»Share a Luna Park Memory … and Make a New One!«

Memorializing Coney Island

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INTRODUCTION: *COOL MEMORIES*

»At Disneyworld in Florida,« Jean Baudrillard notes in *Cool Memories II* (first published in 1990), »they are building a giant mock-up of Hollywood, with the boulevards, studios, etc. One more spiral in the simulacrum. One day they will rebuild Disneyland at Disneyworld« (42). Though obviously intended to be sarcastic, Baudrillard's comment turned out to be prophetic: in fact, in 2007 Disneyland was to be rebuilt, at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, itself rather than at Walt Disney World, in the shape of the »Dream Suite« – a rentable apartment each of whose individual rooms is themed to one of the park's various sections (see Freitag 2021, 187). But already around the time Baudrillard wrote his comment – construction on the »giant mock-up of Hollywood,« the Disney-MGM Studios theme park, lasted from 1987 to 1989 – Horace Bullard, an East Harlem-born millionaire, was busy buying up land and developing plans in order to rebuild, not »Disneyland at Disneyworld,« but Steeplechase Park at Coney Island. As Coney historian Charles Denson writes in his *Coney Island: Lost and Found* (2002), Bullard had obtained a lease on the city-owned property that from 1897 to 1964 had been occupied by George C. Tilyou's famous Steeplechase Park and had commissioned a plan for an amusement park that »paid homage to Coney's past« and »revived past attractions from Luna Park, Dreamland, and the original Steeplechase« (212).[1] »[F]ondly recall[ing] Steeplechase Park,« Bullard was, as he told a *New York Post* reporter in 1985, »determined to make Coney Island a safe place again for a family outing« (Nathanson 1985, 11).

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1 | Luna Park (1903–1944), Dreamland (1904–1911), and Steeplechase Park (1897–1964) refer to three of the four amusement parks opened in rapid succession on Coney Island around the turn of the twentieth century. The fourth and earliest park, Sea Lion Park, operated from 1895 to 1903 on the site later occupied by the »original« Luna Park.

Bullard's ambitious plans would eventually come to naught (see e.g. Denson 2002, 212–221), but his idea was revived in 2010, when Central Amusement International, a company owned by Italian amusement rides manufacturer Zamperla, opened Luna Park in Coney Island. Named after Frederic Thompson and Elmer »Skip« Dundy's 1903 »original« Luna Park, located partly on the site formerly occupied by Dreamland, and featuring numerous references to Steeplechase Park (as well as the other parks) both on site and in its paratexts,[2] Zamperla's Luna Park constitutes one of several examples of how contemporary Coney Island has become »nostalgic for itself« (Dawdy 2016, 110). Indeed, getting off the D, F, N, or Q train at the Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue station (itself a tribute to the past with its historic terra-cotta parapet; see Spellen 2010), visitors to Coney Island nowadays encounter several designated landmarks and places that celebrate Coney and its history: right across the station, for instance, in the landmark building at 1208 Surf Avenue, the not-for-profit arts organization Coney Island USA keeps »defending the honor of American popular culture« (Coney Island USA) with its sideshow performances and events, advertised by a barker's ballyhoo and colorful hand-painted banners designed in retro-style (see Denson 2002, 224–239). A little further down West 12th Street and right below the »Wonder Wheel« (a ferris wheel that celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2020 and another New York City designated landmark), the Exhibition Center of the not-for-profit Coney Island History Project displays a stunning collection of historical artefacts and curiosities from Coney's past, including old photographs and maps, vehicles and decorations from long-gone amusement rides, and a toll house sign from 1823 (see Coney Island History Project 2020). Through Amanda Deutch, who occasionally conducts oral history interviews for the Coney Island History Project, the organization is connected to Parachute Literary Arts, yet another not-for-profit, which organizes events to celebrate Coney Island's literary legacy – events such as the 2015 Poem-a-Rama, for which the cars of the »Wonder Wheel« were turned into small literary salons as New York City-based poets read their own and others' Coney Island poetry to an audience of three (because each car holds a maximum of four people; see Deutch 2019).

Amidst these nonprofit grassroots organizations, the decidedly commercial and administratively conceived Luna Park[3] may appear somewhat incongruous and ill-fitting with the traditionally unregulated development and anarchic atmosphere of Coney (as memorably captured in Joseph Stella's 1913–14 painting »Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras«). Yet far from simply relying on a »retro marketing strategy,« as Frank (261) has maintained, the current Luna Park,

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2 | For a definition of (theme park) paratexts, see below.

