



Review by John Ellis

*Performing Remembering: Women's Memories of War in Vietnam*

Rivka Syd Eisner | Palgrave MacMillan, 2018 | 325 pp. ISBN: 978-3319736143

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*Performing Remembering* is an ethnographic study centered on the members of the Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group, a volunteer musical theatre troupe comprised of female veterans from Vietnam's Anti-French War and American War (the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War, respectively). Arranged as an oral history, *Performing Remembering* recounts the lives and wartime experiences of these performance group women, all the while traversing such foci as Vietnamese politics and national values. Therein, it dwells on the scholarly investigation of oral tradition, performance, gender, and the politics of memory—the political processes through which historical events are purposely recollected or abandoned. Ultimately, the book attempts a treatment of postwar trauma and its long-term effects, what the author calls “transgenerational violence,” through the deliberate practices of ethical performance and remembering. *Performing Remembering* was written by Rivka Syd Eisner, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. Eisner's work has been featured in such scholarly publications as *Performance Research*, *Cultural Studies*, *TDR: The Drama Review*, and *Theatre Research International*. She is the co-editor of the collection *Re-enacting the Past: Heritage, Materiality, and Performance* (Routledge, 2015).

While its core material spans the majority of 325, *Performing Remembering* is modestly partitioned into five sections, three of which comprise the aforementioned oral histories that compel Eisner's investigative discourse. The introductory chapter forms an extensive preamble, serving to chronicle portions of Vietnamese history and familiarize readers with the author's conceptual delineation of memory, reperformance, prospective remembering, and the politics of memory. Eisner proceeds to describe her visits to the performance group's shows and rehearsals, and she details its formation under the aegis of the Vietnamese government. After this broad induction, Eisner plots the ensuing chapters by way of her interviews with four of the performance group veterans. These dialogues are composed of anecdotes that recount the veterans' activism and sometimes violent opposition to French and American forces. Eisner couches these in her own considerable analyses; inevitably, the interviews veer into discussions of the veterans' imprisonment and torture subsequent to their capture, forming much of the insight through which Eisner instantiates her outlook on recovery from postwar trauma. It is here that Eisner ruminates on the far-reaching scope of war, specifically in the form of transnational and transgenerational violence.

The book's fifth section, “Answering to Transgenerational Violence,” serves as a denouement to Eisner's formulation of performance and remembering as therapeutic practices and vital means to assuaging collective suffering. In order to epitomize war's enduring costs, Eisner revisits the subject of the United States military's use of chemical defoliants during the Vietnam War and elaborates on their aftereffects—the protracted incidence of birth defects and infirmities amongst local populations, and perpetual ecological destruction. She concludes by expounding on the performance group members' efforts at advocacy for the victims of chemical defoliants, characterizing their activism as a form of performance.

Throughout *Performing Remembering*, Eisner cites numerous academics in the fields of history, international studies, southeast Asian studies, philosophy, cognitive psychology, cultural theory, gender studies, English, and literary criticism, amongst others. Readers may notice that Eisner instills in the text certain reoccurring elements; for instance, the interviews are rendered in an oddly strophic

form, as if to resemble poetry. Eisner also identifies “six critical motifs” (p. 193) within the performance group’s enactment of remembering: narrative eruption and disjunction, gendered traditions of pain-taking, returning to sites of imprisonment, corresponding with those who were lost to war, choosing to live with war trauma rather than pursuing treatment, and ethical witnessing. All six of these motifs return in Eisner’s subsequent considerations of the veterans’ experiences.

