks have arcs of colorful light bulbs wrapped around. In this image, the technology of the track on the incline and the light bulbs, come together with the image of the water and sunset. In the second postcard of “Shooting –the-Chutes,” the viewer is staring at the same structure, except at the decline of the railway. [See Appendix Figure 28] Rather than emphasizing the single track, the postcard shows the entire large and ornate building structure of the roller coaster. Additionally, the car moving down the incline is completely splashing water while small figures stand on a bridge overlooking the car

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138 Postcard “Shoot the Chutes, Dreamland, Coney Island,” Undated Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

139 Postcard “Shoot the Chutes, Dreamland, Coney Island,” Undated Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

140 Postcard “Shoot –the-Chute, Dreamland, Coney Island,” 1904 Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
splashing into the water, what we might consider a modern day “splash zone.” In this image, the sun is similarly setting, and the splashes of the water are very white in contrast to the blue water and in contrast to the colorful orange, gold and green structure on which the roller coaster is placed. In the third postcard image of Shooting-the-Chutes, the viewer can only make out the structure of the railway and building surrounding the railway through an indentation carved out of the postcard. [See Appendix Figure 29] The image is only blue and white. In this postcard, the railway, boat, and the splash of the water are completely blue, while the bridge and buildings surrounding the ride, are completely white. While the indentations of the large white structure surrounding the “Chutes” are extremely detailed, emphasizing the ornate and grandeur of the buildings, the railway, water, and boat are not ornate and very simply colored in blue on the card. All three of the postcards depicting the same exact water railway or rollercoaster in the park, use extremely different techniques and might even look like a different amusement in the park. However, they all highlight the water, the railway, the structure of the building, and the sky: consistent elements of nature and technology.

The fascination and willingness to ride these roller coasters demonstrates the public’s faith both in technology in the context of this “exotic” scenery. Park owners purposely sought to create an environment that was entertaining and exciting, yet still safe. One advertisement for the “Loop the loop” in 1905, had a small image of a photograph of two parallel loops in black and white. On the top of the image it reads “Loop the Loop: The Greatest Sensation of the Age.”

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141 Postcard “Shooting The Chutes, Luna Park,” 1904 Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

142 Snow, Coney Island: A Postcard Journey to the City of Fire, 44.
On the bottom of the image the advertisement reads “The Safest and Greatest Attraction No Danger Whatever.”

While it was noted that Coney Island attractions depicted technological attractions, as well as natural landscapes that visitors might be familiar with, park owners used this natural and technological confluence to appeal to nostalgia for different American successes. For example, one roller coaster called the “Rough Riders” served to highlight American success in the Spanish American War. [See Appendix Figure 30] The motorman on the trains carried passengers wearing Spanish American War uniforms. One postcard in 1910 simply shows a black and white sketched image of the tracks with a circular sketched image next to a brick building with a sign jutting out of the side that says “Rough Riders.” The card is not detailed in what the ride entails yet in ornate writing it reads “These are some of the Hills you go over on the ‘Rough Riders’ at the Bowery.” To the viewer, the tracks are actually supposed to be physical hills, rather than a railway.

Another example of showcasing nationalistic sentiments through technology in advertisements was the attraction and postcard of America’s imperial power as “The Iron Clad.” [See Appendix Figure 31] In this postcard, cannons appear to be shooting out from the boardwalk into the water. They appear to be hitting ships in the water. The postcard is very dark on the left side next to the cannons and the skyline appears to becoming lighter, and an orange color, emulating a sunset. Both an orange streak and white smoke are painted surrounding the cannons. The caption on the postcard reads “The Evolution of the Iron Clad, Shown in the

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143 SMITH., WITH AMUSEMENT FOR ALL: A HISTORY OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE SINCE 1830., 141

Production of War is Hell- Luna Park, New York.” Ironically, despite the pious caption, historians note that this exhibit was meant to be a “cheerful pandering of national mood during America’s first decade as an imperial power.”145 This particular postcard showcases both the power in American technology in the form of weapons, as well as the image of weapons in water upon the sun setting on a horizon. There is a dichotomy in the image between the darkness next to the canons and the light next to the water. Both the “The Iron Clad” and “Rough Riders” create a fantasy of conquest while overseas territories were becoming a new “frontier” in a period of rampant American expansionism. These fantastical conquests to which visitors are able to take part in, add to the narrative of the power and accomplishment of American technology.

