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To cite this article: Evelyn O'Malley (07 Mar 2024): 'Me and the Sky': smashing the glass ceiling in *Come from Away*, neoliberal feminism, and climate change, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, DOI: [10.1080/14682761.2024.2325305](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2024.2325305)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2024.2325305>



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Published online: 07 Mar 2024.



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# 'Me and the Sky': smashing the glass ceiling in *Come from Away*, neoliberal feminism, and climate change

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers neoliberal feminism and environmental concerns in Irene Sankoff and David Hein's musical *Come from Away*. While the musical is not directly concerned with anthropogenic climate change, many types of skies appear as thematic and metaphorical preoccupations in the piece: feminist blue skies, stormy Newfoundland skies, the clear skies of the American Dream, skies of terror, and skies of war. I argue that *Come from Away* hides the tragedy of climate change in plain sight, in the sky. Undertaking a close analysis of the showstopping number 'Me and the Sky,' sung by the airline pilot Beverly Bass – based on the real-life woman of the same name – I observe the rift between neoliberal feminist success, acts of terror, and the slow-moving tempo of a changing climate. *Come from Away's* celebration of neoliberal feminism is cut short in the song, but it foreshadows the possibilities of a more successful recognition of the conjunction between feminist and environmental awareness.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 November 2023  
Accepted 26 February 2024

## KEYWORDS

Ecodramaturgy; ecocriticism; climate; environmental recognition; neoliberal feminism

In this article, I consider the relationship between neoliberal feminism and environmental concerns that can be interrogated through a key moment of Irene Sankoff and David Hein's musical *Come from Away*. While *Come from Away* is not directly concerned with anthropogenic climate change, many types of skies appear as thematic and metaphorical preoccupations in the piece: feminist blue skies, stormy Newfoundland skies, the clear skies of the American Dream, skies of terror, and skies of war. In what follows, I suggest that the musical expresses the tragedy of climate change by hiding it in plain sight, in the sky. Heeding Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Hamilton's desire for research that 'begins with the inextricability of [...] both nature and culture and feminism and environmental humanities' (Hamilton, 2019, 387 [original emphasis]), I will argue that while *Come from Away's* celebration of neoliberal feminism is cut short in song, it implicitly foreshadows the possibilities of a more successful conjunction between feminist and environmental awareness.

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*Come from Away* celebrates the kindness of strangers in Gander, Newfoundland, to whose International Airport 38 planes and their passengers were diverted when Al-Qaeda-affiliated hijackers crashed Boeing 767 jets into the World Trade Centre's Twin Towers in Lower Manhattan, New York City on 11 September 2001. Gander locals' affability and generosity towards the stranded passengers restores a sense of the best of humanity and offers an antidote to the adjacent horrors of what Jennifer Wallace has described as the 'unfinished and continuing event' that came to be known as 11 September (2020, 46). *Come from Away* takes place in the shock and grief of the few days that came immediately after the attacks. As Wallace points out – bringing together ideas from Rowan Williams, Martha Nussbaum, and Judith Butler – these early days of aftermath held the possibility of a reflective and radically compassionate response rather than a violent one, when vulnerability might have been registered and relations to 'others' might have been seen and felt anew (2020, 49). It is suspended within this moment of possibility that the action of *Come from Away* takes place.

First directed by Christopher Ashley and workshopped in Ontario in 2012, *Come from Away* enjoyed long runs on Broadway and in the West End, playing concurrently with national tours and productions in many more major cities across the world.<sup>1</sup> Reopening swiftly after pandemic pauses, the Broadway and West End productions finally closed in New York in October 2022 and London in January 2023. The one-act musical continues to circulate on various national and regional tours – at the time of writing, the musical is about to embark on a major UK and Ireland tour – via a cast recording of the songs (2017), and a professionally shot film of a live performance at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on Broadway (2021). It is safe to imagine that *Come from Away* will become a staple of amateur dramatic circuits in due course, with its ensemble of 'real-life' characters of mixed ages. The musical received overwhelmingly positive reviews for its redemptive qualities, leading theatre scholar Grahame Renyk to dub it a 'happiness-circulating machine', after Sarah Ahmed's unpacking of the affective, ideological, and exclusionary work that 'happy objects' do under neoliberal capitalism (2021, 262). Renyk acknowledges *Come from Away*'s heartwarming capacities and community-making potential, but he also laments its failure to accommodate challenges. Discovering himself in the role of Ahmed's 'killjoy' as an audience member among friends, he draws attention to the 'problematic aspects of the musical's construction of Canada', specifically the country's hostile immigration policies that are a far cry from the wide flung open doors of *Come from Away*'s representation of Gander (2010, 263). Where the musical does indeed reinforce the myth of a cozy Canada via its folksy Newfoundlanders (see also Freeman 2017), the United States of America is depicted as the exceptional, if wounded, neighbor by way of contrast. These distinctions between Canada and America are no less present in the musical registers of the female characters in a piece that has been especially lauded for its portrayal of women's contributions to the crisis response (Playbill 2018). *Come from Away* therefore bears (related) scrutiny from a feminist perspective, which not only supplements Renyk and Freeman's contributions to our thinking about its affects but brings us in the direction of the relationship between feminism and the environmental humanities, as Hamilton and Neimanis suggest. I begin by working through a song which exposes the specific relationship between the neoliberal feminisms that are premised on an individual's success story (in this case, an exceptional American woman) and the environmental harms of human-caused climate change, coming to light and rippling far from the moment of the immediate tragedy of 9/11.

