

A Field Guide to Artificial Nature(s); Or, the Evolving Literary Ecology of the Temporary Autonomous Zone

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Abstract

'The Literary Field Guide' analyzes any .txt file and provides a breakdown of the text's weather, climate, geographic features, flora, and fauna, in the style of a U.S. National Park Service brochure. As a teaching tool, the Guide creates a site and sense of engagement between the viewer and a complex literary ecology. As a provocation, it creates data visualizations of literary landscapes in hopes of calling attention to the artificial and constructed natures of all such visualizations.

Keywords: Digital humanities, ecology, landscape, literature, nature

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In 1991 the counter-cultural critic Hakim Bey published a slim volume of writing entitled T.A.Z.: the Temporary Autonomous Zone.¹ The form of this book was as experimental as it was provocative, comprised of poetic meditations, lyric rants, and forays into critical theory that were at once brilliantly suggestive and maddeningly imprecise. Yet with this playful and kaleidoscopic screed, Bey gave name to an alternative and subversive information economy, a site of resistance that was both spatially and temporally bound: "All my research and speculation has crystallized around the concept of the TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE (hereafter abbreviated T.A.Z.)" (68, caps in original). While Bey's work is often celebrated (or excoriated) for the way it foregrounds the disruptive potential of digital technology, equally present in this writing is a concern with ecology, geography, and environment. With 'A Field Guide to Artificial Nature' (<http://literaryfieldguide.com/>), a web-based application that provides an ecological summary of literary spaces, I attempt to honor this aspect of the

T.A.Z. within the context of both the Digital and Environmental Humanities.

My research focuses on the importance of digital aesthetics in re-framing environmental discourse, in highlighting the agency of natural spaces, in translating natural patterns of action into human readable terms, and in making visible the environmental forces that shape our lives. 'A Field Guide to Artificial Nature' emerges from these broad preoccupations and takes specific inspiration from recent works of electronic literature and digital art that engage with the power of natural forces, such as Jan Baeke and Alfred Marseille's 'Channel of the North', a poem whose shape and size fluctuates "as a function of the tide in the Westerschelde river on the Dutch/Belgian border";² "Station 51000,"³ a twitter bot created by Mark Sample that *speaks* from the perspective of a National Oceanic and Atmospheric

¹ Hakim Bey, T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Seattle 2011.

² Jan Baeke, Jan and Alfred Marseille, "Channel of the North", Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3, 2012. Retrieved from <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/work.html?work=channel-of-the-north>.

³ Mark Sample, "Station 51000", Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3, 2014. Retrieved from <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/work.htmlwork=station-51000>.

Administration’s data buoy, “now lost at sea but still generating data”.⁴ Such works are excellent examples of digital art’s capacity to translate the power and patterns of the natural world into human readable signs, and this project is committed to such translative acts.

But I am equally motivated by Betty Beaumont’s Concealment Sites,⁵ which documents instances of cell phone towers disguised as natural flora and fauna, and Trevor Paglen’s The Other Night Sky,⁶ a “project to track and photograph classified American satellites, space debris, and other obscure objects in Earth orbit”. Such work document relations between natural and *artificial* ecologies to show how it is that digital infrastructure surrounds us, blends into the natural environment, and participates in systems of power and surveillance. Yet infrastructure is not a stable category, and discussions of its purported *invisibility* come at the expense of its more urgent features. As Tung Hui-Hu asserts in a provocative essay for Environmental Humanities,⁷ “scholarship is too often founded on a pervasive assumption about infrastructure – namely, that it is an “invisible” or cryptic medium to be revealed or decoded. It bears repeating that to have working infrastructure to be invisible or tucked away in the background is often a privilege of those living in developed countries” (81). Infrastructure’s more salient feature, according to Hu, is that it is “first and foremost a speculative medium” (82). It is, in other words, a form of architectural forecast that attempts to anticipate the needs of the future.

‘A Field Guide to Artificial Nature(s)’ is interested in highlighting or making visible the interlocking infrastructures of built, expressive, and natural environments. Attentive to Hu’s claims, however, it is also interested a kind of speculation, or forecast, about how literary texts operate – how the landscapes and ecologies within them tend to function as

infrastructure. Its focus, however, is not real-world spaces but on literary ecologies, i.e., the expression of natural environments within literary texts, which are of course always already remediations of real-world ecologies.