3 | The project formed the centerpiece of a comprehensive rezoning plan by the New York Department of City Planning, developed upon recommendations by the Coney Island Development Corporation and officially approved by the City Council in 2009 (see Parascandola/Parascandola 2014, 35 f.; Frank 2015, 261).

too, employs one of Coney's »native« art forms and media – namely, the theme park – to pay homage to Coney Island history and legacy. This is precisely what I would like to focus on in the following. More specifically, drawing on the concept of »autotheming« as well as the notion of theme park paratextuality, I seek to examine the particular story or image of Coney Island and its amusement parks that is mediated through Luna Park itself as well as through its promotional material, including poster advertisements, websites, and social media posts. As I will show, Luna Park employs the full range of theme parks' hybrid, composite, or meta-mediality as well as theming's »politics of inclusion/exclusion« (Lukas 2007, 277) to paint a highly sanitized and nostalgic picture of Coney's turn-of-the-century amusement parks that not only completely ignores these parks' original modernity, but also their much less restrictive politics of theming. Likewise, while also appealing to New Yorkers' local pride by emphasizing the bygone parks' role in the development of contemporary theme parks, Luna's paratexts offer a highly selective image of Steeplechase Park, Dreamland, and the »original« Luna Park in order to stress the site's continuity with its predecessors as a provider of fun and »cool memories« for all New Yorkers.

Autotheming, Theme Park Paratextuality, and the »Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion«

Zamperla's 2010 Luna Park is by no means the first or only theme park that is themed to (a former version of) itself. As I have argued elsewhere (see Freitag 2016), although especially theme parks belonging to such multimedia entertainment conglomerates as The Walt Disney Company or NBCUniversal, but also such smaller, family-owned parks as Europa-Park (Germany) have increasingly used fictional themes based on transmedia franchises,[4] the past two decades have also seen the rise of »autotheming« – a theming strategy in which theme parks draw on themselves and their own past as thematic sources. Thus the aforementioned »Dream Suite« at Disneyland simply evokes the park itself, while Europa-Park's »Historama« show (2010–2017) dramatized the rise of that park from a small, regional attraction to one of the most visited theme park resorts in Europe (see Freitag 2021, 132–135). Occasionally, autothemed rides, shows, restaurants, and areas reach back in time even further and to the pre-

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4 | See, among many other examples, »The Wizarding World of Harry Potter« at Universal Studios Florida (2014), Japan (2014), and Hollywood (2016), adapted from the children's book series by J. K. Rowling; the *Star Wars*-based *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* at Disneyland in Anaheim (CA) and Walt Disney World (both 2019); or the »Arthur« area at Europa-Park (2014), themed to Luc Besson's *Arthur et les Minimoys* movie trilogy.

decessors of the contemporary theme park. For example, the »Pixar Pier« area (2001) at Disney California Adventure in Anaheim, California, is themed to a Victorian-era seaside amusement pier on the California coast, while »Toyville Trolley Park« (2012), located in the New York City-themed »American Water-front« area at Tokyo DisneySea in Japan, architecturally evokes Coney Island and its turn-of-the-century amusement parks. In her recent *Theme Park Fandom* (2020), Rebecca Williams has investigated theme park fans' manifold efforts at memorializing »lost« theme parks (211–242), but the parks themselves have not ignored the creative potential of their own history either.

Like other forms of theming, however, autotheming, too, is governed by theme parks' general representational politics and strategies. The latter involve, on the one hand, the combination of various art forms or media – e.g. architecture, landscaping, painting, sculpture, music, performance, film, language, and digital media – into multisensory environments that, visually separated from each other and especially from the world outside the theme park, provide visitors with a high level of immersivity (see Freitag et al. 2020). Hence, fusing multiple media that have conventionally and historically been considered distinct, the theme park can be referred to as a »hybrid« (Rajewsky 2002), »composite« (Wolf 2007), or »meta-medium« (Geppert 2010). While scholars have examined the specific roles of some of these media within theme parks' hybrid, composite, or meta-mediality in considerable detail,[5] however, those of others – including landscaping, digital media, and language – have been comparatively neglected. As I will show below, especially the latter, in the shape of attraction signage, forms an integral part of Luna Park's autotheming.

