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The almanac projects: seasons experienced through the material world

By Jo Law



”Minor Heat: Hawk Studies and Learns”, *The Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond*
almanac.photonicsmedia.net/summer/hawk-studies-and

At the Australian Bureau of Meteorology weather statistics “are only calculated where it makes sense to do so” (BOM). This “sense” is directly related to human affairs and activities such as agriculture, fishery and recreation. This paper asks: are there other elements we can incorporate into the ways we think about weather, climates and seasons? What other possibilities exist if we consider weather and seasons that include non-human perspectives? What are the implications of these ways of thinking? In what follows, I draw upon Jane Bennett’s “vital materialism” to consider weather, climates and seasons as human and non-human assemblages of activity (Bennett). From this basis I put forward the notion that almanacs provide a medium for such practices to be realised.

By considering seasons from a vital materialist viewpoint, we are better able to incorporate the complex, entangled agencies that participate in our perceptual models of seasons. In order to apply Bennett’s vital materialism (and its adjacent philosophical methodologies) this paper first outlines the central components of Bennett’s ontology and how they might

present ways of thinking about our experience of the seasons. Next, I present my own almanac projects beginning in 2008 with *The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo* (東京の秋の生活暦)[1] as an active and creative engagement with the living and non-living worlds participating in seasonal changes. The paper argues that the almanac as a medium has the potential to make perceptible an inclusive and encompassing ecology that constitutes our multifaceted experience of the seasons.

2



“Shousetsu: Heaven’s essence rises, earth’s essence sinks/ North wind, freezing rain (3 of 5)”, *The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo*, <www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/613>

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett advocates for a “vital materialism” that questions the divide between non-living and living ‘things’ (Bennett). This questioning enables an ecological thinking, which argues that matter is not dead, inert, or passive but, in fact, is actively participating in shaping the world around us. In other words, Bennett argues, we ought to re-think matter in terms of the agency we often afford to living beings. Drawing from diverse sources in philosophy, critical theory, science and literature, Bennett’s project constructs a way of thinking that accounts for the capacities of non-human entities to affect and to be affected. She prefaces her argument by outlining her reasons and motivations:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness. . . . The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption. (ix)

By aligning with the philosophy of Spinoza, Diderot, and Deleuze (amongst others),

Bennett reinvigorates the potential of a novel approach to materialist thinking. For Bennett, vibrant materialism, contrary to the critical vitalisms of Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch (who posit an *élan vital* or entelechy in their concepts of materiality), rejects the assertion of vitality being something that is *external* to matter itself. In other words, Bennett's vital materialism differs from traditional forms of vitalism in that Bennett sees matter's own self-organising capacity as a kind of agency; an active force situated within all material forms, living or non-living. By re-figuring the ontological imaginary by which we understand matter, Bennett hopes to initiate a more ecologically sound relationship between humans and the rest of the material world.

Indeed, philosopher Levi Bryant suggests that Bennett's vitality need not invoke something other than matter itself ("More on Vitalism"). The qualities of aliveness, or affect – often associated only with living things – are immanent to matter rather than qualities added to matter. Bennett's vital materiality awakens the magical sense of things that children often hold when regarding the world around them, without invoking the extra substances or supernatural causes historically associated with vitalist traditions. She describes this as '*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett 6). Her philosophical-political project thus helps construct a perceptual model of seasons that incorporates the enmeshed networks of things.

But just how does Bennett propose we conceptualise the assemblages that compose her vital materialism? Central to Bennett's methodology is her use of Bruno Latour's concept of actant. She explains, "[a]ctant . . . is Bruno Latour's term for a source of action; an actant can be human or not, or mostly likely, a combination of both"; it is equivalent to Deleuze's "quasi-operator" which "by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the differences, makes things happen" (Bennett 9). Actants do not require that all things are capable of intentional acts, but rather posit "a power that is less masterful than agency but more active than recalcitrance", and which is a constitutive feature of all material bodies (9). She extends Spinoza's conative bodies to capture the efficacy of actants at work "across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body" (23). She chooses Deleuze and Guattari's *assemblage* to denote this ontological field that is inclusive of all things, living and non-living. She writes, "Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (24). Actants and assemblages thus form the units and networks by which Bennett enacts her vital materialist framework. She asks: what actants are at work in an assemblage? What are the relationships between these actants and how do they interact with each other? What are the actual influence or affect these actants may have when brought together as an assemblage?

