*After the Flood: Lydia Barnett on Global Environment, Imagination, and Empire*

Introduction:

Hello and welcome to another interview with “In theory – the podcast of the JHI Blog.” I am **Luna Sarti**, a PhD Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, and today I have the pleasure of speaking with Dr. **Lydia Barnett**, associate professor of history at Northwestern University about her new book “After the Flood: Imagining the Global Environment in Early Modern Europe,” published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2019. The book has been honored with the Morris D. Forkosch Prize from the Journal of the History of Ideas for the best first book in intellectual history. The book discusses how the story of Noah’s flood has been understood, interpreted, and retold by different authors between the late 16th and early 18th century and illuminates the flood’s complicated legacy in the emergence of a global environmental consciousness. I started by asking about the origin of the project and how Professor Barnett came to focus on the story of Noah’s flood as a site for thinking about human agency, environmental disasters, and scale.

1:17

**LB**: I guess this book got started with a flood, really with Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans in 2005. I was just starting my second year of grad school. And in addition to following it in the news as everybody was, I was already interested in the history of earth science and the history of disasters, and kind of seeing the way that flooding was tied to environmental devastation. It was a man-made disaster, it was about racial disparity, and seeing all of that in real time made me reflect on my own emerging research agenda about floods and disasters more generally as sites of entanglement between science and politics and religion. There were evangelical Christian leaders at the time back in 2005 who interpreted Hurricane Katrina as God’s judgement on the people of New Orleans for their sins and I was like – wow - how early modern. It’s still around. So that honestly is the genesis of the project. It’s an actual flood that happened as I was getting started. The dissertation I ended up writing was kind of more generally about earth history and the early Enlightenment, about the Earth as an interdisciplinary object of inquiry. But then as I revised the dissertation to the book, I came back to the flood and that became front and center of the book again. I realized that accounts of Noah’s flood not just in the early Enlightenment but throughout the early modern period - the book is roughly from the late 16th to the early 18th centuries - really exemplified all the things that I wanted to say about why earth history was so interesting and important in early modern Europe. The flood really vividly demonstrated the interest of early modern Europeans in the intersection of human and natural history on a planetary scale. In the early modern period, the history of the earth was never just about nature’s history, it was always about people too and the way they impacted and were impacted by changes in the natural world. The flood really vividly showed the way that early modern Europeans began to think about the human species, to put it in modern terms, as capable of environmental destruction as agents of environmental change. This was another thing that was surprising to me that came out of my research - the way that I think the disaster literature didn’t really prepare for was the way that early modern Europeans didn’t blame God for the flood - they blamed themselves. They acknowledged that God had to physically move the waters, but the moral responsibility lied with the forefathers and their sinful behavior that provoked God to take this step. So, the flood was a way of thinking about humanities and environmental agency on a planetary scale which is also something that I really wanted to emphasize. There has been really great scholarship in the last ten years or so, showing how early modern Europeans saw themselves as agents of environmental improvement or destruction on local scales and I wanted to build on that literature and show that actually there was thinking about at least environmental destruction that humans had caused on a planetary scale as well which the kind of traditional narrative had said that was even thinkable until sometime in the 19th century.

4:39

**LS**: Yeah, I really found it striking how your analyses which stem from pre-modern texts and histories resonate with contemporary discussions and vocabularies. Would you be able to expand a little bit on this aspect and tell us more of the ways in which the book engages with the fact that some of the concepts and vocabularies of the Anthropocene circulated well before the term was invented as a word, particularly when it comes to view humans as agents of global change and perhaps considering the relationship between nature and humans in general?