What follows goes on to adopt a broadly ecodramaturgical methodology, such as that for which Theresa J. May advocates, by ‘examining the often-invisible environmental message of a play or production, making its ecological ideologies and implications visible’ (2021: 4).<sup>2</sup> This kind of ecodramaturgical approach to identifying latent environmental messaging in cultural works that are not ‘about’ the environment sits alongside the intentionally ecodramaturgical or ecocritical practices recently discussed by Ahmadi (2022) and Woynarski (2020), among others, and next to the kinds of design practices explored by scholars such as Beer (2021) and Hudson (2019). While ecofeminism, too, and various ecological feminisms have a decades-long history as a mode of analysis and intentional practices that interrogate the relationship between gender and nature (see Stevens, Tait, and Varney 2018), this kind of knowledge and practice has often been sidelined in the establishment of the environmental humanities (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018). In this context, analyses of popular performance – and of musicals in particular – are largely absent among analyses of works that are not self-professedly ecocritical, ecodramaturgical, or ecofeminist. Feminist studies of mainstream and popular theatre have shown that the reach and influence of this work can be mighty (Aston and Harris 2012).

It is worth clarifying at the outset that I am not suggesting that the makers of *Come from Away* are intentionally sharing an environmental story. I am conscious too of the differences in general levels of environmental awareness in 2001, when the events of 9/11 took place, the 2010s when the musical was written, and the present moment. By introducing Amitav Ghosh’s observations of an early-seeded form of environmental ‘recognition’ in his influential book *The Great Derangement*, which advocates for looking at how literary, historical, and political works have often failed to grasp how climate and the complexities of climate change are integrated into all aspects of culture, we can see how, latently, the musical’s sullied skies are entangled with the slow-moving clouds of anthropogenic climate change (2016, 6).

### **Smashing the glass ceiling**

Towards the end of *Come from Away*, the airline pilot Beverly Bass – based on the real-life woman of the same name – sings the showstopping ‘Me and the Sky’, during which she has an important realization about her relationship to her chosen profession. The song is the only solo in the musical to build a substantial backstory for its singer (running at over 4 mins). Bass sings directly to the audience from her Gander hotel room where she is waiting for airspace to reopen so that she can resume her interrupted Paris-Dallas flight. While most of her passengers are out making merry to the raucous Celtic folk strains that acoustically depict Newfoundland in Sankoff and Hein’s composition, Bass has stayed soberly at her phone, listening for the important call that will allow her to return to work. She is steadfast both in her professional responsibility and her inhabitation of the more conventional Broadway folk-rock sound that musically distinguishes the United States from Canada in the show. The narrative arc of ‘Me and the Sky’ recounts Bass’s childhood ambition to fly planes, commencing with her upbringing near the airport in Texas and detailing the prejudices she overcomes to become a female pilot. Passion and persistence enable her to enter the air (quite literally), rising above the patriarchy and smashing the glass ceiling that has until now prevented women from

undertaking this kind of work. Misogynist World War Two era pilots retire from service and hostile female cabin crews – initially wary of her highfalutin ambition – soften towards her, as they learn to trust her expertise and good humour. The American Dream of meritocracy comes true as Bass climbs the career ladder to become ‘the first female American captain in history’, capturing news headlines as she sets the world record for captaining the first all-female flight crew (Sankoff and Hein 2015, 70).<sup>3</sup> It’s the pinnacle of individualist feminist possibility realized: she progresses from climbing over corpses on the mortuary plane she flies to captaining chartered flights, and ultimately commanding transatlantic flights before going on to mentor new trainees who will follow in her jetstream. ‘Suddenly I’m in the cockpit’, Bass exclaims with delight in a triumph of grit against the doubters: ‘Suddenly everything’s high’, she belts (67). Jenn Colella (nominated for a Tony Award for originating the role on Broadway, and featuring on the original cast recording and appears in the proshot film) gleefully emphasizes the consonants on ‘cock’ and ‘pit’ to celebrate her arrival. She vocalizes a disbelieving intake of breath immediately after the first time she sings the word and utters a satisfied ‘hah’ when she repeats it in the chorus.<sup>4</sup> No longer condemned to ‘stay grounded’, the wide-eyed, tenacious girl with a big dream gets her ‘wings’ and learns to fly (67). Bass soars and Colella’s voice reflects her ascent: ‘Suddenly there’s nothing in between me and the sky’ (67).