The almanac projects offer answers to these questions by generating a structure that interprets the emergence of seasons as assemblages of living and non-living things and their interactions. Rather than an artwork illustrating a theoretic concept, the almanac projects make apparent vital materialist concepts by meditating on the materiality of our experience of the world, by paying close attention to details of everyday life. As Bryant argues, "[t]he

work of art allows us to encounter even the familiar things of our everyday life in their independent thingliness, seeing them, perhaps for the very first time” (“Wilderness Ontology” 26). The creation of a disjunction between objects and experiences through art is central to seeing them anew. Bryant writes,

[A]rt seems to carry the capacity to break with meaning, to bring the alterity and thingliness of things to the fore, to allow us to see them both from their point of view and independent of our own meanings and intentions. (“Wilderness Ontology” 24-25)

Unlike weather data-driven artworks, such as Tim Knowles’ *Windwalk* (2008) and Cam and Yvette Merton’s *The Little Optimum* (2003), the almanac projects were not derived from a direct relationship with weather. Rather, they make manifest aesthetic experience as an inherently non-passive interactive act of perception, fundamental to exploring and understanding with the world of the living and non-living.

3



“Kanro: Sparrows enter the water and turn into clams/ Chrysanthemums bloom (2 of 5)”,
The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo, <www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/216>

The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo was conceived as a durational project and created during my Australia Council Tokyo studio residency in 2008. The project took place between 5th September and 4th December, framing it within autumn. Inspired by Liza Dalby’s *East Wind Melts the Ice*, the project adopts the Chinese solar calendar as a structuring device to affiliate the ninety days of the residency with reference to seasonal occurrences (Dalby). This project was followed by *The Seasonal Almanac of Austinmer* in 2009 and the current *Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond* (2011–2012). [2]

Almanac is an ancient tool used to organise humans’ experience of the environment into familiar and predictable patterns. [3] It is an effective medium to understand the world through its material constituents. Still in use today, the Chinese Almanac is based on a

lunisolar calendar, also known as the agricultural calendar (農曆). The year is divided into twelve months (月 or moon), as well as twenty four solar terms (節氣) as determined by the position of the sun on the ecliptic. Each solar term lasts fifteen days and marks a significant point in the season, such as, “start of spring,” “summer solstice,” and “autumnal equinox.” Other solar terms are named using descriptions with reference to weather events or agricultural activities as observed in ancient China, for instance, “Grain Rain” 穀雨 in spring. Each solar term is further divided into three pentads (候 or five day periods). Their names are derived from general observations of ecological, climatic, agricultural and animal activities. The seventy two pentads bear names such as “thunder sings” in mid-spring, “worms come forth” at the start of summer, “cool winds arrive” at the start of autumn, “elks break antlers” in mid-winter. The calendar was adopted in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, where the solar terms remain unchanged but the pentads were modified in accordance with local observations. This ancient almanac acts as an archaic map that not only guided farmers in their agricultural activities, but more importantly, as Dalby notes, provided a divination reference for the emperor – “the son of heaven” (天子) (Dalby xxiii). In the context of this ancient world, it was important to pay attention to *all things* between heaven and earth.

The Autumn Almanac consists of ninety daily multimedia online post-cards, each post-card composed of materials gathered on the day: photographs, ephemerals, audio recordings, video footage, information tidbits, questions and thoughts. The expositions drew upon things, objects, characters, and experiences encountered on the day bringing together ecological and anthropogenic events, framed within the corresponding pentads and solar terms. The project has a strong basis in the diaristic form realised by Sei Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book* and Lady Murasaki Shikibu’s diary (Sei; Muraskai). Specifically, it takes cues from the aesthetics of interacting with the seasons and the surrounds: time, place, and changes through observations. Dalby’s use of the Chinese solar calendar in her memoir creates a deliberate layering of the ancient almanac, the two Japanese versions of this calendar and her own experience of the seasons in Berkeley on the Sonoma coast of California. In doing so, she does not only allow different geographies to overlap but also different timelines to intersect within each pentad. *The Autumn Almanac* similarly made use of layering: contrasting the generalised perception of seasons with their materialistic experiences, in order to make sense of the encounter with Tokyo. Using the modern Japanese almanac, the project extends the ancient categories of things to include pampas grass, daikon, freezing rain, and typhoons as well as *kotatsu* (a type of heater) and water pipes. These things situate the experience of contemporary Tokyo firmly in relation to the tangible materials of everyday life.

