Making Tracks: Lisa FitzGerald

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

By **Lisa FitzGerald**

Environments needle their way into our minds, becoming the settings for our stories but also telling their own tales.

Landscapes push back, shaping our bodies as we move through our lives. As Seamus Heaney wrote, the landscape is “written into your senses from the minute you begin to breathe.”**[1]** I was raised in Kerry on the west coast of Ireland and that, no doubt, has shaped me. Land positioned on the Atlantic seaboard means a mild and moist climate, battered peninsulas, and roaring tides. It’s where red fuchsias blanket the hedgerows, where ridged and furrowed lazy beds are etched into the landscape. It, too, is etched into and on to my body. Our stories are our engagements with our natural worlds.

Several years ago, as a fine art undergraduate, I tried to paint pictures that captured that interplay between the body and its subjective environmental experience. I was (in my own mind) painting that effervescent vitality that goes beyond words. For the last several years, theatre, that visceral art medium that involves the artist’s body merging with its surroundings, has been the locus for my exploration of environmental narratives—narratives that are produced as the space around us bears down on our skin, into our senses, and on to our minds. Bodies and space are constantly engaged in the production of a performance, and it is this environment that I review in my recent publication, *Re-Place: Irish Theatre Environments*.

I want to present theatre history as an environmental story. Theatre frames that idea of a body in space. It is a social form of situating the body in its environment; in Artaud’s words, culture becomes “a sort of second breath.”**[2]** The theatre can be

extended beyond the realm of the cultural to speak to a vital materiality. My work seeks to capture the interplay between theatre environments and the bodies that inhabit them: Theatre environments that consist of audiences and auditoria; the memories that are etched on the bodies of the performers; the scripts that are endlessly replayed and the archive that gathers up the traces of the past. Theatre is a great tool for environmental thinking because each performance is a small world; its life-filled sets offer ways of critically engaging with spatial practice and history.

My recent publication is also partly an experiment: a move into digital theatre environments that might well raise questions as to what defines theatre. Digital theatre history is a new phase in performance, and digital culture is very much a part of new and innovative performance practice. In nature there is no normal, but a constantly evolving system of flourishing. Seeing how theatre and digital technologies mesh is an attempt to overcome strict demarcations between real, live, and simulated environments. I want to overcome the live/performed dichotomy, to challenge the notions of authenticity, framing, and reproduction that have been a thorn in the side of both theatre and environmental narratives. I want to argue for a theatre practice that provides a critical point of engagement for pressing environmental issues, digital spaces that can inspire deep reflection on new natures and, above all, a performance space where culture is something we breathe.

Searching out my own space, I've since exchanged the periphery for the cosseted center. I've slowly huddled my way in from the outer perimeter of the European landmass to Germany and the Rachel Carson Center. My move has been for my work, but its greatest impact has been on my sense of who I am: the realization that I am definitely from the fringes of a place. My path to the environmental humanities has been perforated by doubts as to the importance of aesthetics in a time of crisis. But how we envision and frame the world is my point of entry into environmental issues. I hope that its value lies in the exploration of framing and narration that is such a large part of how we categorize nature.

Adapted from from Re-Place: Irish Theatre Environments (Peter Lang Oxford, 2017).

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[1] James Randall. "An Interview with Seamus Heaney." *Ploughshares* 5, no.3 (1979): 17.

[2] Antonin Artaud. The Theater and Its Double. Translated by Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958.