On the other hand, theme parks employ strategies of selection or what Lukas has termed a »politics of inclusion/exclusion« (2007, 277) in order to choose themes that are easily recognizable to as many people as possible, but also in order to avoid controversial themes or aspects of themes that may offend or alienate potential customers – usually anything involving violence, death, politics, religion, as well as sexuality. Within the context of historical theming (including autotheming), this has resulted in depictions of the past that have been severely criticized for their multiple omissions and their general »whitewashing« (see e.g. Wallace's notion of »Mickey Mouse history« [1985]; or Fjellman's »Distory« [1992, 59]). To be sure, what exactly may be considered »offensive« or potentially »alienating« to visitors ultimately depends on local and historically changing notions of appropriateness, and the history of theme parks provides numerous examples of specific elements that have been adapted, altered, or even completely removed due to their newfound »offensiveness.«[6] Zamperla's Luna Park constitutes yet another case

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5 | See e.g. Marling 1997 (on architecture); Carson 2004 as well as Camp 2017 (on music); Freitag 2017 (on film); most recently, Kokai/Robson 2019 (on performance).

6 | For a case study of Disneyland's »New Orleans Square« area and its problematic depictions of race and gender, see Freitag 2021, 165–170.

in point: as I will argue below, for Luna Park the turn-of-the-century parks' rather eclectic roster of attractions, which included mechanical rides (coasters and other thrill rides), but also dark rides, shows, and exhibits, was reduced to typical »fun fair« amusement rides, also because of the rather controversial themes of some of Dreamland's and (the »original«) Luna Park's non-mechanical attractions.

Theme parks' strategies of thematic selection and their »politics of inclusion/ exclusion« also extend to their paratexts, however. As mentioned earlier, theme parks offer a high level of immersivity, with the result that, unlike e. g. in the (movie) theater, the distinction between the mediated space and the space of medial reception collapses: in a theme park, visitors find themselves right in the middle of the action. Somewhat paradoxically, however, visitors only rarely experience this space immediately (in the literal sense of the term). Instead, multimedia representations of the park or its parts, usually produced by the parks themselves, serve as medial interfaces between visitors and the park landscapes before, after, and even during the visit. Drawing on the work of literary scholar Gérard Genette (1997) and media scholar Jonathan Gray (2010), Rebecca Williams has referred to these medial interfaces as theme park »paratexts« (2020, 159): in the shape of guide maps and apps, but also ads, signs, announcements, websites, and pictures and videos posted on social media, theme park paratexts, like other media paratexts, provide visitors with »frames and filters« (Gray 2010, 3) or entire »scripts« (see Akrich 1992; Buchenau/Gurr 2016) on how to experience the sites.

At the same time, theme park paratexts also apply the »politics of inclusion/ exclusion« to their depictions of theme parks. Yandell, for instance, speaks of an »agenda of perfection« (2012, 34) in the context of Disneyland souvenir maps, which liberally adjust distances and scales as well as omit and hide »backstage« elements such as service roads and show buildings in order to reach »a level of control and perfection not achievable by moving through a hands-on world, even through a simulation like Disneyland« (25). The same applies to other paratexts as well: pictorial representations of theme parks like postcards or pictures and videos posted on social media, for example, never show the parks during periods of inclement weather, extremely high attendance, or maintenance and renovation. And just as theme parks »whitewash« the past in their representations of historical themes, historiographical paratexts like coffee-table books or »throwback« videos and posts on social media sanitize the parks' own history: accidents or mishaps, unsuccessful attractions, and elements that have been altered or removed due to changing notions of cultural appropriateness (see earlier) are regularly excised from paratextual park histories. In the case of Zamperla's Luna Park in Coney Island, it is, as I will show, not so much the site's own history – not too much has changed since Luna Park opened in 2010 – but rather that of its thematic sources Steeplechase Park, Dreamland, and the »original« Luna Park that is paratextually sanitized. But first, let us explore Luna Park itself.