In addition to physical rides, different technological displays at Coney Island took place in the context of scenic plots. Henry J. Pain went to Coney Island in the 1880s to showcase a series of “pyrotechnic displays,” or fireworks, throughout the different parks.146 As he occupied areas on both Manhattan and Brighton Beaches, the post cards and advertisements of his displays would not necessarily show the actual fireworks, but rather the view that the spectator will have before the display. In one postcard, “View of Pain’s Fire Works,” hundreds of chairs are on the foreground of the card, with a large body of water between the chairs and what appears to be a gray and green mountain.147 [See Appendix Figure 32] Below the mountain appears to be a village filled with buildings, boats and churches. While this postcard seems to be simply a


146 Snow, Coney Island: a postcard journey to the city of fire, 45.

display of a mountainous town, there is more than meets the eye. One visitor mails this postcard and writes on the back that the postcard is actually a display of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. This quiet scene of a town with a mountain in the background, will be completely disrupted by a firework show, emulating the natural disaster on Pompeii. In this particular postcard, it is up to the viewer to provide the person receiving the postcard of the tremendous technological display of the fireworks erupting over the tranquil town painted in the card.

Pain’s firework replication of “The Fall of Pompeii” was one of many displays that created the illusion of death and destruction in Coney Island, particularly Luna Park. The images on these advertisements showcased both the fears and anxieties in natural and manmade disasters. In fact, three disasters were running simultaneously on Surf Avenue. Two post cards showcase the tidal wave that killed around seven thousand people in Galveston, Texas.\(^{148}\) [See Appendix Figure 33] One postcard depicts the Gulf City in color from left to right including a lighthouse, five large ships lined up in a port, with buildings varying in size propped perfectly surrounding the ships. In the second postcard, the red and white lighthouse still stands, while all of the ships have disappeared in the port and every building is completely destroyed, appearing as rubble sliding into the water. The postcard reads “Scene from the stupendous reproduction of the Great Tidal Wave THE GALVESTON FLOOD AT CONEY ISLAND, Opposite Culver Depot, Showing a Small Portion of the Immense Scene of the CITY OF GALVESTON After the Flood.” The Gulf City had been staged using real water, fake water, and hundreds of model buildings.

The first live disaster on display in Luna Park was known as “Fire and Flames,” in which a four story building was repeatedly set on fire, which was battled by firemen, as residents of the building heroically leaped from the windows of the building into safety nets.\textsuperscript{149} This scene of the urban fire happened multiple times a day, showcasing both the fears and fascinations that spectators had with technology and urban life.\textsuperscript{150} In addition to the Galveston Flood, the urban fire, and the Destruction of Pompeii, Coney Island also featured the eruption of Mount Pelée and the destruction of Martinique in 1902, as well as the Johnston Flood in Pennsylvania in 1889.\textsuperscript{151} These manipulations of natural disasters fashion the images of the park in which man is able to control nature so much to a point that Coney Island can create and recreate nature throughout the day. Visitors want to see the mountains of Pompeii, together with a fascination to see Coney’s ability to destroy and then recreate again this mountainous scene.

In addition to its artificial displays of natural land and scenery, Coney Island exhibited both physical and artificial displays of animals. Luna Park and Dreamland were both known for the trained animals that walked about the parks. In one image titled “Trained Elephants at Luna Park,” three elephants with colored decorative covers of their tusks walk through the center of the grounds of the park.\textsuperscript{152} [See Appendix Figure 34] Three men surround the elephants with blue uniforms and spectators surround the animals on either side of the road in which the animals walk through. The elephants appear to be simply a part of the surrounding display of amusements.