‘Me and the Sky’’s musical progress propels the narrative. To begin, the vocal part is quietly accompanied by guitar. The guitar is joined by keyboards, electric guitar, violin, and percussion as the song builds. Shifting with slight melodic variation, the verses work through the various obstacles Bass confronts to their incremental overcoming with increasingly excited storytelling and higher belts. The notes climb and voice crescendos ‘poco a poco with driving force’, tracking the upward mobility of her career to a sustained E flat (71). Colella sings with the mastery of a mature performer in her prime, in control of the challenging vocal technique demanded by the music and simultaneously conveying the emotional range required by the storytelling. She is as capable a singer as Bass is a pilot, and, in performance, ‘Me and the Sky’ celebrates a mature performer playing a mature character in a showstopping ‘I want-becomes-an-I am’ song.<sup>5</sup>

Taken together, lyrics, music, and performer characterize Bass as a bright woman embodying the ‘confidence culture’ of Orgad and Gill (2022). She is a capable individual in the right place at the right time, bolstered and swept along by a changing world, but – in the manner of Cheryl Sandberg’s 2013 *Lean In* ‘feminist manifesto’ – she also ambitiously embraces the challenge to achieve this success on her own merit. While the period of Bass’s rise to success roughly tracks the second-wave feminist movement from the 1970s, it is Sandberg’s and similar twenty-first century creeds – exemplifying what Catherine Rottenberg (2018) has theorized as neoliberal feminism – that attend the period of *Come from Away*’s creation. In a neoliberal feminism premised on the individual’s accomplishment, Rottenberg identifies the rise of idealized ‘subjects who are individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing [...] entirely responsible for their own self-care and wellbeing’ (7). Epitomizing one such subject in ‘Me and the Sky’, Bass performs a distinct awareness of gendered inequalities but disavows them as a ‘superwoman’ who takes personal responsibility for cultivating a ‘felicitous balance’ between the demands of work and family life (23–28). The sky is as blue as she can paint it.

Not only does Bass thrive as a successful transatlantic captain, but she retains a sense of idealized femininity while doing so, a femininity that emerges through the music and lyrics of the song, and through Colella's performance. When she applies to American Airlines, the organization of her dreams is guided, Bass reveals coyly, by the airline's having the 'prettiest planes' (Sankoff and Hein 2015, 68). The alliterative 'p' surprisingly juxtaposes femininity with a desire for aircraft – not typically conceived of as pretty (except by a spirited woman who encounters them as such). It simultaneously places Bass within the interest community – usually gendered as masculine – who refer to vehicles as female in a demonstration of possession or patronizing stewardship (cars, boats, planes, etc.). The lines sung mezzo-piano, 'prettily', too, with Colella adopting a hushed expression as she shares her feelings about the kinds of planes she dreams of flying.

Never deviating from this idealized femininity despite having entered a masculine profession, a further diminuendo tells of Bass's marriage to Tom, a peer who shares her passion for flying, in what is presented as a marriage of equals. Bass and Tom gain mastery of the earth's topography from an aerial perspective as they transport others safely around the world. They reunite periodically in the domestic space of the kitchen where they place pins on a map to mark the places where their flights have touched down (73). Furthermore, Bass sustains her pioneering career whilst raising multiple children.<sup>6</sup> 'Suddenly' she is a 'mother' – Colella makes effective use of endearing facial expressions to perform her fulfillment and surprise as she sings these words – and 'suddenly shocked at how much they've grown' (73). As she advances to become a senior flight instructor at the age of 51, she wonders how her own now deceased parents would have felt about her training others – especially men – to be pilots. In 'Me and the Sky', neoliberal feminist affects are dazzlingly mobilized by the combination of the music, orchestrations, lyrics, and performer working together 'to generate passionate attachments to its ideals, particularly the happily balanced woman' (Rottenberg 2018, 171). It really does seem possible to 'have it all' in this song (Genz 2010): seniority in a demanding but fulfilling career, a happy marriage, and healthy children that accommodate and benefit from her vocation – all without ostensible compromise and whilst retaining an apparently intrinsic idealized femininity. No wonder she sings about it.

