

Barnett, L.: *After the Flood: Imagining the Global Environment in Early Modern Europe*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. 264 p.

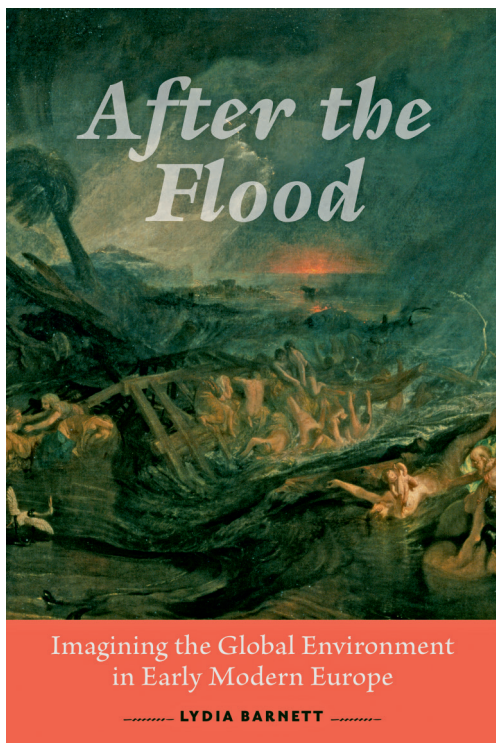
After the Flood represents an important contribution in dealing with the long history of human impact on the environment. As the subtitle suggests, the book investigates how the issue of global environment became a scientific and philosophic topic beginning in the European modern age. BARNETT moves from contemporary concerns about global warming and environmental degradation as also expressed by Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* in 2015 to bridge the present debate on the Anthropocene with the reflections regarding the human role in transforming the nature that emerged at the time of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation.

The analysis is based on extensive research among printed and archive sources collected in several archives and libraries, particularly in northern Italy. BARNETT's discourse focuses specifically on the intellectual discussion of Noah's biblical flood that flourished in the late sixteenth century, a debate that interpreted human sin as the cause of planetarian cataclysm and natural disasters. Her hypothesis is that, well before the large-scale transformations brought

about by industrial society, there existed an idea of humanity as a unified body that could act to transform the natural world on the global scale. As occurred in the biblical account, these transformations produced by human agency could be interpreted as a possible threat to the survival of humanity and the world itself. Noah's flood also came to be used as an archetype for explaining European political and religious divisions and conflicts at the time and for imagining the future, salvation, and human redemption from sins. The research focuses specifically on the intellectual contexts of Protestant Britain and Catholic Italy while also investigating the role Switzerland's religious and philosophical *milieu* played as a mediator between northern and southern Europe. BARNETT stresses the importance of actors and networks in developing and exchanging ideas about nature, religious disputes, and political claims in relation to the rise of colonial exploration and overseas dominions.

Studying the Universal Deluge was thus part of the effort to reunify Christian Europe by understanding the fragmentation and clashes caused by religious divisions across the continent and, at the same time, by bringing together religion and science as "a way of thinking about unity and division, place and globe, in a world that was both deeply divided and rapidly expanding" (p. 6). This intellectual development was also connected to the effort to spread European civilisation all over the world. Significantly, the introduction presents a very powerful image – drawn from Georg HORN's history of the Universal Deluge of 1666 – that represents the bridge between the post-flood restoration of the world enacted by Noah and the new European world order that was emerging at the beginning of the modern age.

The book begins with an extensive theoretical introduction in which BARNETT develops a long-term historical perspective about the awareness of the human impact on the environment, showing that it emerged well before the rise of modern, industrial society. Building on the growing body of literature in the history of science and environmental history and critiquing an environmental determinism perspective, she sustains that, from in the modern age onwards, European intellectuals grappled with the consequences of human agency in transforming the natural landscape: "Clearing forests, draining swamps and fens, and 'improving' arable land were all undertaken with the intention of hastening or forestalling climatic changes that they believed would either promote or interfere with their political, social, and economic goals" (p. 9). Specifically, the author moves beyond a traditional approach in which pre-modern society with its supposed perception of a



humanity dominated by God's will and the predominance of natural forces is treated as separate from modern secularised society with its recognition of human agency's role in shaping the world of nature.