Coded in Python within the Flask micro web framework, the ‘Field Guide’ analyzes any .txt file and provides a breakdown of the text’s weather, climate, geographic features, flora, and fauna, in essence bringing relationships between land, text, and environment into relief. For example – and in honor of its bicentennial – if we upload Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein to the ‘Field Guide’, we receive a visualization of the text’s literary ecology, designed to look like a brochure from the National Park Service:

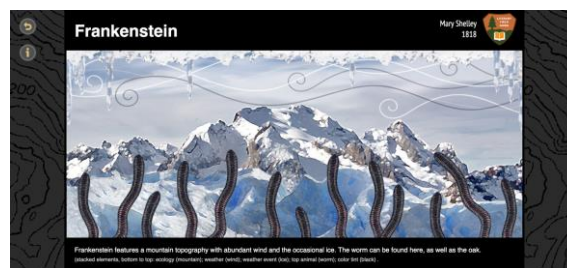


Figure 1. A Field Guide to Frankenstein

Scrolling down, we see a detailed summary of the text’s plant life, animal life, geography, weather, weather events, and climate (figure 2):

Fauna		Flora		Geography	
All Animals	Mammals	All Flora	Flowers	Landscape	Colors
worm 5	deer 2	pine 3		mountain 46	black 12
deer 2	elephant 2	oak 3		lake 31	blue 9
horse 2	horse 2	willow 1		shore 15	white 9
elephant 2	bat 1	apple 1		river 13	yellow 6
turkey 2	mole 1			desert 12	green 5
frog 1	lion 1			hill 10	silver 3
eagle 1	whale 1			ocean 10	gold 1
tortoise 1	hare 1			precipice 9	red 1
vulture 1	beaver 1			island 8	
albatross 1				glacier 7	
Invertebrates	Amphibians	Trees	Herbs	Weather	Weather Events
worm 5	frog 1	pine 3		wind 31	ice 31
		oak 3		cold 28	lightning 3
		willow 1		snow 15	fog 1
		apple 1		rain 13	hurricane 1
				thunder 9	

Figure 2. Field Guide to Frankenstein’s Flora, Fauna, and Geographical features

⁴ Finn Arne Jørgensen, “Where Are All the Nature Bots?” Ant, Spider, Bee, April 14, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.antspiderbee.net/2015/04/14/where-are-all-the-nature-bots/>.

⁵ Betty Beaumont, Concealment Sites, 2014. Retrieved from <https://weadartists.org/betty-beaumonts-concealed-sites>.

⁶ Trevor Paglen, 2007-2011. The Other Night Sky. Retrieved from <http://www.paglen.com/?l=work&s=othernightsky&i=1>.

⁷ Tung-Hui Hu, “Black Boxes and Green Lights: Media, Infrastructure, and the Future at Any Cost.”, in: Environmental Humanities 55. 2016, 81-88.



The 'Field Guide to Artificial Nature(s)' debuted at the Ideal Spaces' Work Group Symposium in Venice, as a part of the 2018 Architecture Biennale. An early version of the 'Field Guide' is the 'Literary Forecaster', which focuses on a text's weather; this is also publicly available online (www.literaryforecast.net).

As a teaching tool, the 'Field Guide' attempts to create a site and sense of engagement between the viewer and a complex literary ecology. As a provocation, the 'Field Guide' creates data visualization of literary landscapes in hopes of calling attention to the artificial and constructed natures of all such visualizations. Indeed, compared to other data visualizations that attempt to show complex weather systems as if they were accurate and objective representations of natural forces, such as Fernanda Viégas and Martin Wattenberg's *Wind*, the 'Field Guide' acknowledges its role as an imperfect mediator of artificial ecologies from the get-go.

There are, of course, several differences between Hakim Bey's polemic and the 'Field Guide'. Bey attempted with his Temporary Autonomous Zone to identify spaces, practices, and tactics for resisting and subverting the emerging global economy in the 1990s. This project is to a smaller scale, but it shares a similar objective to resist and subvert – not globalism, per se, but the broader epistemology that makes globalism seem *natural*, that turns natural spaces into *resources*, that renders wilderness the raw material for *capital*. In sum, the 'Field Guide' attempts to visualize artificial nature in order to call attention to the way our constructions of nature are always in some ways contrived, artificial, and culturally (and politically) mediated. As with Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone, the virtue and risk of this approach is its performative nature, its playfulness. Yet the objective of play in this context – to put natural spaces in focus and to demonstrate our imperfect methods of representing natural forces, in order to confound simplistic thinking about them – could not be more urgent in an age of increasing ecological fragility. Such an approach has a role to play in challenging dominant narratives about nature and its artifices, mediated, re-mediated, or otherwise.