Adding to 'Me and the Sky's' exhilarating performance affects that are generated by Colella's masterful performance of the song as written, Kelly Devine's musical staging for the number places the other female members of the ensemble in a semi-circle around Colella. They stand from their chairs and are lit gradually, donning air hostess hats and coming into focus as Bass's memory brightens and she takes centre stage. The women cheer her on: Bass's success becomes their shared possibility. 'Suddenly', she sings – clapped on the off-beat by these supporters who punctuate her lead – 'it stopped. No one's saying you can't, or you won't, or you know you're not anything because you're a girl' (72). The ensemble, enlivened by Colella's stage presence, adds texture to Bass's story to emphasize what seems like irrevocable progress towards gender equality. They form a line and advance towards the audience together, shoulder to shoulder with the star. The presence of the other women sharing Bass's light gestures to the lives of women beyond her as the exception and Devine's staging therefore evokes the liberal feminist ideal of sisterhood in a way that the song without them does not. As Colella riffs and runs on the E-flat for the peak iteration of the lyric 'Sky', the women around her beam in



admiration. The glass ceiling is in smithereens. Its shards only reveal themselves when the first plane pierces the North Tower.

It is at the juncture of career peak and maturity that Bass finds herself calmly captaining the Paris-Dallas flight that is rerouted to Gander on 9/11. She recalls air traffic control's sudden interruption to her flight. Colella is shocked from singing into the spoken word as she learns that 'the one thing I loved more than anything was used as the bomb' (75). With the urgent news of danger in the skies shifting the song into its coda, Bass, Colella, her entourage, and the audience return to Gander with a bump. The joyous sonic atmosphere is disrupted as her dream and the towers are irrevocably splintered. 'Suddenly something has died', she sings, *pianissimo* and in head voice, referring to the deaths caused by the attacks, the personally affecting death of her friend and colleague who had been captaining one of the hijacked planes that day, and the end of her innocent and positive progress narrative, linked to perceptions of what aircraft (can) do (75). The stage picture returns to the hotel room as her backing singers fade into darkness. A spotlight focuses on Colella alone at the table where she began, cradling her coffee. In this first moment of sitting with her trauma, with quiet devastation, it dawns upon Bass that: 'Suddenly there's something in between me and the . . . ' (75). But before she can utter a last, melancholy 'sky', the phone call that she has been waiting for comes. She is alert, of course, and ready to respond to this (second, welcome) interruption to her reverie with the same breath.

### Neoliberal feminism in a changing climate

Except that there was always something there in between Bass and the sky. Alongside its feminist message and representation of a capable woman's response to the tragic events of 9/11, 'Me and the Sky' is a love song addressed to the aviation industry. The song celebrates human ingenuity, technological mastery, growth, progress, and the pleasure afforded by flight in the era of globalization. Between Bass and the sky, less suddenly but more insidiously and no less devastatingly, was always the contribution of fossil fueled greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft to climate change (Gössling and Humpe 2020; Klöwer et al. 2021). The fact that Gander had an airport at all, spacious enough to accommodate the 38 redirected planes, is owing to its original function as a refueling stop for transatlantic crossings, made redundant by longer-range aircraft in the 1960s (Tibbo 2023). On 9/11 *Come from Away's* Newfoundlanders are shocked to see Jumbo jets entering their skies and to smell the fumes from the fuel in their usually clear air. Indeed, the geopolitics of *Come from Away* are compounded by the fact that Bass's home state and the destination of her flight is Texas, also home to the oil capital of the world. That Texas is so (infamously) renowned for its extraction industry only serves to emphasize what is hidden in plain sight throughout the musical. *Come from Away* makes no allusion to how planes so forcefully feature as the poster child for high carbon consumer culture. The musical eschews green politics as a tension, bar a quip from a passenger, Kevin, about fellow passenger Nick, a British oil executive who is travelling to Texas. If an audience member anticipates the performance of guilty or conflicted grappling with environmental anxieties from a highflyer like Bass, it never comes. In fact, the absence of any gesture to environmental discourse becomes disconcerting in a love song composed in praise of flight. This disconcert pins the metaphorical map precisely at the juncture of

complicity between the neoliberal feminisms premised on the individuated subjectivity of 'star' women (pilots or performers) and the human practices that are accelerating climate change. While 'Me and the Sky' plays with the recurring lyric of 'suddenly' there is nothing sudden about the geological timescale of climate change.

Less suddenly, the slowly violent dangers wrought by climate change 'star nobody' (Nixon 2011, 3). But even if the violences wrought by a changing climate – felt disproportionately by women and girls who constitute the majority of the world's poor – are temporally and spatially dispersed, the social, economic, and political conditions in which Bass becomes a pilot, with their attendant greenhouse gas emissions, are 'sudden' in terms of twentieth century history.<sup>7</sup> Bass's spectacular personal story not only coincides with the second-wave feminist revolution but also with the so-called 'Great Acceleration' that continues to hasten and worsen climate change at an Earth system level. Graphs prepared by the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (2015) illustrate a defined and unmistakable uptick in related socio-economic activity and earth system change around the middle of the twentieth century, measurable in increased atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration driven by human action. This dramatic acceleration accompanies the time during which Bass is able to enter the workforce. 'Me and the Sky' therefore illustrates Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation of an uncomfortable 'rift' that opens in the 'fault lines' of thought, when we consider that this post-war period of accelerated extraction and emissions also 'included the production and consumption of consumer durables – such as a refrigerator and the washing machine – in Western households that were touted as "emancipatory" for women' (2014, 15). There is no stretch of imagination necessary to realize that the domestic appliances and birth control that Chakrabarty points to as emancipatory for (some) women are pivotal to Bass's capacity to pursue her career and attain substantial professional success while raising a family. Climate change emerges as a sobering rejoinder to the kinds of feminism that can get one woman into the sky, pivoting us in the direction of more radical and communitarian, intersectional feminist aspirations.