Autotheming Coney in Luna Park

Zamperla's »new« Luna Park evokes Coney's turn-of-the-century amusement parks primarily through architecture, signage, and cleverly adapted rides. This is hardly surprising, as these are the elements of the »original« parks that via historic photographs and films, but also via representations of Coney in popular culture and the arts, are probably the most well-known and, hence, the most easily recognizable ones for Luna's potential audience, whereas much less is popularly known about, e.g., the music and the general soundscape of Steeplechase Park, Dreamland, and (the »old«) Luna Park. One of the most prominent among these elements is certainly the iconic entrance to the »original« Luna Park, which was located next to the Kister building and thus right across from »new« Luna Park's main entry gate on the corner of Surf Avenue and West 10th Street (see the map provided in Denson 2002, 27). With its four tall obelisks topped by balls as well as its giant pinwheels hugged by the word »Luna,« the new gate clearly references the archway of the »original« Luna, even though it is much smaller and features a bright orange and purple color scheme rather than the old gate's pure white.[7]

It is important to note that the new gate serves purely ornamental or thematic purposes: in contrast to Coney's turn-of-the-century amusement parks as well as, later, Disneyland, Luna Park does not charge a general admission fee in order to socially regulate access and replace »the anarchy outside the gates with an ordered environment conducive to profit making« (Sterngass 2001, 230; see also Freitag 2021, 215–268). Instead, everyone is welcome to enter the park through the main gate or one of the additional entries facing Surf Avenue or the boardwalk and to then buy tickets to the individual rides. Neither does the main entry area provide, as is the case in other theme parks, guest services or opportunities for shopping and dining. Instead, its function is simply to visually pay homage to the »old« Luna Park and to thus connect the two sites. It does so, however, in a way that completely erases the self-proclaimed modernity of the turn-of-the-century parks and rather paints them in a nostalgic hue: whereas the original entry featured the word »Luna« in »the sans-serif, Machine-Age typography that branded Coney Island as modern« (Frank 2015, 40), the »new« Luna Park uses a playful art nouveau font that not only goes well with the swirls and scrolls surrounding the pinwheels (another feature copied from the »original« design) but that also lends a certain »pastness« (see Carlà 2016, 23) to the entrance and thus presumably better meets visitors' expectations about turn-of-the-century Coney than »modern« typography would.

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7 | Kasson (1983) has contrasted the »old« Luna Park's »Super-Saracenic or Oriental Orgasmic« architecture with the »formalism of the Columbian Exposition [1893]« (65), but at least with respect to daytime color schemes, Luna Park and Chicago's »White City« were surprisingly similar.

Besides contributing to Luna Park's nostalgic atmosphere, the art nouveau font also provides, along with the orange and purple color scheme, visual continuity to visitors and thus helps holding the park's various segments together:[8] not only is it used on all the entrances to Luna Park, but frequently also on in-park signage and especially on attraction marquees such as that of the pendulum ride »Luna 360,« which also features a pinwheel. On other marquees, including that of the Wild Mouse coaster »The Tickler,« by contrast, the font is combined with a reproduction of the famous »Steeplechase Funny Face.« This drawing of the face of a broadly grinning young man served as the logo of George C. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park and was prominently displayed, among other locations, on the façade of the park's steel-and-glass »Pavilion of Fun« building. In addition to the load and unload station of the park's titular Steeplechase ride (see below), the »Pavilion of Fun« housed some of Steeplechase Park's more outré attractions: the »Human Roulette Wheel,« for example, where visitors would sit on – and eventually be thrown off – a huge spinning turntable (as memorably depicted in Reginald Marsh's 1936 painting *George C. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park*), or the »Blowhole Theater«, where patrons would watch other visitors getting off the Steeplechase ride and get shocked with a cattle prod by a little person (in the case of men) or have their skirts blown up by jets of air (in the case of women; see Denson 2002, 35). It is for this reason that scholars have regularly associated the »stretched, grinning red mouth« of the »Steeplechase Funny Face« with Coney's »performance tradition of blackface minstrels, the contorted bodies of ›freaks‹ and other sideshow performers, the exaggerated smiles of barkers, and the behavior of the crowd that sometimes sought experiences tinged with intimations of sex and violence« (Frank 2015, 36).[9] At Zamperla's Luna Park, by contrast, the »Funny Face« merely functions to evoke Steeplechase Park in general and to thus depict Luna as the heir of not just the »original« Luna, but of all of Coney's turn-of-the-century parks.