Eisner includes scenes of her own experiences with the veterans and their families in Vietnam, such as touring Con Dao Prison, the same prison where many of the veterans were tortured and detained decades before. Throughout this section, Eisner does not refrain from affirming the ambiguity surrounding wartime ethics nor from reemphasizing the Vietnamese Government’s manifold expressions of state-sponsored narratives. In the instance of her visit to Con Dao Prison, now a tourist-attraction beset with statues of anguished, emaciated prisoners, Eisner states:

the prison statues reduce the complicated politics of the wartime struggles to a clear, simple binary of oppressed vs. oppressor, good vs. evil. The more certain and declarative the messages are at historic sites, the more they seem simultaneously to perform the state’s insecurities regarding alternative readings of the past. (p. 97)

In the fourth chapter, Eisner elaborates on what she identifies as a ubiquitous cultural idiosyncrasy of the veterans and of Vietnamese women as a whole: paintaking. Paintaking, Eisner avers, is an ominously gendered expression; the performance group veterans repeatedly state their duty and privilege as Vietnamese women and citizens to unduly bear suffering in anything pertaining to state and familial affairs, in peace and at war. While Eisner denounces the veteran’s cultural lionization of suffering as a means of honoring one’s allegiances and demonstrating virtuous endurance, it is difficult not to draw comparisons to Victor Frankl’s own testimonial in *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl’s assertions on endured hardship and the acceptance and subsequent value of suffering in a concentration camp, are not unlike those of the veterans, as he states that suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning and purpose, specifically in the meaning of any deliberate sacrifice. (2006)

Regarding Eisner’s prose, while the book does contain straightforward narration and historical exposition, much of the text is comprised of swaths of referential deliberation. Herein, Eisner succumbs to an unbridled tendency to write sentences that are long and affected, and thus incoherent to the point of sheer irresponsibility. Some of Eisner’s writing is so knotted that one would venture to say that even academics familiar with the esoterica to which she so frantically alludes are sure to get mired in the bewildering dimensions of her sentences if not the consistently abstruse terminology. Case in point, the opening sentence to the section “transgenerational remembering” reads,

Co Kim Dung’s narratives evoke the ambivalent pleasures and playfulness of revolutionary masquerade, the necessity of enacting radical street performances against colonial power and the problematics of employing violence, the inspiring pierce of the memory punctum as a narrative force that moves memory and history into and through individuals and across social bodies, the co-sustaining powers generated through exchange with ancestors, the contractual significance of a cherished performative object, and the historical importance of commemorative pilgrimage as a means of teaching and transferring memory from one generation to the next. (p. 181)

This sentence is not the exception, and an appropriate way to respond to it and other portions of Eisner’s writing is by castigating her editor. In addition, it brings to light how preventable it could have been had Eisner inserted a period somewhere or simply attempted to be more straightforward. The chapters abound with conceptual language thematically linked to Eisner’s premises of remembering and reperforming, but she often does little to explicate meaning or context, leaving the

reader adrift in a lexical morass and doubting even her grasp of the circuitous dissections to which she has subjected them.

Despite these issues, one should still consider the sheer breadth of material Eisner has so dutifully amassed in the endeavor that is *Performing Remembering*. Moreover, the heart of the book and its larger inquiry, is continually reestablished in the words of the performance group veterans themselves. It is in their accounts as adolescents embroiled in war that the reader begins to understand the gravitas of Eisner's premises, such as when one veteran relates throwing a grenade into a cinema, a cinema containing not only French Soldiers, but also innocent civilians and Vietnamese citizens. It is by way of such complicated, problematic, and sometimes incomprehensible nationalistic violence and sacrifice, that the reader can begin to construct an interpretation that Eisner herself is so evidently pursuing. In her dialogues with these women, Eisner unearths many questions, but not without addressing the possibility of restorative answers. This is largely exemplified by the veterans' own willingness to so openly share the past, and in Eisner's "ethical witness" of the veteran's reenactments in the context of their performances. It is in this that the reader comes to understand the complexities of war, postwar trauma, the past, and the sheer act of remembering. Indeed, perhaps the most cogent summation of *Performing Remembering* is when Eisner quotes Rebecca Schneider, a professor of theatre arts and performance studies: "much reenactment, in art and in war, is a battle concerning the future of the past" (p. 97).

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#### References

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