I would like to suggest that the tragedy of climate change nevertheless underscores *Come from Away* and emerges through its absence in the narrative, illustrating what Amitav Ghosh has termed *The Great Derangement*, naming ours an era 'when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight' (2016, 11). Ghosh astutely observes the formal failure of many twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural works to grapple with the enormity of climate change in preferment of the smaller everyday modes of realism. He argues that the absence of uncanny and extreme weather events, such as they alter the course of human actions, works in concert with histories and legacies of colonialism to conceal the realities of anthropogenic climate change in a glut of cultural works, particularly literary fiction, during this period. His provocation is that these works and the cultures that produced them will appear 'deranged' to future historians, learning that we knew that our behaviors were making the earth increasingly unlivable and continued to produce culture that hid the fact. Bass's devastation at the (ab)use of the object of her affections as a weapon of war can be encountered as an example of the tragedy of climate change hiding in plain sight in *Come from Away*, as her realization of the tragedy of 9/11 invokes in her grief response a glorification of planes that become a kind of 'hamartia' or tragic mistake, plainly recognizable only from a distance (Wallace



2020, 157). The parallel course of accelerated climate change along with the rise of feminisms premised on entering but not remaking the system makes apparent the limited nature of Bass's brilliance as best practice in the anthropocene.<sup>8</sup> She points us to the tragedy that her success came alongside the acceleration of atmospheric carbon dioxide alongside the rise of liberal and neoliberal feminisms that speak of equality (in different ways) and are implicated in climate change, even though Bass herself doesn't join these dots in the moment.

In the moment when Bass is jolted from her dream in song, it occurs to her that, 'Suddenly there's something' in between her and the sky. The 'something' is as important as the 'suddenly'. In the song, the something that Bass recognizes is that planes, as well as enabling travel, can be used as dangerous weapons of war. My suggestion is that, encountering the song now, we are presented with the more capacious opportunity of recognizing that there was always more to this something than that which she experiences in the moment. While the song begins and ends in the same place (a hotel room in Gander) and while all that has changed between the beginning and the end of the song is that the phone has rung, the world presented to the audience has changed in a flash of recognition presented through Bass's eyes. Ghosh's future historian might single out Bass's sudden learning of the terrorist action in 'Me and the Sky' as a possible moment of 'recognition', which he identifies as a 'passage from ignorance to knowledge', often mute and in which 'comprehension need play no part' (2016, 4). A person might recognize something without understanding it. Attending to see how the 're' in recognition 'harks back to something prior', and so 'flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld' (4–5), is what characterizes such a moment. Ghosh distinguishes between something recognized and the acquisition of new knowledge, the former arising 'from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself' (5). This dormant potential exists in an individual because of prior awareness of the lived world, including the experience of intergenerational storytelling and myth making: 'I would not be able to speak of these encounters as instances of recognition if some prior awareness of what I was witnessing had not already been implanted in me, perhaps by childhood experiences', he hypothesizes (6). Given that 'Me and the Sky' is rhetorically structured around what originally stood between Bass as a child and her ambition to fly, moving between the various 'somethings' she overcame, the moment of her dawning at the end of the song – for audiences if not for Bass – can be said to be one of the recognition where she recognizes the world less welcoming than where her song and her story began. Whether or not Bass could digest the structural nature of the obstacles she overcame (or whether she ever comes to understand them) in this moment of trauma expressed in speech-song, they are linked to the violence of the terrorist attacks and their wider geopolitical context, which includes the ecological violence and plight of rural women displaced by the oil industry (fueling aviation).<sup>9</sup> It would be a stretch to claim that because she retains an embodied memory of the barriers of misogyny and sexism, she now also recognizes (understanding notwithstanding) the relationship between the violence of the patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, or, their relationship to the violence of American imperialism and their relations to and enmeshment with environmental harm. It is possible, however, to infer that she recognizes in the moment of learning about the terror attacks that all

was not always as well in the world as she imagined, or that not all others accompanied her on her affective journey (some out of a desire to retain power, others because of relative powerlessness, and still more who remained always in various forms of nonviolent and violent opposition).

