

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

I eventually noticed the patient and bemused glances from other customers at the café where I was reading Katherine Thompson's WR 150 final essay, "The Grim Reality Hidden Beneath Freshkills Park's Bright Façade." The more I read, the more excited I became, and I can now remember exclaiming, quite audibly, "Nailed it!" and "You go!" and "Wow!" I was simply caught up in the beauty of Katherine's language and the power of her argument, and, well, I couldn't contain that silently.

Katherine hails from Staten Island, and she told me early in the course of the tug that her home and her family held on her. (Indeed, she has recently transferred to NYU to be closer to that area.) But it was her home landscape that she spoke to me about one day after class around the time Essay #1 had been completed. She was already thinking about the final essay, and she wanted to know if she could write about the Freshkills Landfill, an environmental feature that looms figuratively and literally over Staten Island.

Our environmental history course examines the ambiguous and reciprocal relationships between nature and culture. And in the issues raised by a human-engineered park atop a skanky landfill, Katherine was smart enough to see a whole range of the contested meanings that humans make about nature—and about our manipulation and modification of nature. Her essay begins with the guiding conceptual questions that focused her study, and her opening paragraph defines the conceptual problem she raises along with the claim she argues throughout her essay. I appreciated the exhibits she included, but I especially loved the complexities of her argument. As she examines "an ideal, yet manufactured nature..." and "the silencing of the history of the region," Katherine is simultaneously giving emphasis to the conviction of her own voice.

Frederic Fitts

WR 150: American Environmental History

FROM THE WRITER

Before enrolling in Professor Ted Fitts's "American Environmental History" course, I had never really considered the relationship between people and nature. Hailing from Staten Island, NY, reports about the impending Freshkills Park, being built on top of the closed Freshkills Landfill, didn't exactly excite me, but they certainly didn't bother me either. However, as I made my way through the course and became more intrigued by our somewhat damaged conception of our place in nature, I recognized that I had a more intense reaction to the issue to which I once was indifferent. As I approached the final essay, which was fairly open in topic, I knew that I wanted to reflect on Freshkills Park. What most interests me about this stretch of land is its shift from a massive, abused dump to an aesthetically-pleasing park, a change that I feel speaks volumes, in both a literal and metaphorical way, about our relationship with nature.

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KATHERINE THOMPSON

THE GRIM REALITY HIDDEN BENEATH FRESHKILLS PARK'S BRIGHT FAÇADE

In about twenty years, sometime around 2037, Staten Island's Freshkills Park will be fully complete. This expansive project, intended to be the second largest of its kind in New York City, will boast playgrounds, hiking trails, public art, and many other features sure to delight Staten Island residents and, as hoped for by the spearheads of the project, people from outside of the borough. For many people, this is a story of redemption, as it seems to represent a metamorphosis from a wasteland to an environmental oasis. Under this proposed aesthetically-pleasing façade, however, will lie over half a century's worth of New York City's garbage, covered and, ultimately, its significance downplayed with a plastic liner and eight layers of barrier material ("Freshkills Park"). In establishing such a massive space on top of the remnants of one of the world's largest landfills, we are attempting to erase our past misuse of the landscape and to instill an ideal, yet manufactured, nature in its place. This silencing of the history of the region and of the realities of urban development, however, only serves to demonstrate our seemingly contradictory intentions—to foster a connection with nature and to expand at its expense. Neglecting the realities of expansion, which undoubtedly produces unwanted byproducts, will only allow for the continuation of disastrous environmental practices, except in another, far-away location, ambiguously referred to as "somewhere else." This idea is comforting, as it reduces any legitimate blame, but it also serves to detract from the issues present at the core of human civilization and those pertaining to our tense relationship with nature.

Staten Island, a relatively suburban borough of New York City, has come to be heavily associated with its infamous Fresh Kills Landfill. This massive garbage dump, which handled New York City's garbage from its opening in 1947 until 2001, when the last garbage barge was sent, grew to be the largest site of its kind by 1955. Prior to this extreme management and use of the land, however, the site served a very different, but important, purpose. When Staten Island was quite rural and very disconnected from the rapidly expanding center of New York City, it largely consisted of species-rich salt marshes, which were in place to protect the shoreline from erosion and reduce flooding (Melosi 59-60). However, quite separate from the rural landscape that characterized Staten Island, was the continued growth of the rest of New York City, an element that inevitably produced drawbacks and a tremendous amount of trash. Many locations were selected as destinations for this trash buildup, but with resources having been exhausted quickly, there was a desperate need for a new home for New York City's garbage.

