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"It Ain't Right and It Ain't Natural": Climate Change in Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown*

Dean Schmit

Anaïs Mitchell's musical *Hadestown* has undergone significant, yet subtle, thematic changes regarding climate change since it was first performed in 2006. Although there have been five iterations of the show — Vermont in 2006, the concept album in 2010, the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) in 2016, Edmonton in 2017, and Broadway in 2019 — only three have full recordings. Therefore, I am only analyzing the concept album, NYTW, and Broadway. Although the depiction of climate in *Hadestown* has stayed relatively similar, how it is conceptualized has changed. It has gone from "taking place in a 'postapocalyptic American Depression era,'" to reflecting fears of the near future.¹ Many of the changes are small, but they reflect ideas about the present day — of 2010, 2016, and 2019 — which reveal how the recent past can be historicized.

The plot of *Hadestown* stays the same across the three versions. It follows a pair of newlyweds, Orpheus and Eurydice, who struggle to survive as Hades takes Persephone to the Underworld — known in the musical as Hadestown, an industrial company town — and the season turns to winter.² After Hades and Persephone quarrel over the increasing industrialization of the town, Hades offers Eurydice a choice; she then enters Hadestown seeking work and the fulfillment of the American dream.³ Above everything, she desires security. Orpheus follows her, but the pair reunites after Eurydice has already signed her employment contract; Orpheus is quickly discovered and beaten. Persephone intercedes after she hears him sing, asking Hades to give him a chance. Orpheus sings the finished version of his song — which the audience hears throughout the show — which recounts the love story of Hades and Persephone in Demeter's garden; the workers of Hadestown join in until the walls themselves echo Orpheus's song. While Hades is swayed, the Fates taunt him that regardless of what he does, Hades will weaken his own power. Instead, Hades gives Orpheus a test: with Eurydice following behind, walk out of Hadestown without looking back. The couple embarks on their journey with the hopes of the workers. However, Orpheus begins to doubt and fails. While the concept album ends the show with a solemn duet between Eurydice and Persephone (which later becomes a curtain-call song), the 2016 and 2019 shows begin the story again.

The 2010 concept album of *Hadestown* opens with a description of the natural world tied to the union of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus reassures Eurydice that "The birds are gonna make the wedding bed / And the trees are gonna lay the wedding table / And the rivers are gonna give us the wedding band," while Eurydice points to the current state of the world, as times are "[h]ard and getting harder all the time."⁴ Unlike the other two versions of the musical, "Wedding Song" opens the concept album. It establishes the show's primary theme of poverty and wealth, juxtaposing it against the natural world. While the turning of the seasons plays an important role in the concept album, climate change does not.

¹ Anaïs Mitchell, *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of Hadestown* (New York Plume, 2020), 113.

² A company town is a place where all businesses and housing are controlled by one employer.

³ In the Greek myth, Eurydice is bitten by a snake on her wedding day and thereby enters the Underworld. Mitchell changes this to an active — if constrained — choice.

⁴ "Wedding Song," in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-wedding-song-lyrics.

One of the primary conflicts in the show is that of industrialization against nature. This is visible in both couples; while Hades and Persephone are the literal embodiments of these concepts, Eurydice and Orpheus each strive for one. It is not a conflict that allows both to win; as Orpheus sings in “Epic (Part I),” Hades is “[d]igging and dredging and dragging the depths / Of the earth to turn its insides out.”⁵ While Persephone is the goddess of spring, not the earth, there is enough slippage between the two concepts in *Hadestown* that the effects of industrialization on the other party is clearly visible. In his plea to Hades, Orpheus lays bare this destruction, describing him as the “king of the scythe and the sword... / [who] scrapes the sky and scars the earth.”⁶ Industrialization is ravenous; it will eat up the world until nothing remains. In doing so, it will destroy both sets of lovers, since Eurydice aligns herself with Hadestown when Hades promises her a way out as his “canary.”⁷ He promises that she will be unlike the other workers; things will turn out well for her.