The creation of an almanac necessitates a direct and active interaction with the material world. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold provides readers with intimate accounts of activities observed in the plant and animal worlds and responses to the changing seasons in Wisconsin (Leopold). In Leopold’s almanac, humans are a bit player in this broader world of wilderness. They live alongside the other inhabitants of the world. In developing his theory of wilderness conservation, Leopold puts forward the concept of land ethics, he writes: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land . . . In short, a land ethic changes the role of

Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member or citizen of it” (Leopold 239-240).

Levi Bryant further extends the concept of wilderness ontologically to “rescue this kernel from the domain of anthropocentric experience and transform it [;] wilderness would signify being as *a plurality* of agencies, without ontological hierarchy – one that might refuse any bifurcation of being into nature and culture” (“Wilderness Ontology” 21). Bryant’s aim echoes that of Bennett and Leopold, when he writes,

[W]e need to cultivate modes of thinking that help us to become attentive to the alterity of things, the thingliness of things, and the differences that things themselves contribute independent of social construction, human intention, and human meanings. (“Wilderness Ontology” 23)

The Autumn Almanac draws attention to the material details of each encounter. An entry during the solar term, *Kanro* (寒露 or Cold dew), the pentad 'Chrysanthemums tinge yellow/ ducks migrate' on October 20th, illustrates such an engagement with the urban environment of Shinjuku and the river Kandagawa [4]:



“Kanro: Chrysanthemums tinge yellow/ ducks migrate, 1 of 5”, *The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo*, <www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/240>

The intersection between Otakibashi (bridge) and Waseda Dori (avenue) separates Takadanobaba from Kita-Shinjuku (North Shinjuku). The Kandagawa also separates Shinkjuku-ku (ward) to the East from Nakano-ku (ward) to the West.

Between Otakibashi and Kireibashi at the top-end of Kita-Shinjuku, the “riverwalk” is designed for the pleasure of pedestrians (it is closed to traffic – even to cyclists). Here, people walk their dogs, jog, exercise, meander, and enjoy the greenery, the artificial stream, and abundant public seating. We saw two old ladies discussing how their plants are doing in their gardens. A young schoolgirl

stopped and said “hello” to them before going next door to visit her grandmother.

Near Kashiwabashi, I spotted an early reddish maple and opposite was a grumpy-looking mermaid statue outside a small villa.

Just beyond Daidobashi, around eight very old ladies were sitting in a close row in the sun, tended by their carers. They were chatting and watching the birds. They said “hello” as we walked by.

We crossed Ome Kaido (road) and Yodobashi, which separate Kita-Shinjuku from Shinjuku. The vista had now completely changed to an urban one. The river continues to divide Nakano-ku from Shinjuku-ku. We saw some ducks on the river. A man was strolling along the river with his wife. He stopped next to me and said something about “Kamo”(duck). Then he asked in English, “You call them ‘ducks’ in English?” We said “yes.” “There are many kinds, you know.” I asked him what kinds those were. He said that they were from Russia. “They migrate,” I said, then asked, “in autumn?” He checked with his wife then answered, “About two months ago.” I asked him whether he studied birds. He chuckled a little and said, “No, I study human beings.” Then he and his wife said good-bye and left us.

Just about 50 metres beyond, a group of street cats were waiting to be fed.

We turned left at Aiwaibashi into Shinjuku.

This post renders the encounter with seasonality by drawing attention to the enmeshed networks of things that constitute that experience: the maple tree whose leaves were beginning to turn red, the sun in which the eight old ladies were basking in, the Russian ducks that recently migrated to Japan. Together with a number of other entries, it forms an emerging thread from *The Autumn Almanac* that can be loosely grouped under the title of “riverwalks.” Instead of being guided by maps or destinations, these walks were simply led by the river courses with no particular aim or purpose. Over a number of iterations, the descriptions of each riverwalk drew out active members of a community (Leopold) or actants in an assemblage (Bennett). The entry on September 18th during *Hakuro* (白露 or White Dew) and “Swallows leave/ lycoris bloom,” records an earlier encounter with the Tokyo river system:

Walking along the *Tamagawa Josui* (Tamagawa channel) in Mitaka . . . I came across stands of the *Lycoris radiata* cited by the modern almanac. They are indeed in bloom. The blooming *Higanbana* . . . signals the presence of autumn.