Relying upon the relatively new landfill method, Robert Moses, hailed as the "master builder" of the mid-twentieth century New York metropolitan area, proposed a filling of the Staten Island marshes with the city's solid waste, a practice that would work particularly well in Staten Island's salt marshes (Steinberg). The beneficial aspects of the salt marshes, particularly in their protection of the coastline and their encouragement of biodiversity, were thus seen as inconsequential to the more important interests of the urbanized New York City. Regarding this,

Moses remarked to Staten Island borough president, Cornelius Hall, who had initially opposed the landfill, “you have an immense acreage of meadow land in this locality which is presently valueless” (Steinberg). Therefore, business interests and the human desire for expansion ultimately took precedence in this matter. According to Moses’s plans, this would only be temporary, persisting for a few years. However, it quickly became clear that this solution was a more permanent endeavor, and more time was requested to turn the land Moses, Hall, and city sanitation commissioner Andrew Mulrain described as “fallow and useless” into a reclamation project, featuring highways, parks, and industry and “the greatest single opportunity for community planning in this City” (Steinberg). Once again, this goal was not realized; continued population surges and denial of the drawbacks of this growth established an even more pressing need for waste management, which meant more dumping of trash on Fresh Kills, higher mountains of garbage, and less and less marshland (see Fig 1).

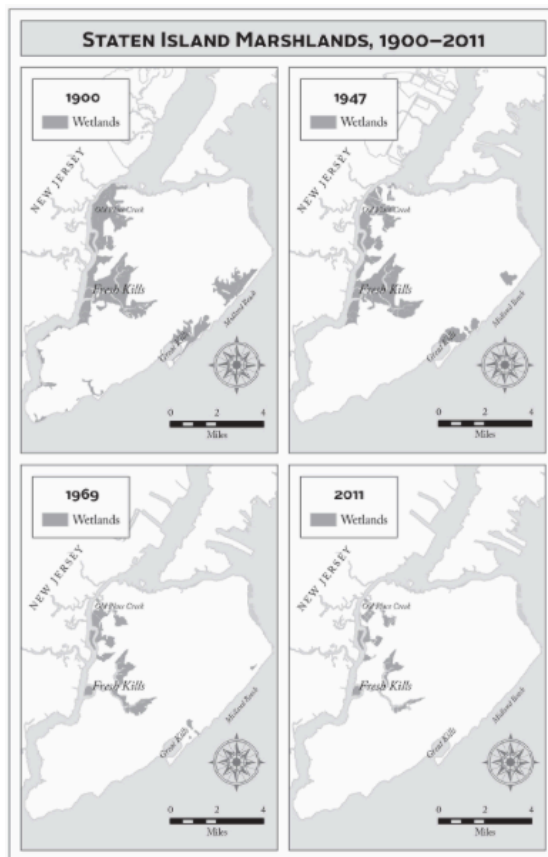


Fig 1. Staten Island Marshlands (1900–2011)

What the expansion of Fresh Kills didn’t mean, however, was any legitimate change in lifestyle for the city’s elite or those living outside of the city’s dumping borough. Still a part of New York City, but yet very detached, Staten Island took the brunt of the city’s garbage, while residents from the other boroughs continued to produce tremendous amounts of trash.

For the residents of Staten Island, the reality was not pleasant. While things may have been coming up roses for other New York City residents, the persistent stench of the ever-growing dump made it difficult to ignore the environmental degradation of the landscape. This established a sense

of hostility in Staten Islanders, as they felt a real disconnection from the city, indicated by the island's status as the "forgotten borough." Even still, they dealt with the immediate negative effects of the entire city's trash buildup; this was amplified with the closure of the city's other remaining landfills in 1991. A video entitled "The Fresh Kills Story: From World's Largest Garbage Dump to a World-Class Park," presented by the Staten Island Borough President's Office, features residents' reflections on their experiences with the Fresh Kills Landfill. Guy V. Molinari, a past Staten Island Borough President, recalled, "it was atrocious and I always had a feeling that the people in the other boroughs didn't give a damn about us," a notion echoed by others who were interviewed (AndyUpload). Rising piles of garbage and the negativity the landfill fostered for Staten Islanders coincided with election of Republican leaders in New York City's government, prompting action to close the landfill after its over half-a-century of service (AndyUpload; Lippard). On March 22, 2001, the last barge arrived at the Fresh Kills Landfill, marking the end of a significant era in Staten Island's history (The Freshkills Park Alliance).