Eurydice craves stability, while Orpheus tries and fails to write a song to bring summer back. This reflects the more pessimistic mood of the concept album. As classicist Dave Oosterhuis notes, “Orpheus can declare his power over nature, but both the songs and the liner notes reveal this to be false,” although this power becomes increasingly real as the show evolves.⁸ Eurydice’s solution proves equally false. The couple clashes in “Way Down Hadestown,” as Eurydice describes Hadestown as a place of leisure where “[e]verybody dresses in clothes so fine / ...sipping ambrosia wine.”⁹ Orpheus counters that “Everybody slaves by the sweat of his brow / The wage is nothing and the work is hard.”¹⁰ Not only will Hadestown not provide Eurydice with security, Orpheus argues, it will leave her in a worse situation than the one she is currently in. In the end, neither of them has any real power to change the world; the weather is fully out of their control.

Despite the dire threat Hadestown poses to the natural world, the weather the characters are concerned about is seen as normal. In “How Long?” Persephone and Hades argue about what to do with Orpheus, showing that they have become trapped in an unhappy cycle they feel powerless to stop. This is reflected in the extreme repetition of the rhymes, as each chorus contains the words “fit,” “pit,” and “spit” in successive lines.¹¹ Their marriage affects the seasons, as Persephone returning to Hadestown triggers the beginning of winter. However, there is no sense that their unhappiness is throwing the seasons out of balance, as becomes text in later versions of *Hadestown*. Rather, Persephone argues that “It’s true the earth must die / But then the earth comes back to life / And the sun just goes on rising.”¹² This is the typical change of seasons. Eurydice makes a similar argument in “Doubt Comes In,” encouraging Orpheus to “Just

⁵ “Epic (Part I),” in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-epic-part-i-lyrics.

⁶ “Epic (Part II),” in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-epic-part-ii-lyrics.

⁷ “Hey, Little Songbird,” in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-hey-little-songbird-lyrics.

⁸ Dave Oosterhuis, “Orpheus, the Original Penniless Poet: Plutus/Pluto in Anaïs Mitchell’s *Hadestown*,” *Syllecta Classica* 23, no. 1 (2013), 111.

⁹ “Way Down Hadestown,” in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-way-down-hadestown-lyrics. Eurydice’s verse is sung by the Fates in the 2016 version, and cut in 2019.

¹⁰ “Way Down Hadestown.” In 2019, reflecting the desire to make Orpheus more of an innocent, these lines are sung by Hermes instead; it is no longer a fight between the couple, but competing promises from powerful figures.

¹¹ “How Long?” in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-how-long-lyrics.

¹² “How Long?”

keep singing" because "The coldest night / Of the coldest year / Comes right before the spring."¹³ This metaphor for hope establishes changing seasons as normal.

There is a focus on weather and climate in the concept album, but not on climate change. This reflects American beliefs of the early twenty-first century. In 2007 and 2008, while seventy-five percent of Americans were aware of climate change, only between fifty and sixty-nine percent saw it as genuinely threatening.¹⁴ English professor Finis Dunaway argues that Americans did not feel that climate change was a threat to themselves, pointing to an iconic photograph of a polar bear. He argues that the "problem... still feels so remote, so far away (in both time and space) as to make it seem too abstract."¹⁵ This is echoed in the concept album. Mitchell locates *Hadestown* in both the distant future and the past, but not the present. It was not until 2012 — two years after the concept album was released — that Mitchell "clocked the tragic irony of simultaneous flooding in the east and drought in the west" during Hurricane Sandy.¹⁶ This revelation affects the later two albums.

The NYTW album from 2016 is significantly longer than the concept album, although it did not include eleven songs. One of those is "Any Way the Wind Blows," which opens the show. Reflecting Mitchell's experience with Hurricane Sandy, the climate of the show is much more unstable than in the concept album. The opening lyrics

In the fever of a world in flames / In the season of the hurricanes / Flood will get you if the fire don't... And there ain't a thing that you can do / When the weather takes a turn on you / 'Cept for hurry up and hit the road

emphasize the powerlessness of ordinary people in the face of climate crises.¹⁷ They are sung by the Fates, who typically repeat and strengthen a character's doubts; this verse is directed both at Eurydice and at the audience.