Of course, BARNETT recognises the important differences between early modern perceptions of human/nature interactions and contemporary debates on climate change and environmental degradation connected with anthropic transformation. However, she argues that, beyond the global imaginary built through exploration and field trips, commercial routes, and colonial expansionism, a perception of global catastrophe was also fundamental for establishing a global consciousness in European thought. The Universal Deluge made it possible to think about different races spread across the earth's surface, to imagine a global climate giving rise to the various transformations in the natural landscape, and also to envision a post-diluvian world as "a depopulated wasteland waiting to be restored and reclaimed" (p. 12) that humanity needed to settle and populate through migration.

This debate made possible the circulation and mediation of ideas in a transnational perspective, reinforcing a significant trans-scalar way of thinking that brought different local knowledge into contact with one another and generated different spatial and temporal scales. Moreover, BARNETT identifies a connection between early modern concerns about catastrophic floods and global climate issues and present-day reflections on the Anthropocene and climate change: "premodern histories of the planet and people centred on the biblical story of Noah's Flood were premised on several ideas that fell out of fashion in the 19th century but have rightly returned to view in recent decades: the idea that human history must be written in reference to nature's history; that the earth's future should be of equal concern as its past; and that multidisciplinary collaboration is necessary in order to reconstruct the past, understand the present, and discern the future of the human species and the global environment" (p. 18). This premodern perspective also transcended the idea of humanity having a common destiny and uniform collective responsibility, a move paralleled by recent anti-speciesist accounts of the Anthropocene asserting that different global populations bear different degrees of responsibility for climate change. Different representations and re-interpretations of Noah's flood, she argues, can in some ways be considered the forerunners of the contemporary imaginary which "derives considerable force from its recollection and reactivation of deep cultural myths about the awesome power of floods to ruin the world as the unintended result of human behaviour – myths that are, it must be noted, not universally shared across the diverse human cultures on the planet and thus not equally compelling everywhere" (p. 19).

In the chapters that follow, BARNETT illustrates the complex debates and circulation of ideas that have shaped the modern understanding of the biblical account through time and space.

The first chapter is dedicated to the rise of studies about the Great Deluge in Renaissance northern Italy, starting from Camilla ERCULIANI's late sixteenth century work in the city of Padua. ERCULIANI, who was also one of the few female thinkers published at this time, explained the Flood as a consequence of overpopulation and began to interrogate natural-philosophical issues and the biblical account. BARNETT also analyses her work in relation to that of other European intellectuals. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the transatlantic networks that developed during the 17th–18th centuries between Spanish catholic colonies and protestant scholars to put the role of colonisation into relationship with studies on the Flood.

The next two chapters are dedicated to philosophical discussion on the Flood in dialogue between England and Switzerland that unfolded until the early eighteenth century. Specifically, Chapter 3 is dedicated to the figures of Thomas BURNET and John WOODWARD and their claim that humanity might find redemption following the Flood, while Chapter 4 analyses the correspondence between WOODWARD and the Swiss naturalist Jakob SCHEUCHZER. Chapter 5, finally, returns to Padua to engage with the figure of naturalist Antonio VALLISNERI and his discussion of the theories developed by English and Swiss protestants from a catholic perspective.

One of the book's strong points is its impressive reconstruction of the networks and circulation of ideas that sustained this debate across two centuries. BARNETT has also connected these reflections to the present debate on climate change and environmental issues, deconstructing certain preconceptions and shedding light on the history of science and environmental history by tying early modern theories to contemporary assumptions and moving beyond the nineteenth-century idea of a separation between nature and humanity.

Further research could potentially analyse in more depth the connection between the histories and imaginaries produced by these past religious-philosophical accounts and contemporary theoretical debates and methodologies investigating the Anthropocene.

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