While a cause-and-effect trajectory has been too easily (and often without sufficient evidence) drawn between climate change and terrorism, there is no doubt that the tragedy of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ intensified the internal displacement of people in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed the attacks (Asaka 2021). Chakrabarty’s anthropocene rift is intuited musically – as a sudden pause in the song – as Bass is confronted by the rupture of the attacks, whether or not she draws a connection from the recognition of the plane as an object of (intentional) harm to other forms of (unintentional) harm (including but not limited to neoliberal feminism and anthropogenic climate change). Bass may not be in a position to recognize the relationship between climate change and the airline industry in her experience of feminism and the terrorist attacks, in this moment, but she does recognize that the open skies of freedom are more dangerous and less trustworthy than she imagined them before. Moreover, there is the possibility that contemporary audiences may come to recognize their interconnectedness in this moment, certainly from the vantage of feminism and, eventually, from an environmental perspective. The longer we don’t see it, the more is the tragedy.

### Seeding environmental memory

Bass’s character depiction in the musical builds towards and pivots around this solo performance in ‘Me and the Sky’, which grounds and retrospectively inflects all her other skyward actions and interactions. Colella doubles as a Newfoundlander in the musical (each member of the ensemble plays a passenger and a Newfoundlander). In ‘Me and the Sky’ the audience encounters a performer who presently embodies Bass but who has also previously performed a Newfoundlanders’ resilient response to the stormy skies of their home. Seeds of an intergenerational environmental history ripe for recognition via Colella as Bass are therefore planted at the very beginning of *Come from Away* when it establishes the geography of Newfoundland at the Atlantic edge in the opening number, ‘Welcome to the Rock’. To energetic and heavily accented beats the ‘islander’ Newfoundlanders recounts the climatological obstacles their (settler colonial) ancestors weathered under the skies that ‘made’ them and the self-fashioned strength of character upon which they drew in the moment of crisis that 9/11 presents: ‘Welcome to the wildest weather that you’ve ever heard of. Where everyone is nicer but it’s never nice above’, they sing (Sankoff and Hein 2015, 3). Imagining ancestors who performed life in defiance of the weather, they sing in call and response: ‘Welcome to the land where the winters tried to kill us and we said, “We will not be killed”/Welcome to the land where the waters tried to drown us and we said, “We will not be drowned”’ (5–6).<sup>10</sup> This historical memory of environmental hardship in a hostile climate, struggle and perseverance is embodied as an intergenerational legacy, danced to the rhythm of the song in a heavy-footed stomping. While the Newfoundlanders’ spirit is not part of Bass’s particular American story in the musical, the number frames the musical in terms of what is shaped by the skies: the particular island geography, landscape, and weathering necessary to live under them. In ‘Me and the Sky’, an audience member sees Colella as Bass, a performer’s body that

retains the knowledge of human bodily vulnerability in the face of environmental hardship: dormant knowledge that knows the earth is not inert, and that it could be awakened in her or in others at any moment.

In addition to this exposition setting up the character of Newfoundlanders deriving from a history that is also environmental, geological time that extends beyond the human is invoked in the song 'Stop the World' that immediately follows 'Me and the Sky'. Filling a lull before they can finally board the plane, the characters of Diane and Dave visit the Dover Fault, the tectonic boundary separating the continental plates between the Gander and the Avalon zones. They reflect on their own chance meeting and impending parting in human terms, straddling the line that separates the continents, while the deep time that the song uses as its central metaphor grounds their human lives in the context of a material environment with a history that spans far beyond the human: 'here we are where the continents once crashed together before they went their separate ways' (Sankoff and Hein 2015, 78). The invocation of a geological spacetime throws a kind of nostalgia for their emergent relationship into dizzying relief at scale, and it also frames Bass's Great Acceleration 'Me and the Sky' story – which the audience has just heard – within this longer history. Diane reads from a notice board, '[F]ive hundred and forty million years ago, the continents of the world crashed together right here; and two hundred million years ago, they separated again, moving apart from each other' (2017). The wish they express in the song, to 'stop the world from spinning', comments on the world that has paused for a few days after the events of 9/11 and their personal desires to slow down in their busy lives, but it also contrasts the human events with planetary time in terms of eons (Sankoff and Hein 2015, 79). The ocean, river, and trees of which they sing, and in which they capture a 'moment' in a photograph, are imagined as looking down from above, as prehistoric landscape shaped by prehistoric skies.