To be sure, the »Funny Face« is by no means Luna Park's only reference to Tilyou's Steeplechase Park. Several amusement rides at the park – all manufactured by Zamperla, for which Luna doubles as a showcase for its products – use ride systems and theming to reference attractions from the »old« parks; and perhaps the most obvious case is that of »new« Luna Park's »new« Steeplechase ride – a so-called »motorbike coaster« whose trains »position guests astride a seat, similar to riding a motorbike« (Younger 2016, 428). Rather than to motorbikes – as in the case of, e.g., Shanghai Disneyland's »Tron Lightcycle Power Run« (2016) – the

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8 | As of 2020, Luna Park extends over five blocks that are separated from each other by public roads leading to the beach. Unlike other theme parks bisected by public roads such as Phantasialand (Germany), however, so far Luna Park has chosen not to install pedestrian bridges for its visitors, with the result that technically, visitors are forced to continually leave and re-enter the park as they move from block to block.

9 | In 2014, the Coney Island History Project even dedicated an exhibition to the »Funny Face« (see Coney Island History Project 2020b).

trains of »Steeplechase« are themed to horses in order to evoke the signature attraction of Steeplechase Park, a gravity-powered horseracing ride with parallel tracks that surrounded the park and that itself paid homage to »Coney's reputation as a racing center« (Sterngass 2001, 229).[10] While Luna's »Steeplechase« coaster is comparatively short and, due to the lack of parallel tracks, does not offer a »competition« element, the experience nevertheless constitutes a charming allusion to the original »Steeplechase« ride, an allusion that, as we will see below, Luna Park's paratexts also capitalize on. Likewise, »The Tickler« uses the »medium« of the ride system to translate a turn-of-the-century gravity-based thrill ride into a twenty-first century amusement experience. Located right across from Luna Park's iconic »Electric Tower« (see the map provided in Denson 2002, 36), the »original« »Tickler« sent riders in round tubs down a gently sloped zigzag path, exposing them to high lateral accelerations. The very same effect is produced by the tight unbanked turns of the »new« »Tickler,« a so-called Wild Mouse coaster, in the horizontal »back-and-forth« section of its track. The coaster further mimics its »predecessor« by allowing the round cars to spin freely as they navigate the track and by positioning its giant marquee high above the attraction (for a depiction of the »original« »Tickler«, see Stanton 1998).

Yet what is even more interesting than the various turn-of-the-century rides Zamperla's Luna Park *does* allude to, are the attractions and experiences from the »original« parks that it silences or ignores: today's visitors to Luna Park can find no references whatsoever to Dreamland's Biblically themed dark rides (»Creation« and »Hell Gate«), its »Lilliputia« exhibit of little persons, or its »Fighting the Flames« catastrophe spectacular (see Cross/Walton 2005, 42–44 and 88; Palladini 2018), the »original« Luna Park's »Infant Incubators,« where actual prematurely born infants were displayed (see Cross/Walton 2005, 94), or Steeplechase Park's »Human Roulette Wheel« or »Blowhole Theater« (see earlier). Conceived and designed long before the much more restrictive theming strategies of contemporary theme parks were implemented, these – by today's standards – inappropriate, voyeuristic, and degrading attractions have been rigidly excluded from the 2010 Luna Park's highly sanitized autotheming of turn-of-the-century Coney Island amusement parks.

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10 | Starting with William Engeman's Brighton Beach racetrack in 1879, three racetracks opened on Coney Island around the 1880s. As Sterngass (2001) writes, »Coney's visitors could now gamble on horses virtually every day in the summer, and with its trio of racetracks, Coney Island replaced Saratoga as the center of American thoroughbred racing until the New York State legislature criminalized bookmaking in 1908« (232).