Hadestown does acknowledge the human cost of climate change. As musical theater scholar Valerie Lynn Schrader notes, Eurydice's story is that of an immigrant.¹⁸ Although Mitchell originally imagined her as "a migrant agricultural worker," both the NYTW and Broadway albums cast Eurydice as a climate refugee.¹⁹ As the opening song notes, Eurydice is looking for work and constantly on the move because there is no other option. Notably, this is never directly labeled in the show, likely because the term climate refugee has been highly controversial at times. After Hurricane Katrina, debate raged over the foreignizing effect of labeling American

¹³ "Doubt Comes In," in *Hadestown*, Righteous Babe Records, 2010, genius.com/Anais-mitchell-doubt-comes-in-lyrics.

¹⁴ Tien Ming Lee et al, "Predictors of Public Climate Change Awareness and Risk Perception Around the World," *Nature Climate Change* 5 (November 2015), 1015.

¹⁵ Finis Dunaway, "Seeing Global Warming: Contemporary Art and the Fate of the Planet," *Environmental History* 14, no. 1 (January 2009), 10.

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 24.

¹⁷ "Any Way the Wind Blows," *Hadestown*. New York Theatre Workshop, 2016, genius.com/Original-cast-of-hadestown-any-way-the-wind-blows-non-album-track-annotated.

¹⁸ Valerie Lynn Schrader "'Why We Build the Wall': Hegemony, Memory and Current Events in *Hadestown*," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 16, no. 2 (2022), 122.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 93.

citizens of color as refugees, particularly since white victims were often called evacuees.²⁰ The specifics of Eurydice's identity are unknown, and do not matter except for how they push her towards Hadestown. Anthropologist Adeline Masquelier notes that some academics object to the term "*environmental refugee*...because it excludes factors (such as political, economic, and social forces)" which are just as important as the environment in displacing people.²¹ Oosterhuis considers the question of whether Eurydice chose to enter Hadestown, or if she was forced to; referring to her circumstances, he asks whether there is any meaningful distinction between these definitions, as what she chose was based on her circumstances.²² This applies even more strongly when Eurydice is textually displaced by climate change.

The setting of the NYTW production is explicitly American, in a way that the concept album simply implied through musical style. Orpheus references Sing Sing prison and the Fates say that Hadestown is part of the Rust Belt.²³ Mitchell's Great Depression setting is also more evident, as the Fates describe Eurydice coming from "the belly of a bowl of dust."²⁴ As the historian William Riesbaume notes, the Dust Bowl is a vivid public memory, and dust blowing across the Plains is the most striking representation of the event, so it has been used to symbolize ecological crisis since the 1930s.²⁵ However, since Mitchell is using this imagery as literal set-dressing, she does not critically engage with it. The Dust Bowl evokes a feeling of helpless disaster in the American western plains, but anthropologist Hannah Holleman notes that this obscures the causation by colonial expansion, as well as the global scale on which similar soil erosion was occurring in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁶ Similarly, the importance of race is obscured in both popular memories of the Dust Bowl and all versions of *Hadestown*, as scholar Nia Wilson notes.²⁷ While actors of color portray Eurydice, Persephone, and on Broadway, Hermes and the workers, the concept album had an entirely white cast, which likely accounts for the missing consideration of race.

In NYTW, Mitchell changes the mythology of her show from what it had been in the concept album. While Persephone going to the Underworld still causes the seasons to change, the weather is now out of balance. This is most visible in the "Chant," where both romantic relationships break down. Persephone is disgusted by the changes Hades has made to the town — namely adding factories and a power grid, although she does not mention the wall which audiences were particularly focused on due to the Trump presidency — since they make

²⁰ Adeline Masquelier, "Why Katrina's Victims Aren't Refugees: Musings on a 'Dirty' Word," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4 (December 2006), 737.

²¹ Masquelier, "Why Katrina's Victims Aren't Refugees," 739.

²² Oosterhuis, "Orpheus, the Original Penniless Poet," 117.