International airspace reopens and Bass's flight is finally given permission to depart. Before she boards her plane, she is unsettled to witness the humiliating strip-search of passenger Ali, a practicing Muslim – and world-famous Egyptian cook, who has overcome initial ostracization by other passengers in Gander by virtue of his culinary skills – gesturing towards the intensification of Islamophobia that occurred in the wake of 9/11. The audience briefly glimpses this shadow of intensified xenophobia and war to come through Bass's eyes, but, hurrying the musical towards its conclusion, another threat appears in the skies: a hurricane is about to make landfall on Newfoundland. Bass is itchy to get her plane off the runway and into the air before she is grounded again. Winds forecast of 50 miles an hour gives urgency to the departure and usher in the ensemble song 'Somewhere in the Middle of Nowhere' led by Bass. Although factually based, this appearance of extreme weather is largely dramaturgical in its use and glossed to chivvy the musical along, but it also quietly plants the possibility for future recognition of extreme weather threats and their relation to human activity that might be made by contemporary audiences, as they come to make these connections (that were always there, as Ghosh points out, even if not expressed as such). Bass's plane lifts off, narrowly avoiding another hiatus. As she leaves Canada and reenters U.S. airspace, she announces over the intercom, 'If you look out your window, underneath all that rain is Maine. We've just crossed the American border. Welcome back to the U.S.A.' (2015: 83). Colella holds the 'A' of U.S.A. on a belted 'D' for seven counts, such is the relief of the homecoming. The celebratory return is presented in the American folk-rock Broadway sound, as the

passengers depart the folksy ‘Somewhere in the Middle of Nowhere’ (85). Accelerating towards their destination, Bass asks her passengers to look out their windows: ‘you won’t want to miss this: we just entered Texas’ (87). Like the ‘A’ of the U.S.A., the second syllable of ‘Tex-as’ is sustained on a high belt. This time the celebration is accompanied by an upward key change from D to E major before the ensemble joins her again in chorus. As the seated on-stage passengers peer out of their imaginary airplane windows, an audience member looking at them might imagine that they ‘see’ the iconic oilfields of Texas beneath them – images of which are prolific in media imagery – overlain perhaps with ‘Me and the Sky’’s portrait of Bass as a child at the airport. Bass thanks her passengers for ‘flying American’, the pilot’s rote words resonating afresh as she reclaims her place in the sky (confirming her professional commitment to the organization for which she works).

Notwithstanding her chastening by the changes in the world, Bass goes on to identify flying as a patriotic act in the days that follow her return to Texas, just as Bush sought to restore confidence in the sector by encouraging travelling to Disneyland alongside shopping (Bush 2001a, 2001b). Bass is eager to return to her job as soon as she is permitted and waits again at the phone for the call. Walking through eerily quiet airports, she makes a point of thanking the few uneasy travelers for still continuing to fly.

### **Dormant buds**

I was entranced by ‘Me and the Sky’’s affects when I first encountered the song, sung by Rachel Tucker, who played Beverly Bass at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 2018. I knew nothing about *Come from Away* ahead of being brought to the theatre by my Irish family. They had arranged a first night out since the birth of my son a few months earlier, and so it was through a haze of exhaustion that I first heard the song: my reality felt very far from the presentation of high-flying women who could take care of small children and excel at work. A return to work was looming that would bump me back into the world of thinking about performance and climate, which felt like future fog. My specific circumstances notwithstanding, however, I too embody much of Rottenberg’s neoliberal feminist subject, as a white, Irish middle-class woman with the luxury of pursuing (mostly) vocational work and benefitting from the world changed for (some) women that Chakrabarty observes. Like the women of the ensemble and others in the audience, I cheered for Bass’s success and at Tucker’s vocal capacities. I also found myself agape at what appeared to me to be the audaciousness of lines sung in praise of pretty planes. The relationship between feminism and the environment seemed crystal clear at that moment, and recognition of it appeared self-evident.

I share this flooding back not to highlight my recognition as unique (given the relative ubiquity of *Come from Away*, I doubt it is), but to suggest the potential for encountering *Come from Away* in this way. Perhaps, on the one hand, there is not much more here than a good example of what Stacy Wolf calls a ‘dissonant pleasure’, the kinds of ‘strong feelings of admiration and fury’ that arise for the feminist spectator during performance (2018, 168). For ‘Me and the Sky’ can indeed be accused of exemplifying twenty-first century neoliberal feminism, underscored by what Rottenberg unmasks as a ‘husk of liberalism’, drawing on the feminist championship of equality that pays lip service to solidarity and social justice, persisting as ‘feminism’ to bolster a sense of American

exceptionalism and moral superiority (2014: 419). At the surface of the song, 'Me and the Sky' conceals how our current environmental predicament is recognizable in the neoliberal feminist subject and can be exposed through an ecodramaturgical analysis.