\textsuperscript{149} Kasson, \textit{Amusing the Millions.}, “Fire and Flames,” 71.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{152} Postcard “Trained Elephants at Luna Park Circus, Coney Isld, N.Y.,” Undated Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
One of the largest advertising mechanisms for Luna Park was the execution of an
elephant named Topsy. Topsy was to be put to death after killing two of her keepers, but for
Luna Park owners Thompson and Dundy, this was not to be done without some marketing and
free advertising to their park. By contacting Edison and filming the spectacle, they actually
electrocuted Topsy with hundreds of spectators present. It was put on film, one of the first
Edison films, and photographed for every major American newspaper and magazine.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, subduing and controlling animals through medicine
and electricity had been a common mechanism to showcase the progress humans had made in
technology. Inventor Monsieur Rauspach subdued three lions, a boa constrictor, and an elephant
through the use of electrically charged prod as reported on by the Pall Mall Gazette. And in
1897, the Popular Science News reported that a horse had been “conquered” by electricity. The
electricity “cured” the vicious and dangerous side of the horse. Even when the United States
Capitol building was finally lit up at night, one article boasted of the electrical power on the
building in its ability to kill the insects attracted to the beaming lights. One publication wrote
that the power of the lights warned all of the insects of the swampy Washington D.C. of the
to power of the United States through it’s beaming electrical light.


155 Marvin, When Old Technologies Were New, 117.

156 Ibid.
In addition to physical animals, artificial animals were a part of the amusements and rides at Coney Island. In Steeplechase Park, artificial horses lined a racetrack, in which pairs of two could hop onto horse and ride at high speeds around the track. The most famous and popular postcard and image of Steeplechase Park is one of 6 tracks lined up with a view of the incline of the tracks. [See Appendix Figure 35] The backs of the horses and the riders are to the viewer with American flags lining the side of the tracks with the horizon in the distance. This ride is an example, not only of the excitement of a railway designed for amusement, but the robotic horses create a technological interpretation of a nostalgia for the pastoral nature of the west. According to the park owner George Tilyou, the exhibit was meant to “straighten out wrinkles… [and to have] cares and worries forgotten.” Steeplechase appealed to the concept of escaping the urban environment to physically ride a horse, all while still embracing the technology of the railway.

The most popular exhibit at Coney Island showcased one of the most natural things on earth inside of a machine: an exhibit showcasing premature babies inside of incubators. While hospitals in 1903 would not invest in the technology for what would be come the modern medical incubator, park owners saw the value in the spectacle of premature babies. Dr. Martin Couney opened incubator exhibits first at Luna Park, and then next door at Dreamland, while never charging parents for the care. Of the 8,000 babies that came through Couney’s exhibit, he

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159 Parascandola, Visions of an American Dreamland, 30.

was able to save 7500.\textsuperscript{161} While Couney’s claimed not to be a showman and his mission was to save the children, his futuristic vision fit perfectly into the narrative of Coney Island: one in which technology and that which is manmade, can have control over something as pure and natural as a newborn baby.

Whether through machines, animals, natural disasters, or scenic railways, the images and interpretations of Coney Island appeal to both a desire for escape from the anxieties of the city, all while embracing the newness of technological innovation. While the emphasis on both the natural and artificial within the same context is a reflection of American culture and interest in a common place, Coney Island was only able to succeed in fashioning this image of itself because of its place in time. The images of Coney are a romance of technology and the fantasy of Coney would soon come to an end.

Conclusion: The Fall of the City of Fire

When land and water meet, wonderful things always happen. That means to me that Coney Island will forever be an opportunity. And I don't think that what Coney Island should be in people's minds is, "Let's bring back what was," but rather, "Let's consider it a frontier to do the thing of the future" because that intersection of sand and waves, the kind of light that you have, all evoke very powerful primitive creative urges in people -- in all people, not just artists, not just developers, but somehow all people coming together.162

It is a hot summer day on July 4, 2016 at Coney Island. Thousands are flocking to the famous Brooklyn beaches to get even a peak at one of the grandest of spectacles that the world has ever seen. An announcer’s booming voice echoes throughout Coney Island of a hero realizing his potential on this very day. “Once in every ten generations, a hero rises to lead a broken nation to victory. It is he who has grown to fulfill a legacy of greatness.”163 Millions of spectators from around the world are tuning in on their televisions to witness the events at Coney. All of the global news outlets will be covering the events closely to showcase these shocking happenings. What is this spectacle at Coney Island on America’s birthday every single year? How, in 2016, is Coney Island the magnet of the world on one day per year? It is nothing more than the International Hot Dog Eating Contest.