²³ "Way Down Hadestown," in *Hadestown*, New York Theatre Workshop, 2016, genius.com/Original-cast-of-hadestown-way-down-hadestown-lyrics; "Way Down Hadestown II," genius.com/Original-cast-of-hadestown-way-down-hadestown-ii-annotated.

²⁴ "Any Way the Wind Blows."

²⁵ William Riesbaume, "The Dust Bowl: Historical Image, Psychological Anchor, and Ecological Taboo," *Great Plains Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1986), 131.

²⁶ Hannah Holleman, "De-naturalizing Ecological Disaster: Colonialism, Racism and the Global Dust Bowl of the 1930s," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (2017), 247.

²⁷ Steven Höhne, "Beyond American Dystopia: On the Rise of Apocalyptic Visions in the Contemporary United States," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 66, no. 1 (2021), 274; Nia Wilson, "Hadestown: Nontraditional Casting, Race, and Capitalism," *The Drama Review* 65, no. 1 (2021), 192.

Hadestown feel like a stereotypical Hell, hot and bright with artificial light.²⁸ She exclaims that it "ain't right and it ain't natural."²⁹ Hades protests that he is making these changes as an offering to her, and they continue to talk past each other. As Hermes warns the audience, "when the gods are having a fight / Everybody else better hold on tight!"³⁰ Hades and Persephone's dysfunctional relationship will throw the seasons increasingly out of balance, affecting the human population on the surface. Once again, their helplessness is emphasized.

By 2016, climate change had become a thematic element of *Hadestown*. It was now distinct from the normal functioning of the seasons, and there are multiple places where the show makes that difference clear. The audience is assumed to be aligned with the human population on the surface, who are at the mercy of the gods' whims. This reflects a realization that climate change was already occurring. However, it is still framed in largely historical terms, through the image of the Dust Bowl. While other events like flooding and fires — references to Hurricane Sandy and the California wildfires — are mentioned, the focus of the setting is still the Great Depression. It is no longer apocalyptic, because it is a current event.

By 2019, climate change was a central focus of the show. This reflects developments in concerns about climate change; it was understood in less abstract terms, as Americans experienced increasingly abnormal seasons.³¹ The Dust Bowl setting was dropped entirely, and was not replaced with a different historical event. While the show is still markedly American, the specific references are dropped. The horror of *Hadestown* is also altered; rather than learning that *Hadestown* is not "the promised land" as the Fates and Hades said it was, Eurydice learns that the workers lose their identities through working on the wall.³² It is not about a promise betrayed but a threat to personhood; while Hades's promise in "Hey, Little Songbird" is unchanged throughout the versions, the preexisting image of *Hadestown* as a place of leisure which Eurydice and the Fates express in the previous versions of "Way Down *Hadestown*" is absent.

The focus on climate change is largely the same on Broadway as it is in the NYTW album, but much stronger. In "Any Way the Wind Blows," Eurydice makes the same complaint as people living in 2019: there is "no spring or fall at all anymore."³³ Although NYTW makes it clear that this is the fault of Hades and Persephone's marriage collapsing, the Broadway version makes it explicit. Just before "Chant," Orpheus realizes "[Hades] came too soon / ...It's not supposed to be like this."³⁴ It is the first time a character has explicitly connected Hades with climate change. However, he is not the only party at fault. Although it was ultimately cut for time, Broadway reconfigured Persephone's verse in "Chant (Reprise)" — the song where Hades and Persephone explain their marriage to Orpheus and Eurydice, respectively — with a focus on her agency with

²⁸ For a discussion of the symbolic nature of border walls to Americans, see Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

²⁹ "Chant," in *Hadestown*, New York Theatre Workshop, 2016, genius.com/Original-cast-of-hadestown-chant-lyrics.

³⁰ "Chant."

³¹ Timo Müller and Michelle Yates, "Introduction: The Climate Issue." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 66, no. 1 (2021), 8; Wändi Bruine de Bruin and Andrew Dugan, "On the Differential Correlates of Climate Change Concerns and Severe Weather Concerns: Evidence from the World Risk Poll," *Climatic Change* 171, no. 33 (2022), 1. While severe weather and climate change are different, they are often conflated; abnormal weather makes people more concerned about climate change.