But along with the dissonant pleasure it affords, there is also a 'something' more in the possibility for recognition of the interconnections between feminist and environmental awareness in 'Me and the Sky', and *Come from Away* more broadly, as a piece of theatre. As the realities of a changing climate become an increasingly lived experience, felt by some more than others, individualist feminisms that are premised on entering and not remaking the system are revealed to be as unviable as they always were. *Come from Away* implicitly expresses this problem with neoliberal feminism through its thematic preoccupation with the skies. The blue-sky horizons of feminist success differ from the stormy skies that shape the Newfoundlanders' sense of self, the terror in the skies over Manhattan on 9/11, the extreme weather that hurries the return to America in the piece, and the skies from which the first airstrikes claimed lives in Afghanistan days afterwards. These skies are thrown into relief by the scale of the sky of space and time beyond the human, momentarily alluded to at the Dover Fault. Together, the variously inflected thematic skies are part of the same material sky in which lives – human and nonhuman – are made and ended. *Come from Away* offers a glimpse of something else that might be possible in the moment of Bass's unsettling and its clouding of her bright blue sky, now chilly and darkened.<sup>11</sup> Seeded in the nebulousness is the inextricability of feminist and environmental projects.

In a novel example of real-world recognition, scenic designer Beowulf Boritt recounts a surprise at these on-stage trees sprouting leaves a few months into the run at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre. Silhouetted behind Bass at her hotel table, tall tree trunks reach from floor to ceiling at the wings' edges, flanking the simple timber set. Boritt's stage design had been realized with real trees from the Adirondack mountains (instead of props made with steel and Styrofoam). These trees had been acquired in conversation with an arborist who had 40 acres of woodland to clean up during the winter and so their felling in this instance was an act of environmental care rather than allied to deforestation. When the trees emerged from their winter hibernation, they drew on their stores of water and their buds began to open. Boritt reflects on this budding: they don't know they were chopped down. Obviously, there's enough of a spectrum in the lighting grid that they're getting some kind of nutrient and there's one little tree that really doesn't know it has been chopped down because it's still growing. It is a little sad and beautiful all at the same time (Stewart 2017). When Bass sits at her hotel table and sings 'Me and the Sky', then, encircled by a female chorus and backgrounded by trees resisting death (with the help of theatrical skies composed of stage lighting, heat, and air) the liveness of our entangled feminist and environmental relations are visibly, tangibly, audibly for us, whenever we are ready to recognize them.

## Notes

1. For a full and up to date list of productions of *Come from Away* see <https://comefromaway.com/>.
2. Theresa J. May sees the task of ecodramaturgy as threefold. She advocates for the examination of ecology in historical and contemporary works such as I adopt in this piece. In

addition, she argues for the possibilities of ‘using theatre as a methodology to approach contemporary environmental problems’ and ‘examining how theatre as a material craft leaves its own ecological footprint and works both to reduce waste and invent new approaches to material practice’ (2021, 4).

3. All subsequent references to song lyrics and musical notation are from Irene Sankoff and David Hein *Vocal Selections: Come From Away* (Victoria: Hal Leonard, 2015).
4. I recommend watching Jenn Colella singing ‘Me and the Sky’ in one of these recordings: *Come From Away – Me and The Sky (LIVE)* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQVrbzBv-AU>; A recording of Colella’s performance on the proshot film of the stage musical is available at ‘Me & the Sky- Jenn Colella’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CxPdnHxh54>, (Accessed 17 February 2023).
5. In an interview with Victoria Meyers, Colella remarks on her age (42) as she received her first significant recognition for her work via a Tony award nomination. Colella reflects that her ‘advanced’ years enabled her to feel ‘pride and deep, deep gratitude’ whilst enabling her to remain ‘present and centered’, owing from ‘being the age that I am and having been around for a little bit’ (Meyers 2017).
6. The term ‘pioneering’ is used intentionally here, to situate this reference as an extension of the specifically American ‘frontier’ narratives discussed at length by Theresa J. May in *Earth Matters on Stage* (2021) that have proven catastrophic for human and planetary health.
7. Women and girls make up the majority of the world’s poor, who are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Climate change exacerbates the effects of existing gender inequalities. See Allen (2022) and Actionaid (2024), for examples.
8. The term Anthropocene was coined by scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to define a new epoch wherein humans have significantly altered the earth’s geology. I use the term with some caution and with a lower-case ‘a’, following others in the environmental humanities who opt to acknowledge the controversies associated with such a broad-brush use of the ‘human’ and to add complexity to the term while acknowledging the challenges it presents. See, for instance, Anna Tsing in Greg Mitman (2019) “Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing,” 18 June, <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>.
9. See Lisa Woynarski (2020, 59–65), for example, for a discussion of Nigerian playwright Osonye Tess Onwueme’s play *Then She Said It* (2002) that explores the gendered nature of oil extraction as a global commodity that generates devastating local effects on rural women.
10. *Come from Away* is silent on the history of the indigenous Beothuk people, who precede European colonialism on the island that became Newfoundland, and who were declared extinct in 1829.
11. Colella describes her own queer sexuality as ‘super out and proud’ (Gladstone 2020). She recalls meeting the real-life Bass – a huge fan of the musical, who has seen it over 100 times – for the first time. Colella describes Bass as a ‘very right wing Texas Republican’ and notices a gradual ‘softening’ from Bass they get to know one another.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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