Even though trash was no longer arriving in Staten Island, the expansive site still loomed over the island, in its four main trash mounds, particularly prevalent scent, and its influence on the overall reputation of the borough. But, perhaps most significant to the city's interest, was the former landfill's vastness, emptiness, and its ability to be molded. Adhering to a very Moses-like philosophy, a competition was hosted to establish building plans for a large, impressive park, intended to rest on top of the previous landfill site. Nearly fifty years earlier, this virginity, in a sense, was also admired, inspiring plans to embark on a similar path toward developing recreation and park sites. However, in this initial circumstance, these plans were overwhelmed by the pressing waste management needs of the city, leading to an extreme case of mismanagement of nature. In the current circumstance, however, goals involving a large-scale, beautiful park appear completely contrary to past action. In a sense, many believe this to be somewhat of a success story, in that the land and the surrounding borough itself are being reclaimed, representing a healthy management of nature, completely and irrevocably opposite to the previous mismanagement. This peachy assessment of the human-nature association is, on a purely superficial level, appealing, since it suggests that humans can break something and then build it up again. However, this idea relies far too much on surface aesthetics, neglecting what this morphing land indicates about human's distorted view of and misguided relationship with nature.

Chosen to lead the charge behind the new Freshkills Park project was James Corner and his architecture firm, Field Operations (The Freshkills Park Alliance). His plans for the landscape were selected because they demonstrated a different outlook on the significance of the land. His plans feature elements that are said to work with the human-created topography of the land, such as the four large garbage mounds, and also elements that are said appeal to the landscape that existed prior to human involvement. In this way, his design intends to "respond to the natural and constructed history of the site" (The Freshkills Park Alliance). In speaking about his future of the park, Corner noted "the whole process of this kind of technologically engineered ecology provides an opportunity for Freshkills to offer a great educational demonstration in environmental sustainability" (Rogers).



Fig 2. Design of Freshkills Park schematic plan.

Optimism associated with the park and how it represents the epitome of incorporating nature and society, is ultimately, however, quite short sighted and ignores the horrifying impact we had on the environment at Fresh Kills. For instance, Timothy Boyland, a member of the Staten Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, noted in a short promotional video for the park, “As we look around, you can see, as nature begins to take over and take back, reclaim, this is going to be an amazing spot.” The positivity associated with the park ignores that the park is not nature in its purest form; it is in fact a very manufactured nature, carefully designed with many human interests in mind. Other overwhelmingly positive reactions to the park rely on the uncanny assertion that such a tremendous amount of garbage that ravaged this landscape can swiftly be covered up with an aesthetically pleasing park. Not only are we literally attempting to cover the scars associated with decades of mismanagement of nature, but we are also attempting to detach ourselves from the very pressing problems we, ourselves, ushered into the landscape. In this way, the establishment of a pleasing facade on top of a previously marred wasteland seems to perpetuate our role as shapers of nature. Past actions directed toward this land were outwardly negative, prompting calls for change from residents. To subdue this controversy, the land’s purpose was altered to line up with what the surrounding people and organizations wanted—a nature of their own accord. This history and the views related to it rely on the assumption that our role in nature is quite a heavy-handed one and that we not only have the ability to, but that we should shape nature.

Freshkills Park likely wasn’t spearheaded with inherent or entirely malicious intention. Of course, it was somewhat of a political and eco-capitalistic attempt to benefit from a massive out-of-use area, but it is still creating an impressive space that will be enjoyed by residents. However, no matter the intentions in building the park, this doesn’t detract from the negative effect it will have, not necessarily on the immediate community, but more so on our relationship with nature. As we attempt to forget the atrocity that was Fresh Kills, we are becoming more detached from nature, and entering into the mindset that whatever damage we do to the Earth is reversible or can be easily patched over with a picturesque park.

This detachment from nature extends much further than just actively patching over the history of the Fresh Kills Landfill. It is also evident in what the closure of the landfill and the opening of Freshkills Park mean for the future of New York City’s waste management. Even though the city’s sole remaining landfill is now closed, this does not mean that New York City will stop producing waste; in fact, it remains one of the world’s largest producers of garbage. Despite this

harsh reality, there now exists no obvious, widely known destination for citizen's trash. Instead of being loaded onto barges and being sent to Fresh Kills Landfill, the trash is being sent out to numerous different out-of-state sites, far away from anything deemed important by the city. In the same way that Staten Island residents noted that the Fresh Kills Landfill was "in an out of the way place, in a sense, for the rest of the city" and that other New York City residents were not bothered by the buildup of trash because it was not in their backyards, New York City's current trash destination is not of any real importance to residents (AndyUpload). Therefore, just as the "forgotten borough" became the home of the city's trash, the larger issue of exploitation of the natural environment and waste management is being outsourced, separating New York City residents from the reality of their trash. Karrie Jacobs asserts that, "somewhere, in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, or Virginia—or just about any other place with the exception of New York City—we are building more hills," which illustrates how the consequences still exist, but they exist just far enough outside of the reach of New York City residents. As long as current practices continue, there will be a growing need to dispose of more and more garbage, and we will continually push away the problem, until the issue begins to overwhelm us.