MEMORIALIZING CONEY IN LUNA PARK PARATEXTS

Whereas the »new« Luna Park's autothematic references to Dreamland, Stee-plechase Park, and the »original« Luna Park are only recognizable to those who know about the history of Coney,[11] the park's paratexts – especially its ad campaigns, website, and posts on social media – make the connections explicit and thus seek to authenticate the new development and integrate Luna Park into Coney history, legacy, and memory. For its fifth anniversary in 2015, for instance, Luna Park launched the »Share a Luna Park Memory« campaign, which featured poster ads, e.g., at the Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn, from where visitors can take the N or Q train directly to the Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue station. Created by local graphic designer Maggie Rossetti, the triptych posters used their centerpieces to promote the park's official hashtag #mylunapark; the left and right sides, however, juxtaposed historic and contemporary photographs of Coney rides as well as the captions »Share a Luna Park Memory...« (below the historic black-and-white picture to the left) and »... and Make a New One!« (below the contemporary full-color picture to the right) in order to link (Coney Island) past and (Luna Park) present. For example, one poster motif showed two photographs of the wooden »Cyclone« roller coaster, a designated New York City landmark and part of the National Register of Historic Places, which was originally opened as an independently operated attraction in 1927 and was in-tegrated into Zamperla's Luna Park in 2011. Another motif, however, paired off a photograph of the »original« »Steeplechase« ride at Steeplechase Park with a picture of Luna Park's »new« »Steeplechase,« thus making Zamperla's strategy of autotheming explicit (see fig. 1 and 2).

Interestingly, then, the campaign sought to (re)activate New York City's col-lective memory of the Coney Island of yesteryear, literally asking passersby to »Share a [...] Memory,« only to then invite them not to link this memory to a new experience at Luna, but rather to instantly memorialize their visit to the park (»... and Make a New [Memory]!«). While possibly inspired by a 2011 to 2014 promotional campaign for Disney's domestic parks in California and Florida, which used the tagline »Let the Memories Begin« and thus similarly market-ed the sites as providers of memories rather than experiences (see Weiss 2021),

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11 | At several spots in Luna Park, the park designers have installed poster-sized reproductions of historic photographs of Coney, but since the posters have been left unlabeled and their positioning appears rather random (e.g. a view of the »original« Luna Park's main entry gate opposite the »new« »Steeplechase« coaster), they do not readily assist visitors in identifying autothematic references.

Fig. 1: Poster ad for Luna Park at the Atlantic Terminal (2015)
Photo: Florian Freitag

Fig. 2: Poster ad for Luna Park at the Atlantic Terminal (2015)
Photo: Florian Freitag

this strategy perfectly fit the »new« Luna Park's attempts to nostalgically evoke Coney's past and to integrate itself into Coney history and memory – to position itself as a »lieu de mémoire« (Nora 1984–1994) for Coney Island. In addition to the autotheming at Luna Park itself and the 2015 »Share a Luna Park Memory« campaign, further evidence of this strategy can be found in the park's other paratexts, notably its official social media profiles and website. Visitors to the latter, for instance, may discover a webpage dedicated to »Our History,« whose timeline, however, neither starts in 2010 (when the »new« Luna Park was opened) nor in 2002 (when Luna Park's owner-operator Central Amusement International was founded) or in 1966 (the founding year of Zamperla, Central Amusement International's parent company), but in 1884, when the first roller coaster was installed on Coney Island and »when the thrill started« (Luna Park, »About«). Further milestones on the timeline include the opening years of Steeplechase Park, the »original« Luna Park (illustrated, confusingly, by a picture of Dreamland), and the »Cyclone« roller coaster. Hence, Luna Park claims *all* of Coney's history of amusement parks and rides as its own, but as in the park itself, the company liberally applies strategies of selection or the »politics of inclusion/exclusion« to the depiction of this history on its website. Here, too, past attractions whose theming may be considered inappropriate by today's standards are simply ignored, and so are entire parks: Luna Park's claim that it constitutes »the first new amusement park in Coney Island in over 40 years« (Luna Park, »About«) may be correct with respect to Astroland, which operated from 1962 to 2008 on the very site now occupied by Luna Park (see Denson 2011, 126), but flatly denies the existence of the family-owned and -operated Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park, founded in the early 1980s around the historic »Wonder Wheel« (see Denson 2002, 165; and 2011, 123; see also my discussion earlier). According to its own historiography, Zamperla's Luna Park alone abides to time-honored Coney traditions.