5:13

**LB**: I really try to walk a fine line in the book between not being anachronistic in the way I describe early modern modes of environmental thought while also really wanting to push back against the notion that the idea of the Anthropocene, the idea of humans being able to instigate geological change on human time scales and on a planetary scale, is a new concept. It’s an old one and it’s not modern. It’s early modern or maybe even older. I hope that a medievalist - yourself or other people - do the work to also show the way this concept showed up in non-European cultures before the 1580s when my book pops up. I certainly don’t want to claim priority for my particular actors for Europeans in general. But just to say that I think it’s not about reassigning priority for the discovery for Anthropogenic climate change. That’s not what I’m trying to do. But I do think it’s important to really insist that the Anthropocene concept was at least a pre-modern and early modern concept. I think for a couple of reasons. I guess, and this has maybe changed in the last few years, but as I was writing the book just feeling like some of the Anthropocene discourse especially that was happening in the humanities kind of piggybacking off the natural sciences was a little bit maybe almost self-congratulatory. You know, like we’re doing this, and we now recognize that we’re doing this. It was almost like give yourself a pat on the back. And there was almost a weird element of self-congratulation for having effected those transformations in the non-human world and for having figured out that that was what we were doing by accident. I think I was really inspired to push back on that by [an article in *Critical Inquiry*](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664552) by Jean-Baptiste Fressoz and Fabien Locher in 2012 where they discuss how the recognition of anthropogenic environmental destruction was pretty widespread in 19th-century Europe, particularly in imperial contexts. But then they kind of did it anyway. So they were sort of pushing back on that kind of triumphant history of increasing scientific progress by saying – look, people have known about what they were doing to the environment for a really long time and they did it anyway, so we shouldn’t feel too proud of ourselves for having figured out what we’re doing to the planet right now. So that was part of it. And I also really wanted to insist on the premodernity of the Anthropocene concept in order to kind of highlight the role of religion, the importance of religion, to the history of climate science and to the history of the earth sciences more generally, where in the latter religion has traditionally been seen as a kind of stumbling block to the development of modern geology and religion barely surfaces at all in accounts of the history of climate science and climate theory. And so I really just wanted to highlight how religion has actually played a key role in both of those primarily through the way that the narrative of Noah’s flood has provided this kind of conceptual narrative structure in which humanity’s planetary agency, to put it in modern terms, could kind of be thought and elaborated.

8:41

**LS**: And I think -as you point out- that there is a lot to learn from analyses that consider the role of human agency and human responsibility in premodern conceptions of the environment. So, I have a question about the role of sin in ways of understanding flood. Sin has a big role in your discussion of Noah’s flood in relationship to human responsibility and -since you also mentioned religious approaches to contemporary floods,- I was wondering if you think sin might actually be used as a generative intellectual tool in contemporary discussions of the causes of the Anthropocene?

9:22

**LB**: Well I don’t know. Maybe? I mean, it’s a really good question whether sin could be a generative tool. I feel like my job as a historian in this book was to document the importance of religion to the history of environmental thought, climate science, or earth history but I see that centrality of religion in that story as having both positive and negative consequences both at the time and also in terms of its legacy in the modern era. On the one hand, I think it’s important for people, maybe even especially people of faith now, to know that belief in God and belief in climate change can absolutely go hand in hand, and they should. Especially for American Christians and Evangelicals. These two things are not mutually exclusive, and history shows that. So, I guess, I would say that’s both a matter of correcting the historical record as well as thinking about it in terms of climate action in the present and future. But at the same time there were also really problematic, serious political and intellectual issues with the particular mode of environmental imagining that I document in the book particularly tied to this question of sin that you raised. The notion that we collectively have sinned and we collectively will be punished for it which is kind of the moral logic around the flood - you know our ancestors sinned they brought on the flood they didn’t mean to but they definitely did and now we in the early-modern present are all suffering from the consequences and it’s not our fault but also it’s just the way we are also kind of justly suffering for the sins of our ancestors. I mean that kind of moral logic is still very much a part of at least certain strands of contemporary ways of thinking and talking about climate change and it’s wrong. It’s not a good account of the causes or consequences of anthropogenic global climate change now. We did not all do this and we are not all suffering together. The disparities and causes of climate change as well as the recursive suffering from it, there are massive disparities. So I guess I worry – I am not sure if this is your question so please jump in and redirect me or reframe it – I feel like there may be a kind of secularized legacy of this kind of collective sin/collective punishment from the early modern period that survives. And I kind of see it in invocations of the collective “we” that has messed up and is now being punished that I think is actually really toxic. And that scholars and experts particularly in recent years are starting to push back on and highlight instead those disparities in cause and effect. But maybe tell me more about what you were thinking about sin as way of pushing back against or sin as a generative concept.