This trend represents the human desire for advancement and prosperity. The inclination to expand often comes with consequences, most of which no one wants precariously lurking in their own backyards. Instead, we have an inclination to push the issues to an unknown location, accepting the benefits and not wanting to know about what occurred to produce these benefits. Prior to the establishment of the landfill on Staten Island, central New York City and its industrialization were seen as more important than the nature and wildlife on Staten Island. Therefore, the byproducts of urban life and population growth—in this situation, trash buildup—were pushed to the farthest, most desolate area of New York City. Once this area became more populated and had more sway in politics, the long established landfill was repeatedly challenged and eventually closed. Now, the area is, in a sense, being compensated for its service as a trash receptacle with a beautiful, new park; at the same time, however, New York City's trash is once again being pushed further away from it. This ongoing chronicle of pushing trash farther from its source is a dangerous proposition, as it causes residents to become disassociated from their negative impact on the environment and only makes way for more mismanagement.

Fresh Kills Landfill represents an attempt to better an environment we've somehow deemed important at the expense of an environment that we've somehow deemed unimportant. In establishing a massive, pleasing park we are bettering more populated areas at the expense of rural ones. In an interview, Corner noted that "you could... argue that the Fresh Kills landfill is the best thing that has happened to Staten Island. What you have here is four square miles of land preservation" (Rogers). Corner's notion that the land is being beautified and will be much better for immediate residents is, of course, accurate. However, what it fails to address is that—in preserving this land that New York City has deemed significant because it may one day encourage tourism and profit—other land, unimportant to New York City on a financial basis but important on a trash basis, will be abused. This self-given power to determine what is important and what is unimportant in nature is highly indicative of our one-sided, controlling relationship with nature. This anthropocentric focus, which in this instance involves creating a park perfectly suited to our desires, continues to detract from the realities associated with growth and development and instead paints an overwhelmingly positive view of our association with nature.

Peeling back the layers of Fresh Kills Landfill and now the future Freshkills Park reveals a much starker, scarier reality than what the utopian illustrations of the landscape attempt to indicate, and, in a sense, hide. On a purely surface level, the park is a dramatic improvement for residents—the landfill most likely negatively impacted their health and damaged the reputation of the borough. Since its inception, Freshkills has represented extreme human manipulation of nature; however, in contrast to the initial decimation involved in filling the land, we are now, in a sense, filling the land again, except with fields, playgrounds, and restaurants. Underneath this immediate benefit, however, lies a much more widespread and evasive issue—our poor relationship with nature. Involved in this change is a great deal of irony, as below a perfectly constructed park will lie a once neglected, abused wasteland. However, even more pressing is the metaphorical symbolism that this morphing represents. In building something beautiful on top of something that was once so tarnished, humans are declaring a superiority over nature, one which may extend to other cases. This conception is an overtly negative one, as it sponsors the belief that human destruction of nature is acceptable, so long as we can swiftly patch this devastation with something we find appealing.

The Fresh Kills Landfill's transformation to Freshkills Park is quite a notable one in regard to a meeting between nature and culture. Many have attempted to paint the transition as an entirely positive one, in that it represents the notion that hope persists, even when the situation may seem dire. This overestimation of our capabilities in the face of nature is quite damaging and will only make way for more mismanagement. Instead of representing reclamation and hope, Freshkills Park is a strange symbol of our competing interests: our desire to expand culturally at the expense of nature and our desire to maintain a connection to nature. As the four mounds continue to lose height, with the usage of the methane gas present in them as an energy source, and signs that indicate the regrettable history of the land fade, the former interest will be buried deep beneath the latter interest. This will serve to perpetuate the false conviction that our impact on the environment is unimportant, that anything we do can be covered with a constructed nature of our own design. Continuing on this dangerous path, the consequences of human action will continue to be pushed further away from civilization, providing for more misuse and more disconnection from nature.

