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Remaking Iconic Space at the Margins: Coney Island

First author, affiliation: Robyn Autry, Wesleyan University
Email: rautry@wesleyan.edu

Abstract

The deadliest and one of the most costly natural disasters of recent US history, whipped through New York City in late October 2012. The resulting physical destruction and loss of life in communities along the Atlantic Ocean, from the Caribbean up to New England (US), left many shocked. Although much of the attention has been directed toward the widespread damage to lower Manhattan, including the closure of the New York Stock Exchange and the flooding of the subway system, this paper focuses on the havoc wreaked by the “superstorm” at Coney Island. The urban residential neighborhoods along with the iconic amusement park were virtually destroyed, but not for the first time. The South Brooklyn peninsula is home to some of the city’s poorest residents, many of whom had difficulty evacuating, which led to increased casualties and looting in the shore-side neighborhoods. The concentration of low-income neighborhoods at the shore is a product of a long and twisted history of urban planning, renewal, and private speculation. Drawing on oral histories from before and after the storm, visual photographic records, and data from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), this paper compares the public image of Coney Island as an iconic but neglected and socially marginalized urban space before and after the storm.

Unlike many studies of urban environmental catastrophe, this paper draws on visual cultural studies and visual sociology to trace the use, production, and consumption of images as photographic evidence to strategically invoke Coney Island’s past and advocate for future redevelopment. I also discuss the use of visual and digital technologies to track the storm’s path and devastation to audiences in official and unofficial news accounts online and in television. In this respect, I compare the use of these visual technologies of display as a form of ‘spectacularization’ whereby the mundane is rendered extraordinary to the more familiar practices of spectacle at Coney Island as a national and city landmark. I explore the way that natural or environmental events are rendered spectacular cultural phenomena. Just as Coney Island, seemingly rising up out of the Atlantic Ocean, incorporates both natural and social elements in its fantastical image, so to did Hurricane Sandy as an object of display.

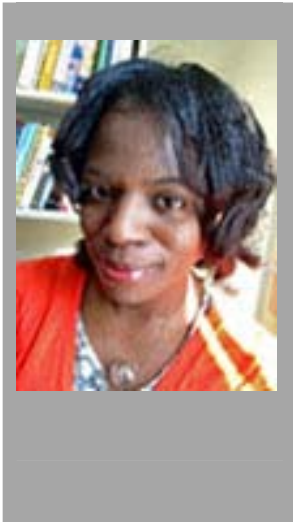
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Author's Biography



Robyn Autry is a sociologist with broad interests in collective identity, memory and trauma, and urban studies. Her article examining problems of heritage preservation and urban development in Johannesburg appeared in the discipline's public journal and an article on the politics of apartheid era monuments in democratic South Africa appeared in *Theory, Culture, and Society*. Her work on representations of racial violence at US museums was published in *Theory & Society*. Her research on urban change and community museums in the US is under review in *Museums and Society*. Her book manuscript "Desegregating the Past: The Public Life of Memory in the US and South Africa" is currently under review at Columbia University Press.