12:22

**LS**: Well… what I found striking is that people in the Little Ice Age experienced instances of local flooding which activated the idea of sin via the story of Noah’s flood. So, within the Christian context, floods seemed to enable a certain reaction in people in terms of overstepped limits… somehow in this perception of flood as punishment of sinful behaviors I perceive not only the awareness that humans can cause problems because of their embodiment and their material existence, but also the perception of limits which should be respected. I was wondering if sin could also be seen in these terms as an intellectual tool that is supposed to articulate and shape human desires.

13:07

**LB**: That’s a great way of thinking about it that’s actually making me think about some of this material in kind of a new way or pushing my thinking forward. You could definitely be right that some of the discourse around sin and agency around environmental devastation is maybe a kind of early-modern version of a discourse about limits on natural resources. It’s making me think, yeah I mean a little bit both, thinking about Camilla Erculiani, the late 16th-century Italian apothecary who features in chapter one whose kind of account of sinfulness is kind of puzzlingly, vaguely but very interestingly caught up with her account of human bodies physically taking up too much of earth’s resources and thus too much of the earth’s earth, and thus precipitating a flood. Similarly, a little bit I’m thinking of the late 17th century British natural philosopher, John Woodward, whom I discuss in chapter three who similarly seemed to also be hinting that the sin for which God sent the flood had to do with people abusing the earth’s natural resources… So, I think there probably is a bigger story to be told than the one that I told here that hopefully you and other people will push forward about sin as being a kind of discourse of limits, about the boundary line across which people transgress, a kind of ecological equilibrium and pass over into a tipping point.

14:42

**LS**: Just going back to something else that is connected with the question of sin and that we mentioned before is perhaps the issue of scale that you discuss in the book as one of the questions activated by Noah’s story, in terms of the imagination but also in terms of agency and responsibility. You discuss how one of the most important questions posed by the story was that of its scale, whether it was global or not and if not - what was the area that was affected by the flood. Of course answering such questions had many implications in terms of the origin and the diversity of human bodies and cultures across the globe. Can you talk about this concept and illustrate some of the ways in which the flood became a site for articulating the tension between local and global, particularly in relation to imperialism and evangelism in the Colonial Atlantic?