The same applies to Luna Park's *Instagram* account, where carefully selected pictures of past Coney Island are freely mixed with (no less carefully chosen) impressions of contemporary Luna Park (see Luna Park, »Luna«). One particular post from August 6, 2020, for example, not only upholds Luna Park's exclusive claim to the history of Coney Island, but even extends it to the entire history of the US theme and amusement park industry. Captioned »As the birthplace of the amusement park, Coney Island, Brooklyn was visited by the most iconic names in the industry and inspired amusement and theme parks all over the world including Disneyland and Disney World« (see Luna Park 2020b), the picture shows a smiling Walt Disney on the »Zip« coaster at Steeplechase Park. Prior to the opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, California, in 1955, Disney and his team had indeed undertaken field trips to various tourist attractions and amusement parks, including Coney Island, but ironically, Disneyland would later attempt to distance itself from supposedly seedy and poorly organized playgrounds and amusement parks such as those of Coney Island (see Weinstein 1992). Via this post on its

Instagram account, however, Luna Park not only stresses the centrality of Coney among Disneyland's antecedents, but also and once again its own relevance as the sole heir to this rich tradition.

At the same time, Luna Park also engages in a different sort of »Distory« (Fjellman 1992, 59; see earlier) on *Instagram*. On August 13, 2020, the company posted yet another black-and-white picture of cheering people riding a Coney Island roller coaster – in this case, the »Cyclone« – and commented: »The historic Cyclone has been a rite of passage for thrill seeking New Yorkers and guests from around the world since its inception on June 26, 1927. Do you remember your first time?« (Luna Park 2020). Dated »circa 1962« in the post, the picture exclusively shows African American riders and thus perpetuates the widespread notion of Coney as »a crucible of democratic freedom and equality« (Kasson 1983, 95) in recreation and entertainment – a place for *all* New Yorkers (and others) to have fun (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Instagram post by Luna Park (August 13, 2020)
Screenshot: Florian Freitag.
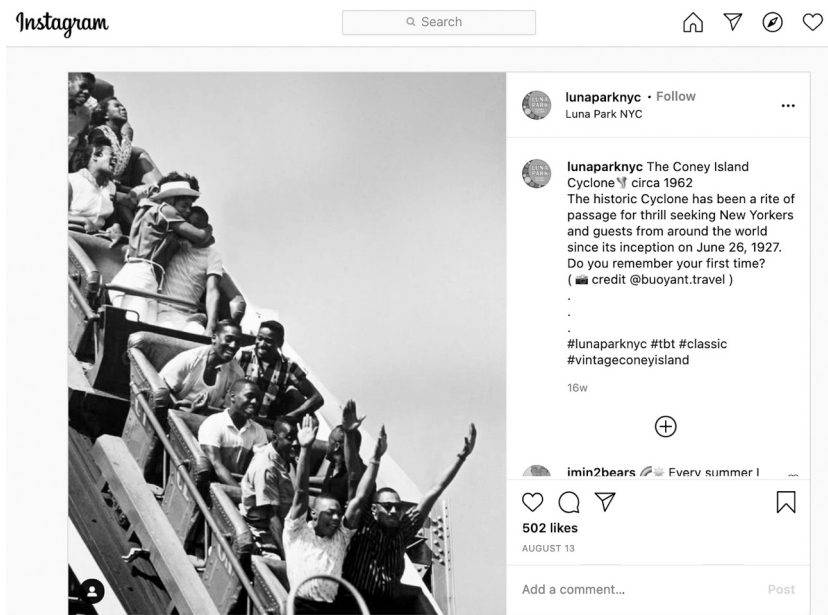
The history of racial discrimination in US theme and amusement parks in general and in Coney in particular is much more complex, however: Disneyland, for instance, was »the only Orange County location listed in the *Green Book* for black Americans wishing for a ›vacation without aggravation‹« (Morris 2019, 214) but nevertheless drew heavily on racial stereotypes in its depiction of Af-

rican Americans (see Freitag 2021, 166 f.; see also Wolcott 2012). Similarly, at turn-of-the-century Coney Island,

> [h]ostility against dark-skinned peoples also took symbolic form. At Coney, any national prejudice could be gratified by knocking over Turks, Frenchmen, or Prussians in the shooting galleries and rifle ranges, but the various »Kill the Coon« (or »African Dodger«) ball-throwing games remained the most popular aggressive amusements. (Sterngass 2001, 105)

In addition, African Americans were also »subjected to an unofficial color line, assigned Jim Crow bathhouses, and discouraged from bathing on certain sections of the beach« (ibid.). As late as 1964, Steeplechase Park chose to close down rather than integrate its outdoor pool (see Denson 2002, 135). Although other historic photographs and paintings depict what appear to be mixed crowds enjoying the »Cyclone« (e.g. Alfred Gescheidt's photographs from the 1950s and 60s; see »Alfred Gescheidt«) and other Coney rides (e.g. Joseph Delaney's 1932 painting *Coney Island*), it generally remains unclear what the official policies and actual operational practices regarding race were at specific Coney Island locations at different points in time. In any case, Luna Park's *Instagram* post glosses over any instances of racial segregation or discrimination at Coney, perpetuating the notion and memory of the site as a provider of fun and »cool memories« for everyone.