³² "Way Down *Hadestown* II."

³³ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 21.

³⁴ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 89.

the climate. Persephone explains that when she and Hades were younger, they “set [the world] spinning hand in hand.”³⁵ Here, Hades is not only a force of destruction, but half of a team needed to maintain the climate. As Orpheus expresses through the “Epic” songs, Hades has the potential to do better. Persephone’s objection to Hadestown is strengthened, as her verse in the first “Chant” now goes, “And in the meantime up above / The harvest dies and people starve / Oceans rise and overflow / It ain't right and it ain't natural.”³⁶ The issue is much bigger than Hadestown itself; it impacts the entire planet. Persephone’s concern for what her absence is doing is absent in other versions of the show.

The many operas which have used the Orpheus and Eurydice myth as the basis for their story must grapple with the fact that Orpheus ultimately fails; his art is not enough to change the world.³⁷ Writers have dealt with this in various ways; Mitchell chooses to embrace it, and to remind the audience that “there’s value in [Orpheus’s] trying and even in his failure.”³⁸ Although Orpheus himself ultimately fails, his song does not. In every version of the show, Orpheus convinces Hades to let him try to leave. While Orpheus is suspicious, Hermes — who is a mentor figure on Broadway — confirms that it is a test, not a trap. The outcome is not predetermined; if Orpheus does not look back, Eurydice will be freed from her contract. Orpheus doubts for just long enough to fail, but is given another chance to try because the show will be performed again.

This chance is real on both a metatextual and textual level: as Hermes leads the chorus through the final song, Eurydice appears again, having just come in from the cold, and encounters Orpheus for the first time. The cyclical nature of the show does a great deal to defuse the pessimism of the tragedy. In both the opening and closing numbers, the audience is warned that the show is a tragedy, but told that “Someone’s got to tell the tale / Whether or not it turns out well / Maybe it will turn out this time.”³⁹ This promise has increased in strength as the theme of climate change has grown in prominence. It is entirely absent from the concept album, and is weaker in NYTW, where Hermes says they have to tell the story again “*as if it might* turn out this time” (my emphasis).⁴⁰ Just as Hades is continually quelling riots and unaware of the (literal and metaphorical) crack in his border wall, there is always a promise that if one tries hard enough, things will turn out fine. This message applies to climate change as well; Orpheus’s goal is to reunite Hades and Persephone, and he succeeds in that goal over and over. Even though he has failed to rescue Eurydice, he has begun that process of reconciliation.

By the time the show reached Broadway, *Hadestown* no longer had a dystopian setting; it had a near-future one. The chronology accounts for a change in the tone of the endings. The show remains a tragedy for the characters, as Orpheus will always turn to look behind him. However, the audience experiences it differently. In his article on the concept album, Oosterhuis concludes

³⁵ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 195.

³⁶ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 105.

³⁷ Peter Burian, “The Fate of Orpheus on the Operatic Stage: Death and Transfiguration,” *Syllecta Classica* 23 (2012), 52.

³⁸ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 255.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Working on a Song*, 13.

⁴⁰ “Road to Hell II,” in *Hadestown*, New York Theatre Workshop, 2016, [genius.com/Original-cast-of-hadestown-road-to-hell-ii-annotated](https://www.genius.com/Original-cast-of-hadestown-road-to-hell-ii-annotated).

that "Hadestown is the world, we are the dead, and Orpheus is not among us."⁴¹ This bleak ending is much different than where Wilson arrives, as she argues that "Ultimately, *Hadestown* presents storytelling as a repeated act of hope."⁴² The Broadway show constantly reminds the audience that while climate change may seem insurmountable and the consequences of failure are great, the important thing is to keep trying.

⁴¹ Oosterhuis, "Orpheus, the Original Penniless Poet," 123.

⁴² Wilson, "Hadestown: Nontraditional Casting, Race, and Capitalism," 191.

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