Along the Tamagawa towards Musashi-Sakai, we also came across what seemed to be a market garden. The main crop in season is winter melon. The vine has already started to die back and the ripe melons were perfectly formed waiting patiently to be harvested. An unattended counter outside the garden listed the

vegetables for sale.

The *Tamagawa* is a natural river that was once a source of fresh water for Edo/Tokyo. In the 17th. century major work was undertaken to create artificial canals to feed water from the river to the wells in Edo. It is not surprising to learn that the needs of the growing population of Edo and later Tokyo had impacted both the natural river systems and artificial canals. Apparently, in 1984 the Bureau of Waterworks Tokyo introduced recycled water into the dried up system. More recently we can see works have been done to try to rehabilitate the water channels and associated ecosystem.

A number of participating actants in this assemblage are brought to the fore: the river *Tamagawa*, the suburb of Mitaka, the flower *Lycoris radiata*, the season of autumn, a market garden, a harvest of winter melons, an unattended counter, the 17th century Japanese capital of Edo, the Bureau of Waterworks Tokyo, and so on. These objects move fluidly between the nested and overlapping frameworks of meteorology, urban development, horticulture, and history.

The *Lycoris radiata* stands on the banks of the Tamagawa, signalling the arrival of autumn. The river itself is an artificial water channel made in the 17th century to bring water to a growing city. The urban land along the river is used to grow food. The biology of this modified river system has long been in need of rehabilitation and care. This list of things is not unlike Bennett's "theory of distributive agency" that "does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits" (Bennett 31-32). As readers follow the descriptions, they examine the different types of interactions on different scales ("zooming" in and out) "without ontological hierarchy" (Bryant, "Wilderness Ontology"). A flat ontology grants the material world an autonomy and independence from human minds. This structure brings into focus the relationships between parts and wholes within a system with each part enjoying the same ontological status as the whole; allowing us to perceive how we affect the world and how the world affects us (De Landa).



“Shuubun: Beetles wall up their burrows/ azuki beans ripen 2 of 5”, *The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo* <www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/180>

An entry on October 1st, during *Shuubun* (秋分 or Autumnal Equinox) “Beetles wall up their burrows/ azuki beans ripen,” continues this exploration brought together by the river, *Kandagawa*:

The precipitation probability has again dropped back down to the 10% mark with tropical cyclones 0815 slowly dissipating and 0817 steering towards Southern China.

Whenever it rains, the *Kandagawa* (Kanda River) around Takadanobaba really gushes. The rainwater of the local areas drains into the channel and water flows quite fiercely after heavy rainfall. The Kandagawa acts as a natural dividing line between Takadanobaba and the neighbouring Shima-Ochiai in some parts. We took a walk along the river at night and crossed over to Shima-Ochiai where at first I thought I saw a brave large street cat crossing a busy road. At closer inspection as the creature dashed for the bush along the railway – we realised it was a *tanuki*, a raccoon dog.

The rain, the cyclones 0815 and 0817, neighbouring China, the *Kandagawa*, the neighbourhoods of Takadanobaba and Shima-Ochiai, rainfall, rainwater, drains and channels, the street cat, a busy road, the railway, road-side bushes, and the raccoon are all actants in this assemblage. The train line is separated from the pavement and the busy road by a fence and planted bushes. The *tanuki* finds shelter in these bushes as its habitats are increasingly encroached by the urban development in Takadanobaba and Shima-Ochiai. The densely built suburbs must have carefully planned drainage to channel away rainwater quickly and to deal effectively with medium and heavy falls especially during typhoon season. The Kandagawa provides the main waterway to take the rainwater out to Tokyo Bay. In this way, each actant is connected to each other in the enmeshed networks, tugging each other, influencing the overall shape of the system. Some are considered alive, some are not, and

some are in-between. Like the storm drain Bennett witnessed in Baltimore one summer morning, each of these assemblages revealed themselves in a new light where, “*objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (Bennett 5).