15:35

**LB**: I think one of the main reasons why the flood became the centerpiece of European understandings of earth history, the centerpiece of all these accounts, why it was so good to think with, is because it was definitionally global for most scholars though there was a kind of sub-debate about whether possibly the flood only covered the old world and maybe not the new but that was generally regarded as heterodox and those people were kind of drummed out of the conversation and there was a general consensus that the flood was global which was the reason why it was called the universal deluge. It was kind of right there in the name. It is planetary, it covers everything. And I think it was that, it didn’t need to be proven with natural evidence, at least, it could just be kind of posited and you could sort of go from there. So, it provided a built-in framework for thinking on a planetary scale. But to speak to the scaling question, I see various ways in which the story of Noah’s flood provided a kind of mechanism for taking local bits of knowledge and piecing it together into a global account. Seeing, like I mentioned, the British naturalist, John Woodward, who sent out a query list that was intended for British travelers to use traveling overseas and it was a lot of them had to do with things like find marine fossils inland and then that would be proof of the global extent, proof of something that everybody already knows but just adding more evidence to the pile, or ask the locals, ask indigenous people if they have any flood traditions, and if they do, then bam, that’s Noah’s flood. Great, more empirical evidence - this time from oral traditions. So, yeah, I think it was kind of useful as way of putting local stories and local data into a global historical account. But it was highly Euro-centric and parochial and that also involved violence to the historical traditions of non-European peoples. So I guess I would say…since you mentioned, too, the connection to empire and evangelism, this is something that I address in chapter two of the book the way that narratives of the human repopulation of the earth after the flood played into these histories of the origins of races and nations and peoples in a way that was explicitly meant to justify European sovereignty and missionary efforts in the Americas, in particular, and which ended up creating a racial hierarchy and a racial taxonomy as European scholars tried to document/figuring out where Noah’s sons and grandsons and so on, where they went after the flood, how they got there, when they got there, particularly they were obsessed with the question of how old world humans made it to the new world, so the question of the peopling of the Americas was a key intellectual question across the long 17th century, and that seemed, I think, to play two roles. One is to prove that all indigenous peoples of the Americas were ultimately Noah’s descendants, and part of the same Biblical story of world history, and thus just needed to be kind of brought back into the fold of the Christian faith. So, it was a way of kind of papering over the violence of conversion in the Christian missionary efforts. But at the same time these accounts of the re-peopling of the earth after the flood were also often pretty explicit about the ancestors of indigenous American nations and civilizations having descended from the barbaric peoples of central Asia. So there was a long-standing debate about whether that old world/new world migration happened across the Atlantic or across the Pacific and eventually Europeans converged on the idea that it must have been across the Pacific, and I think that was because the idea of an Atlantic crossing was too close for comfort and it was important to them to kind of deny the navigational ability to cross an open ocean to the ancestors of indigenous Americans, which now we know is false. There was this hunt for the trans-Pacific land bridge which would have proved that indigenous Americans were the descendants of Tartars and other central and east Asian peoples that early modern Europeans knew very little about but were convinced were barbaric and racially inferior. So I guess I am just fascinated by the way in which these kind of closed flood re-peopling stories were both this gesture of universalism, we’re all part of the same human family, but also we’re all different because we all arrived at these places in different points in time and actually there’s this massive geographic and historical difference between in this case a colonizer and colonized that helps to kind of justify European imperialism in the Americas.

20:24

**LS**: While I was reading through the different chapters I was kind of amazed and somehow also scared by the fact that the same elements could be arranged in so many different ways depending on the interests and values that the authors were trying to defend in and with their narratives. In so many ways, reading the book becomes an exercise in disassembling arrangements while moving between “scales” of historical imagination. In this process it seems to me that you are inviting readers to question their relationship with historical narratives and concepts of time. I am thinking especially of your reflections on the tension between Noah’s flood and the Apocalypse. You show in fact how common it was for Protestants and Catholics to pair the two events as crucial turning points in sacred histories involving humans and the natural world and how at some point historians or natural philosophers preferred to focus on Noah’s flood and left the apocalypse aside because the future was viewed as the object of theology. I just thought it was very interesting and I wonder if you could comment on this perhaps in relation to the idea of futurability or future history that is re-emerging now.