CONCLUSION

»A stationary Luna Park,« co-founder Frederic Thompson once said about his 1903 amusement park, »would be an anomaly« (qtd. in Immerso 2002, 74). Indeed, in the field of theme and amusement parks (as well as out-of-home entertainment in general), where novelty, innovation, and uniqueness are paramount, tradition, authenticity, and memories – even »cool« ones – may not appear to be particularly relevant. Yet as Erik Cohen has pointed out, specifically citing (Disney) theme parks as an example, through a process of »emergent authenticity,« »it is possible for any newfangled gimmick, which at one point appeared to be nothing but a staged ›tourist trap,‹ to become over time, and under appropriate conditions, widely recognized as an ›authentic‹ manifestation of local culture« (1988, 380). At some point in the future this may even apply to Zamperla's park itself and result, as has been the case at Disneyland (see earlier), in Luna Park becoming its own thematic source. Up to now, however, the company has mainly sought to capitalize on both the public's interest in novelty and their reverence for Coney Island's past through autothemed designs and paratexts that evoke Coney's turn-of-the-century amusement parks and rides. And it continues to do so: for its 10th anniversary season in 2020, Luna Park had

planned to add a new water coaster whose »splash« sections, spanned by decorative arches, look singularly reminiscent of the famous »Shoot-the-Chutes« ride at the »original« Luna Park (see Cohen 2019; for a 1903 recording of the »original« ride see Library of Congress). When the coaster will be built,[12] it will further contribute to Luna Park's highly selective, sanitized, and nostalgic – in short, its theme park – depiction of the Coney of yesteryear.

While Luna Park's family-friendly approach to Coney's past thus links the site to such other »Distoried« imaginings of Coney and turn-of-the-century seaside amusement parks as Tokyo DisneySea's »Toyville Trolley Park« or Disney California Adventure's »Pixar Pier« (see earlier), it also marks the contrast between the amusement park and its many neighbors, which also draw on and celebrate Coney history and legacy, but do so without the restrictions imposed by thematic selection and the »politics of inclusion/exclusion«: the Coney Island History Project, whose collection of artifacts and curiosities also throws light on the more controversial aspects of old Coney's amusement parks and other attractions, and Coney Island USA, whose »Sideshows by the Seashore« performances revive and continue the tradition of the »side-« or »freak show« – like Luna Park, Coney Island USA also makes use of the »Steeplechase Funny Face« in its logo, but for altogether different reasons – and critically reflect on this tradition at the same time. In her appearances as »Helen Melon« on the stage of »Sideshows by the Seashore,« for instance, performer Katy Dierlam simultaneously »acknowledged the clichés of the sideshow Fat Lady« and »challenge[d] onlookers to look beyond her appearance,« with the result that her performance ultimately works »much as a reflection in the funhouse mirror. That is, it ultimately fails to be about her and becomes instead about us, about our lapses and failures as we attempt to measure up (or down) to the dominant ideal« (Mazer 2001, 257 and 271). Similarly, in Donald Thomas's »Sideshows by the Seashore« performances as the »human blockhead,« during which he hammers six-inch nails up his nostrils, it is the audience's reaction that »becomes the show« (2014, 308). The sideshow at Coney Island USA thus combines the »new« Luna Park's affective approach to the past with the Coney Island History Project's critical gaze at the legacy of New York City's most famous playground.

Employing Coney's various »native« art forms and media (the theme park, the sideshow, and the museum of curiosities), then, contemporary Coney Island simultaneously offers many different ways or modes of remembering the pleasures of yesterday – from the museal to the affective, from the nostalgic to the critical, and from the purely entertaining to the ultimately introspectional. Under the boardwalk, down by the sea, there's really something for everyone.

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12 | Like many other theme parks (e.g. Efteling in the Netherlands), Luna Park has put expansion plans on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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