The almanac projects engage directly with the materiality of the seasons. Gardening and agricultural activities provide an avenue to interact physically with the materials of soil, compost, topographies, daylight hours, weather conditions, insect reproduction cycles, migratory bird patterns, tools, and so on. Three entries in *The Seasonal Almanac* that note the life and death of a *hakea* tree illustrate this direct confrontation with matter. In reverse order with the later posts linking back to earlier ones, they read:



“Limit of Heat: Rice ripens (2 of 5)”, *The Seasonal Almanac of Austinmer*
 <www.photonicsmedia.net/seasonal/804>

April 20th, 2009

A couple of weeks ago, we noticed that the [hakea at the front was unwell](#). We took action to clear plants from its base to allow air to circulate, hoping to stop the spread of any fungal diseases. . . . Perhaps we noticed it too late, or it just had been too wet, or the root rot was too advanced, the tree didn’t make it. We came back and saw that the whole tree had turned a deadly brown.

March 28th, 2009

We look out the kitchen window and notice that the [hakea](#) in the front yard has stopped flowering abruptly. A few branches are turning yellow and dying. The diagnosis is some form of fungal infection possibly caused by the overcrowding ferns at its base. The prognosis requires some immediate and drastic action.

March 3rd, 2009

It's soon coming up to a year since we moved. . . . I remember [the tree at the very front facing the road] was flowering about the time we moved in. As I was leaving for work today, I noticed that it was flowering again.

. . .

When identifying the plant, I realised that this species is cauliflory (that is it flowers on the trunk rather than with the leaves). This characteristic put me on the path of the *Hakea* genus. . . . It is *Hakea bakeriana*, a hakea that is native to forests and open heath of New South Wales central coast.

The hakea's flowering gives clues to time's passage and hints at the returning seasons. Its material form (cauliflory) also enabled its successful identification. This, in turn, provided access to information, such as its preferred environment. The hakea's rapid decline points to the possible unfavourable soil conditions, high rainfall and accompanying humidity that might have led to its subsequent death. This direct interaction with materials is a powerful tool and has the potential in developing our perceptual models of the seasons and the climate.

4



“The Start of Autumn: Cold cicada chirps (1 of 5)”, *The Seasonal Almanac of Austinmer*
 <www.photonicsmedia.net/seasonal/720>

By overlaying this archaic architecture over the Almanac projects, my intention is to contrast the perceptions of seasons with their material enactment. Far from imposing a fixed structure over experiences, the ancient almanac gives form to our interaction with the dynamical systems or assemblages that are alive and creative. It does so by recognising the enmeshed networks of each event or encounter, naming the different actants that are

shaping specific assemblages at a point in time, and thereby encouraging the identifications of other actants that may also be at work. Each almanac presents objects and things in a flat ontology: it “zooms out” to bring into view the nested and overlapping frameworks of the global weather system and the geographic coordinate system as large-scale assemblages; it “zooms in” focusing on the arrays of actants at play and the series of assemblages that may emerge over the seasons. They are enmeshed networks of interconnected things: living, non-living, and somewhere in between.

Without an active and creative engagement with the materials that constitute our experience of seasons, we cannot fully appreciate the significance of their occurrences. In the face of extreme weather events, natural disasters, and climate change, we are left with the first and only resort of emotive response. In order to act intelligently, we need different ways of thinking about weather, seasons and climate. In this paper, we have drawn from theoretical disciplines focusing on a vital materialist perspective to help us do so. As well, we have explored the form of an almanac as a medium to enact such a vital materialist practice. The almanac projects offer the possibility of providing an inclusive and encompassing way of thinking about the seasons that incorporate a non-human perspective.

Jo Law works with diverse art forms including experimental film and video, installation, multimedia and online, and critical writings. Her current project, *The Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond* interprets ecological and anthropogenic events over 1 calendar year using hybrid online/ print forms and can be found at: almanac.photonicsmedia.net. She teaches visual arts and media art at the University of Wollongong.

Endnotes

1. <www.photonicsmedia.net/projects/autumn>
2. <www.photonicsmedia.net/projects/seasonal>
<<http://almanac.photonicsmedia.net>>
3. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “almanac” as, “[a]n annual table, or book of tables, containing a calendar or months and days, with astronomical data and calculations, ecclesiastical and other anniversary.” See Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
4. *The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo* uses the Japanese translation of the Chinese solar terms.

The pentads in the title include both the Chinese and modern Japanese versions translated into English.

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