What is it exactly about the hot dog that remained the one staple in the memory of Coney Island? One can assume that most Americans do not know that the roller coaster, the modern medical incubator, and the Circus, all have the same birthplace. And yet, the hotdog remains a staple in the original memory of Coney when the three grand amusement parks initially emerged. While this thesis analyzes up to 1910, in the decade following, Coney Island actually did grow


more popular. On a beautiful day in 1923, a million people would flock to the beaches. However, the sentiments of awe and fascination would never be the same. We can come to understand Coney Island’s significance on American culture when we look at its demise.

The first amusement park to go would be the newest of the big three, Dreamland. In 1911 on opening day, a fire would tear through Dreamland in the morning. It was the light bulbs of “Hell Gate” that caught fire when tar spilt onto a circuit. The beaming tower in the middle of the park burned for just twenty minutes until the flames shooting out of the tower could be seen all the way in Manhattan. After 1 hour, the tower collapsed and Dreamland would never open again. The fall of this fantastical amusement park would eventually serve as a convenient historical symbol of the fall of Coney Island. George Tilyou died two years later, in 1913. Thompson and Dundy went bankrupt that same year.164

As the towers of Luna still shone brightly over the New York City skyline, in the coming decades, the Manhattan skyline would become greater and brighter. Soon Coney Island would be in its shadow. The United States transformed into an industrial society and with that, the invention and innovation of the mechanical rides would no longer fascinate the average visitor. The Whip could not impress anymore than a car. The United States was now also becoming an international power. A visitor in the park might not take the same wonderment of pretending to be a “Rough Rider,” or going to see the replication of Roosevelt’s Naval White Fleet, because the country was about to enter a war. And to some historians, with this extremely deadly war, came not fascination with death and destruction, but deep fears and disillusionment.165

The rest of the country caught up to the modern values that a young man or woman could act on at Coney: where men and women could hold each other publically and where women could go out into the world with large groups of other women. The poor immigrant living in a New York no longer had to save up their money for that one excursion to Coney Island, because there were other places to be amused and experience this leisure. Historian Richard Snow believes that “the wonderful magnet that Coney had been simply wasn't needed any longer . . . It was no longer ‘Coney Island’ in the way that Coney Island fell on the ear of the whole world and represented something unique and entirely new.”

In 1944, a little more than three decades after the destruction of Dreamland, a fire ripped through Luna Park. Only a few exhibits and rides could keep going until the park closed forever in 1946. Steeplechase Park, the original place that created America’s Playground, kept on going through the 40s, 50s, and 60s. It was that small beacon of hope that held onto the magic of what Coney was at the turn of the century. However, finally in 1964, Steeplechase was purchased by a New York real estate mogul by the name of Fred Trump. Immediately after its purchase, Trump ordered Steeplechase to be demolished. It would never be built again. And just like that, the last of what was left of the original America’s Playground, the City of Fire, or the Electric Eden, was gone.

While Coney Island was still visited by the thousands on a hot summer day, Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland had remained memorialized for what they were in the first decade

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168 Fred Trump is the father of President Donald Trump.
after George Tilyou died. Just around twenty years after Steeplechase Park opened, in 1924 a “The Museum of Coney Island” was established, which would honor and give tribute not only to the great invention of the parks, but of the wonderment that struck each person. In one account on the museum in the *Brooklyn Eagle Magazine*, a museum visitor describes his experience on a roller coaster, and how the park hopes to memorialize its innovation:

> One of the most amazing contrivances ever invented for the purpose of amusing folks out in front on the midway was the daring original centrifugal railway, commonly called the ‘Loop the Loop.’ The model of this stupendous device is now to be seen at the museum, and should you desire to manipulate it, turning of a switch is enough to set it in motion and show you how the thing worked thirty years ago. This centrifugal railroad is one device, which will always thrill this writer. It is, in his estimation, the only thriller that has ever shocked him because of its hair-raising loop within a loop. In a somewhat technical manner it is described by the museum authorities as ‘the most darling amusement device built.’