21:41

**LB**: The fact that the apocalypse often played in some cases a large role in early modern accounts of earth history, sometimes just lurking around the edges, sometimes front and center and kind of explicitly paired with the flood as kind of the endpoints of human history and the earth as they knew it, describing a kind of Paleocene that begins with the flood and ends with the apocalypse, the destruction of one world and the creation of another one. It was one of the things that got me intrigued about early-modern earth history very early on. I mentioned earlier that I was surprised and entranced by the fact that early-modern earth history was never just about rocks and never just about nature but also always about people. And similarly, earth history was never just about the past, it was always about the past and the present and sometimes also the future. It just made it so clear to me that the older way of writing history, the history of geology, seemed to take it as self-evident that geology became modern when scientists realized that they shouldn’t be thinking about the future and should only be thinking about the past and specifically earth’s deep history, right, that that’s the intellectual breakthrough that creates modern geology. Obviously, that was an important breakthrough, but as I argue a little bit in the introduction, I think that’s a little bit of a red herring. The discovery or invention of deep time was a huge intellectual breakthrough but I think it also meant breaking apart natural and human history, once earth had a deep history that humans didn’t play a part of, that kind of sense that human history had to be part of earth’s history kind of got tagged as pre-modern and pre-Enlightenment, left by the wayside, that had to be recuperated very contentiously in the 20th century. And similarly the notion that studying the Earth had to take account of the earth’s future as well as its past and that its past was key to understanding its present and its future also kind of got lost by the wayside in the this kind of modernization, institutionalization in the 19th century process and then had to be recuperated again in the 20th century. So, I love that about early-modern earth science - this kind of vision of recurrent disasters and the notion that you would study a disaster from the past to help you better prepare for disasters in the future. I grew up in Southern California doing earthquake drills in school so I think possibly the early modern European notion of past and future recurrent disasters maybe really resonated with me and that’s part of the reason why I was drawn to that as a topic of study. But I think there was something important that was lost and is now being recuperated about that early modern vision of planetary disaster that could kind of resurface if we’re not careful, that became seen as kind of stupidly premodern and superstitious but I think there was a kernel of something important there.

24:47

**LS:** I guess like the stories you unravel and reconstruct in the book somehow help understanding how ideas circulated and how recirculating those ideas now can improve the way we think about so many concepts like earth history and the role of deep time and what’s the relationship between historians and the future… So, we talked at length about different topics and as we transition towards the end my question would be what do you think is the most important lesson we can learn from frequenting premodern arrangements of such ideas?

25:31

**LB**: Well, maybe just to kind of continue the line of thought from the last question I am still thinking about what you were saying and about how this kind of early modern mode of imagining the global environment as impacted by humans, as impacting humans, I am not advocating for it, as I point out, particularly in the chapter on scientific racism or in the chapter on the Republic of Letters and the kind of massive empirical holes in their global data set that there were a lot of problems with this particular way of imagining the global environment that I document in the book. But I guess as I was saying in response to your last question, too, I guess there is another part of me that feels like there were things about this early modern mode that are maybe interesting and useful and important for us now as we face the challenge of coming to grips with the environmental devastation that’s happened on local and global scales, particularly during the great acceleration or further back since the invention of the fossil-fuel economy. And maybe this just shows something about my own affection, in some ways, for some of the characters in the texts that I describe even as I critique them. I think that there was maybe a kind of throwing the baby out with the bathwater that happened when this mode that I document was kind of overturned in favor of a modern institutionalized, secularized mode of understanding the earth in which the natural sciences and the human sciences were hived off from one another. So yeah, I’m not sure if there is like... it’s a good question, what is the one lesson that I would like people to bring away from this.

27:23

**LS**: Maybe I can help. As a graduate student, what I learned, I think, from this is like to be careful with ideas, to handle ideas carefully. And also, to be careful about the narratives I create. It’s difficult to articulate one specific lesson but certainly there are lots of lessons that can be learned from the book.

27:43

**LB**: Yeah, I think that’s a really good way of summing up, you know, kind of thinking in a higher-order way about what it means to do environmental history, intellectual history, particularly the history of environmental thought, the history of climate theory, that is to say that this past can be a resource for us as we try to come up with new concepts and narratives to describe what’s happening and to predict the variety of scenarios that might happen. That the past can be a resource but at the same time we always need to be really alive both to the aspects of past modes of environmental imagining that were problematic and deserve critique. And that that critical mode might also help us in the present to be more self-reflexive and more critical about the terms and the concepts and the narratives that we use to describe environmental change.

28:39

**LS**: Yeah. So, thank you so much for this very rich conversation and for such a rich book and I highly recommend this.

28:50

**LB**: Well thank you so much for being in conversation with me and for reading the book. And thanks again to the Journal of the History of Ideas for this incredible honor, I feel very honored and very flattered by it. Thanks for reading, thanks for talking, thanks everyone for listening. I am eager and excited to see how these conversations move forward.