REFERENCES

Jacobs, Karrie. "How the World's Largest Landfill Became New York's Biggest New Park." *Curbed*, 13 Sep. 2016, <https://ny.curbed.com/2016/9/13/12891320/freshkills-park-nyc-staten-island-engineering-design>.

Jacobs's account is a fairly even one that is part of a five-part series which discusses landscapes that are both manmade and natural. She explores the history of the region with an appropriate amount of detail and then provides some well-constructed arguments regarding what our current and past practices reveal about human heedlessness regarding garbage production and dumping. In this way, the article explores a vast set of points and despite asserting an opinion, the opinion is well backed-up. This source assisted me in making some greater statements about the trends I located.

Levison, Andy. "The Fresh Kills Story: From World's Largest Garbage Dump to a World-Class Park." *YubTube*, 20 Sept 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hMhWOaX_0o.

Produced by the Staten Island Borough President's Office, this documentary is primarily centered around Staten Island residents' reactions to the Fresh Kills Landfill and how it impacted their lives and the overall conception of Staten Island. The video also documents how politicians collaborated in order to close the Fresh Kills Landfill. The majority of the residents spoke about how they felt having the city's garbage near them. The documentary itself does appear to champion the efforts of the politicians and is therefore very Staten Island-centric.

Lippard, L. R. "New York Comes Clean: The Controversial Story of the Freshkills Dumpsite." *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/oct/28/new-york-comes-clean-fresh-kills-staten-island-notorious-dumpsite>.

Lippard writes a much more casual article regarding the history of the region as well as future speculation about the fate of the park. It served as an impetus for the establishment of some of my key points, as she offered some interesting questions regarding who benefits from the establishment of the park. Additionally, she questions New York City's issues with waste management. It is definitively characterized by a more negative point of view of the park, but there is solid evidence to support her claims and concerns.

Melosi, Martin V. "Fresh Kills: The Making and Unmaking of a Wastescape." *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, no. 1, 2016, pp. 59-65. Web, http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2016_1_melosi.pdf.

Melosi explores the natural history of the area before, during, and after the Fresh Kills Landfill. It is a relatively valid account, in that it doesn't feature any radical points that aren't substantially explored. Melosi offers an interesting question as to the fate of the park near the end of this article, in that whether it should be addressed as a human or natural artifact, which I aimed to explore in writing this paper.

NYC Parks. "It's My Park: Freshkills – Staten Island." *YouTube*, 17 Mar 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X8ySoz_KIY.

This is a short video produced in conjunction with the Freshkills Park Alliance, offering quick interviews with many different types of Staten Island residents, including park tour guides, architects, and teachers. Naturally, as this is a video meant to make people excited about the future of Freshkills Park, it is reminiscent of propaganda and is inherently one-sided. However, it does offer some points of one side of the argument that I used to refute.

Rogers, E. B. "Green Garbage: Freshkills Park." *Green Metropolis: The Extraordinary Landscapes of New York City as Nature, History, and Design*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2016. *Google Books*. Web, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=bLg_CgAAQBAJ.

Rogers's book discusses different circumstances pertaining to landscape in New York City, but one chapter in particular focuses on Fresh Kills Landfill and plans for a park. Rogers doesn't really offer much analysis of the topic, opting for more of a report-style account. However, there is an element of bias, as a key component of the chapter is an interview with the park's designer, James Corner, which obviously offers a positive conception of the park, as he is the designer and would hope to excite people.

"Site History." *Freshkills Park*, The Freshkills Park Alliance, <http://freshkillspark.org/the-park/site-history>.

This webpage offers a very condensed version of the history of the Fresh Kills Landfill and the future of Fresh Kills Park, beginning prior to the establishment of the landfill. As this is one of the official webpages for the project, it offers a very positive outlook on the construction of the park, attempting to demonstrate the park plans as being somewhat of a reclamation. Therefore, it isn't the most reliable of sources, but it does offer one purposely positive view of the park and provides specific details relating to the plan.

Steinberg, Ted. "The Massifs of Fresh Kills." *Gotham Unbound: The Ecological History of Greater New York*. Simon and Schuster, 2014. Web, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=vlRXAgAAQBAJ>

Ted Steinberg's book features a chapter that explores the history surrounding the creation of Fresh Kills Landfill. He offers a particularly in-depth look into the geography of the region prior to the landfill operation and a discussion of the politics surrounding the decision. Primarily, however, the emphasis was on how the landfill decimated the environment of the area, which signals a negative point of view surrounding the establishment of the landfill. He did not make much mention of the plans for a park on the land and focused on the landfill's beginnings.