In addition to museum exhibits about the wonderment of what Coney was, science and art magazines circulated articles throughout the 1920s and 30s about the technological innovation and invention, paired with the changing nature of theatrical performances that happened in each of the parks. In one article in *Scientific American*, it describes the *Coney Island Museum* of the 1920s and 30s as “The First Institution Designed to Show Human-Play Reaction.”

Since work was done very early to remember the magic of Coney, has the memory of this fantastical land been lost? Do we think of these representations of the human conquest of nature in the same wonderment as the park dwellers at the turn of the 20th century? If Americans were enthralled with the technological advancements of Coney Island, can we think of our own Coney

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170 Ibid.
Islands today. Perhaps the spectacle of the Super Bowl Halftime Show, always expected to wow Americans in grand light shows and musical energy is a modern Coney Island. Perhaps a modern Coney Island is the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios, where visitors see a manipulation and control of nature at the hand of technology (or magic). Perhaps, a hot dog is still a modern Coney Island. A meat completely controlled at the hand of man through industrialization and manufacturing innovation, and it is a food that can bring people together, either my means of local trucks or vendors on the street, or even an International Hot Dog Eating Contest. While the memory of Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland may not live on in the hearts of all Americans, as long as people continue to eat hot dogs, Americans cannot hide from a little piece of Coney in their hearts (even if it is heartburn).

What we choose to remember of Coney Island might a hot dog, or a rollercoaster, or the crowded beaches, but one reporter wrote on his memory of Coney Island in 1909, just two years before the parks’ demise, speaks to the collective American experience that the parks truly captured: “It is blatant, it is cheap, it is the apotheosis of ridiculous. But it is something more: it is like Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon, or Yellowstone Park; it is a national playground; and to not have seen it is to not have seen your own country.”

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The Incubator at Dreamland, Box 4 Folder 7, The Frederick Fried Collection, 1908-1994, Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University

Night Views of Coney Island Postcards, 1906, Box 12, Series 1, Fred Snitzer Collection, The Brooklyn Historical Society
APPENDIX

FIGURE 1

Postcard, “Night Scene in Dreamland, Coney Island, N.Y.” Undated, Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Emphemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 2

FIGURE 3


FIGURE 4
Postcard, “Twilight, Dreamland,” 1906 Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 5

Postcard, “Coney Island, NY from Ocean by Night,” 1907 Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY

FIGURE 6
FIGURE 7

Postcard, “General View of Coney Island at Night,” Undated Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 8

FIGURE 9

Postcard, “Entrance to Luna By Night” 1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 10
FIGURE 11

Unnamed postcard of Luna Park, 1904, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
FIGURE 12


FIGURE 13

Postcard, “Luna Park, Coney Island, Electric Tower,” 1904, Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
FIGURE 14


FIGURE 15

FIGURE 16


FIGURE 17

FIGURE 18

Postcard, “Noah’s Ark, Steeple Chase, Coney Island, N.Y.” Undated Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
FIGURE 19


FIGURE 20
Postcard, “The Old Mill and Mountains,” 1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 21

FIGURE 22

Song Sheet “Afloat On a Five Dollar Note,” 1906, Series 1, Box 25, Folder 11, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 23

Postcard “Touring the Alps 1906, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
FIGURE 24


FIGURE 25

FIGURE 26


FIGURE 27

Postcard “Shoot the Chutes, Dreamland, Coney Island,” Undated Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.
FIGURE 28

Postcard “Shoot – the Chute, Dreamland, Coney Island.” Undated Series 1, Box 12, Folder 5, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.

FIGURE 29
FIGURE 30


FIGURE 31

FIGURE 32


FIGURE 33

**FIGURE 34**
FIGURE 35

Postcard “Trained Elephants at Luna Park Circus, Coney Isld, N.Y.,” Undated Series 1, Box 4, Folder 6, Fred Snitzer Collection of Kings County Postal Ephemera 2013.003, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY.