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# Public Historians' Duty: Agitators, Scholars, Social Justice Warriors?

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**Abstract:** This article examines the intersections between memory activism, academia, and public history through the case of the Traveling Museum of Memory and Identity of Montes de María, known as *El Mochuelo*, in the Colombian Caribbean. The museum, a peripatetic and community-driven initiative, travels across 15 municipalities affected by decades of armed conflict, using interactive and largely non-material displays rooted in oral traditions and cultural practices. Drawing on long-term engagement with the project, the article argues that *El Mochuelo* exemplifies how collaboration among activists, scholars, and local communities can produce meaningful and situated understandings of the past. Rather than treating research and activism as opposing domains, the case demonstrates their productive convergence, highlighting shared ethical and political commitments. Situated within broader debates on memory activism and decolonial museology, the article shows how grassroots initiatives challenge official narratives, foreground marginalized voices, and contribute to processes of symbolic reparation and community rebuilding. By emphasizing creativity, resistance, and interdisciplinarity, *El Mochuelo* reveals the potential of public history as a flexible and engaged practice that bridges academic inquiry and social justice work, ultimately questioning the possibility of neutrality in contexts marked by violence and historical injustice.

**Keywords:** Colombia; activism; Montes de María; Traveling Museum; violence; memory

On November 15, 2023, the *Traveling Museum of the Memory and Identity of Montes de María,* aka *El Mochuelo*, located in the Colombian Caribbean, won the Activist Museum Award from The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. It marks the first time a Latin American venue was granted this honor, highlighting efforts to make sociopolitical and environmental changes in the community.[1] On top of being a worldwide recognition of the more than 12 years of work related to *El Mochuelo,* the award is also an acknowledgement of creativity, activist memory, and even a decolonial exercise.

This article grew out of a research project I began in 2013 after visiting several memory sites in Colombia. It explores the connections between memory activism, academia, and public history through the case of *El Mochuelo*, a compelling example of how collaboration among diverse stakeholders can generate insightful understandings of the past. Rather than positioning research and activism as opposing binary forces, this case demonstrates how they can complement one another – enriching both scholarly inquiry and community-based efforts. When these spheres intersect, they offer the potential for meaningful, shared outcomes that benefit all participants. This grassroots venue, for instance, showcases how the partnership between academics, researchers and activists encouraged not only theoretical and practical developments of the museum field in Colombia, but also promoted people's actions to keep advocating for their communities' wellbeing. *El Mochuelo's* example also raises the matter of interdisciplinarity, politics, and ethics in public history. They use approaches from social anthropology, sociology, philosophy, comparative literature, cultural studies, and other humanities and social sciences to achieve their goals. In addition, and related to ethics and politics, public researchers and activists must have the knowledge and skill to decide when to step in, when to leave, and when and how to become community advocates.

Although *El Mochuelo* was not among the places I explored at that time, those explorations ignited my scholarly interest in community-led commemorative initiatives. I first encountered *El Mochuelo* in 2014, when a Colombian newspaper reported on its work, prompting me to incorporate it into my ongoing study.[2] What first captured my attention was not only its engagement with memory and the

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1 "The Activist Museum Award 2024: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG)," University of Leicester, November 28, 2023, https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/activist-museum-award.

2 Adriana De la Cruz Pallares, "*Los nuevos vientos del mochuelo*," *El Universal*, August 3, 2013, https://www.eluniversal.com.co/regional/2013/08/03/los-nuevos-vientos-del-mochuelo/.

representation of violence, but also its structure as a fully mobile museum rather than a single itinerant exhibition. *El Mochuelo* operates as a peripatetic venue that relocates approximately every three months across the 15 municipalities of Montes de María. Instead of transporting objects in traditional display cases, the museum is designed for easy assembly and movement, relying on digital media, photographs, interactive installations, games, and oral narratives contributed by community members. This format allows each community to host, adapt, and actively participate in the exhibition, transforming the museum into a collaborative and evolving space. While traveling exhibitions are common in Latin America, the idea of an entire museum circulating through a region remains unusual, making *El Mochuelo* a particularly innovative model for engaging with dispersed populations affected by violence. This approach seemed especially compelling given that the museum addresses the traumatic experiences endured by the communities of Montes de María during Colombia's recent internal armed conflict, which began in the 1980s. I was particularly interested in how local residents have drawn on their intangible heritage as a means of resisting violence and advocating for peace.[3] I have established a professional and collaborative relationship with its curators and community leaders, which has granted me access to the project's conceptual framework, exhibition script, development process, and archival material.

## 1 Land, Violence, and Memory: The Struggles of Montes de María

The enduring armed conflict in Colombia, spanning more than five decades officially from 1964 to 2016 but persisting to this day, has prompted numerous communities, scholars, and activists to unite in their quest to understand the past and present challenges they face. The Montes de María region comprises 15 towns rich in natural and cultural resources. Its geographical importance – particularly its access to the Gulf of Morrosquillo[4] – has made it a strategic corridor for drug trafficking and agriculture, earning it the nickname "the Caribbean pantry."[5] The region is also home to diverse flora, fauna, and communities, including the Zenú Indigenous people and multiple groups who value oral traditions like music, storytelling, and poetry.[6]

Beginning in the 1980s, this once-vibrant region was engulfed in violence. Guerrilla groups such as the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (Revolutionary People's Army – ERP), *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia-People's Army – FARC-EP), and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (People's Liberation Army, ELN), established a presence in the area, financing their operations through cattle theft, kidnappings, and civilian harassment.[7] In response, local peasants turned for support to organizations like the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia* (National Association of Peasant Users of Colombia – ANUC), founded in 1967.[8] As drug lords entered the region in the 1990s, the situation deteriorated. From 1996 to 2005, over 234,000 people became victims of violence, including community leaders, farmers, students, LGBTQ + individuals, unionists, Indigenous peoples, and human rights defenders.[9] The presence of diverse actors with conflicting interests in the region made life extremely difficult for the residents, who were frightened and reluctant to take sides.

The Montes de María region stands out as one of the areas in Colombia most deeply impacted by the armed conflict during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. In its Final Report, the Colombian Truth Commission documents a series of atrocities that likely exceed those officially recorded.[10] The following Table 1 is a compilation made by community researchers, including Soraya Bayuelo –community

3 Jimena Perry, "Reflexiones en torno al Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial: ¿Eso qué es y para qué sirve?," *OPCA Bulletin* no. 6, February 2014, Department of Anthropology, University of los Andes, Bogotá.

4 The Gulf of Morrosquillo is a gulf of the Caribbean Sea bounded by the Colombian Departments of Sucre and Córdoba. It runs approximately 80 km (50 miles) from the mouth of the Sinú River, in Córdoba, to San Bernardo Point in Sucre.

5 María Aguilera Díaz, *Montes de María: Una subregión de economía campesina y empresarial* (Cartagena: Banco de la República, 2013), 2.

6 Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, "Los Montes de María: análisis de la conflictividad," June 10, 2010, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/documents/projects/COL/00058220_Analisis%20conflcitividad%20Montes%20de%20Maria%20PDF.pdf. es.wikipedia.org+6info.undp.org+6.

7 Ibid.

8 Asociación de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia, ANUC, http://anuc.co/dynamicdata/historia.php.

9 Giovanni Castro, Soraya Bayuelo Castellar, and Italia Isadora Samudio Reyes, "Museo itinerante de la memoria y la identidad de los Montes de María: tejiendo memorias y relatos para la reparación simbólica, la vida y la convivencia," in *Estudios para la paz: representaciones, imaginarios y estrategias en el conflicto armado* (Bogotá: 2013), 162. Does it have en editor; which publishing house?

10 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, *Colombia Adentro – Caribe,* Vol. Territorial del Informe Final (Bogotá: Comisión de la Verdad, 2022), 75–120, https://biblioteca.hegoa.ehu.eus/downloads/21426/system/pdf/4633/M-7071_CEV_colombia-adentro_04-caribe.pdf.

**Table 1:** Some massacres perpetrated in the montes de maría region between 1991 and 2007.

| Rural area | Municipality | Year |
|---|---|---|
| El Palmar | Ovejas | 1991 |
| La Haya | San Juan Nepomuceno | 1991 |
| El Cielo | Chalán | 1992 |
| Pichilín | Colosó | 1996 |
| La Pelona | San Onofre | 1997 |
| La Libertad | San Onofre | 1997, 2000 |
| San Isidro | El Carmen de Bolívar | 1999 |
| Caracolí | El Carmen de Bolívar | 1999 |
| Capaca y Campoalegre | Zambrano | 1999 |
| Las Palmas | San Jacinto | 1999 |
| El Salado | Carmen de Bolívar | 2000 |
| Las Brisas, San Cayetano, Mampuján | María la Baja y San Juan Nepomuceno | 2000, 2001 2002 |
| Mata de Perro | El Carmen de Bolívar | 2000 |
| Flor del Monte, Canutal y Canutalito | Ovejas | 2000 |
| Chinulito y el Cerro | Colosó | 2000 |
| Chengue | Ovejas | 2001 |
| Retiro Nuevo | María la Baja | 2001 |
| Macayepo | El Carmen de Bolívar | 2000 |
| La Aventura | Córdoba | 2002 |
| Los Guámaros y el Tapón | San Juan Nepomuceno | 2002 |
| Arenas | San Jacinto | 2003 |
| La Sierra | Carmen de Bolívar | 2004 |
| Don Gabriel | Ovejas | 2005 |
| Bajo Grande | Carmen de Bolívar | 2007 |

leader and one of the founders of *El Mochuelo* – and her team. Among these, the 2000 El Salado massacre remains the most notorious. Over five days, approximately 450 paramilitary fighters killed more than 100 people, despite advance warnings to the government. Victims included men, women, and children ranging from six to 65 years old, many of whom were tortured and murdered in public.[11] Table 1 includes 24 of the 117 most unfortunately well-known massacres documented in the Montes de María region.[12]

The National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) addressed the El Salado atrocity in its 2009 publication *La masacre de El Salado: esa guerra no era nuestra* ("The Salado Massacre: That Was Not Our War"), edited by historian Gonzalo Sánchez. Testimonies from survivors describe horrifying scenes of brutality – beatings, mutilations, and psychological torture inflicted in front of entire communities. Three paramilitary groups, supported by powerful regional families, carried out the killings and torture.[13] Other massacres, like those in Chengue, Macayepo, and Las Palmas, did not receive the same level of media attention but had equally devastating effects. The first recorded massacre, in El Cielo (Chalán) in 1992, left eight family members dead at the hands of unidentified armed men. From this point, violence escalated. The 1995 assassination of Sucre's former governor by the FARC-EP marked a turning point, igniting a period of widespread terror: kidnappings, bombings, farm burnings, and mass killings became routine. Civilians were trapped between three forces – guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the state – each accusing the other and often targeting innocent farmers.[14]

In 1996, paramilitaries murdered a civic leader couple in front of their home while they held their infant child. That same year, 15 council members of the Civic Movement of Sucre were assassinated. Farmers, receiving little to no state protection, responded by creating Convivir (Cooperatives for Rural Security) and reaching out to paramilitary groups in Urabá. This opened the door for the infamous Castaño brothers – Fidel, Carlos, and Vicente – leaders of the Peasant Self-Defenders of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU), to expand their operations into Montes de María. The Castaño brothers, whose father was kidnapped and killed by the FARC-EP in 1980, vowed to eradicate guerrilla influence. Linked to drug traffickers and known for their cruelty, the brothers were responsible for over 140,000 deaths. The paramilitary escalation did not eliminate guerrilla groups but decimated communities, left thousands of women and children in poverty, and opened new drug trafficking routes.[15]

Between 1994 and 1999, daily life in Montes de María involved mass killings, disappearances, and displacement. Even after the demobilization of paramilitary groups began in 2005, guerrilla violence and state infrastructure bombings persisted. Only when the army re-entered the region did guerrilla activity begin to wane. This moment of relative peace allowed communities to organize into victims'

**11** Gonzalo Sánchez, *La masacre de El Salado: esa guerra no era nuestra* (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2009).

**12** Edwin De los Ríos, Carmen Andrea Becerra Becerra, and Fabián Enrique Oyaga Martínez, *Montes de María: entre la consolidación del territorio y el acaparamiento de tierras. Aproximación a la situación de Derechos Humanos y el Derecho Internacional Humanitario en la región (2006–2012)* (Bogotá: Publicaciones ILSA, 2012), 11. This table was made with data gathered from a 2017 interview with Bexielena Hernández, anthropologist and founder of Estudio Mapping, a company that designs and produces exhibitions. Estudio Mapping oversaw the design of *El Mochuelo* during 2015; thus, its team of professionals outlined a timeline of the violence in Montes de María.

**13** Gonzalo Sánchez, *La masacre de El Salado: esa guerra no era nuestra* (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2009), 24–27.

**14** "¿Cómo se fraguó la tragedia de los Montes de María?," *VerdadAbierta*, September 2, 2010, https://verdadabierta.com/icomo-se-fraguo-la-tragedia-de-los-montes-de-maria/.

**15** Ibid.

associations to reclaim their histories and seek justice. However, the vacuum left by demobilized paramilitaries was quickly filled by emerging criminal groups known as *bandas criminales* or *bacrim*. Composed largely of former paramilitaries, these groups – such as the Águilas Negras, Erpac, and Rastrojos – have continued the cycle of violence through cocaine trafficking and extortion, albeit without political aims. According to the Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ), by 2010, bacrim were responsible for more violence than guerrillas.[16]

This prolonged cycle of brutality has contributed to the continued marginalization of survivors, many of whom are unjustly linked to various armed factions. As historian Gonzalo Sánchez notes, rural communities frequently endure the weight of these false associations.[17] In response, residents of Montes de María have undertaken efforts to reclaim their sense of self and collective past, emphasizing stories of endurance over victimization and using *El Mochuelo* as a site for remembrance and emotional recovery. Within this broader context, approximately 30 commemorative initiatives now exist across Colombia, including *El Mochuelo*, which play a vital role in honoring community experiences and restoring dignity.[18] Figure 1 illustrates the appearance of *El Mochuelo*.

**Figure 1:** Traveling Museum of the Memory and Identity of Montes de María, El Mochuelo. @CCCMMaL21, 2019. Copyright: Archive of the Corporación Colectiva de Comunicaciones Montes de María Linea 21.

## 2 El Mochuelo's Resistances

Following a community-driven process that spanned more than 12 years, *El Mochuelo* officially launched on March 15, 2019, beginning its tour across the 15 townships that make up the Montes de María Colombian region.[19] The origins of this initiative trace back to 1994, when a group of journalists, educators, cultural advocates, and local leaders founded the *Montes de María Communications Collective Corporation Line* 21 (Corporación Colectiva de Comunicaciones Montes de María Línea 21) in El Carmen de Bolívar, one of the 15 townships. The organization was established with the goal of fostering civic participation and encouraging residents to assert their rights through various forms of communication.

Under the guidance of community leader and journalist Soraya Bayuelo – a survivor of violence after the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia-People's Army, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) murdered her niece – the Collective has worked to inspire children, youth, and adults to envision and build a peaceful future. Their efforts have included the creation of community-based television, radio, cinema, and print media. In recognition of this work, the organization received the Colombian National Peace Prize in 2003.[20]

Drawing inspiration from Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the group also launched an annual community film festival of the same name in 2002. Its traveling format aims to reach audiences who otherwise lack access to cultural events. This commitment to mobility and accessibility laid the groundwork for a new project: beginning in 2008, the Collective envisioned the creation of a traveling museum. After more than a decade of planning, the museum was finally inaugurated in 2019.[21]

**16** "Profiles: Colombia's Armed Groups," *BBC News Latin America & Caribbean*, August 20, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-11400950.

**17** Sánchez, *La masacre de El Salado*, 24–27.

**18** International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, "Red Colombiana de Lugares de Memoria – RCLM," *Sites of Conscience*, https://www.sitesofconscience.org/membership/red-colombiana-de-lugares-de-memoria-rclm/.

**19** These are the towns that compose the Montes de María region: El Carmen de Bolívar, María La Baja, San Juan Nepomuceno, San Jacinto, Córdoba, Zambrano, and El Guamo in Bolívar; Ovejas, Chalán, Colosó, Morroa, Toluviejo, Los Palmitos, San Onofre, and San Antonio de Palmitos in Sucre.

**20** *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, and El *Colombiano* newspapers, *Semana* magazine, radio and television network *Caracol*, and the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung en Colombia, Fescol, promote the award. The Collective won the fifth national prize for being a tool that favors peace initiatives, solidarity, socioeconomic development, and understanding among Colombians. "Montes de María, Premio Nacional de Paz 2003," N.D. https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-1045178.

**21** In 2020 *El Mochuelo* won a prize in the category "Ephemeral and Interior Spaces" at the 27th Colombian Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism, in recognition of the functional and symbolic design of its

As previously noted, from the outset, the development and operation of *El Mochuelo* have constituted a genuinely collective effort, involving community members, local leaders, activists, researchers, and academics. Those involved in the venue's creation emphasize its non-static nature because they believe in the cultural enrichment produced by the interaction between socially dynamic actors and the inhabitants of the area. They also highlight its peripatetic character which allows the site not to dispense conventional glass cases and museological artefacts, such as pottery, paper documents, or material culture.[22] Instead, the founders of *El Mochuelo* envisioned it as a space for interactive displays, pictures, videos, games, paintings, and other structures easy to set up and move around. This presented a notable challenge in the Colombian context, where traveling exhibitions were familiar, but an entirely mobile museum was unprecedented. It also underscored the need for Colombian museums to revise their interpretive frameworks – integrating marginalized and peripheral voices alongside official state narratives – and to rethink their exhibition practices and environments to maintain relevance for contemporary audiences. One of the only objects displayed is called the "Tree of Life," a wooden structure from where branches grow and bear the names of some of the victims of the armed conflict, as illustrated in Figure 2. The names are only displayed with their family's permission.

The museum's script has five modules which illustrate its three axes: Identity, memory, and territory. The first section welcomes the visitor. It has two rocking chairs which represent the regional custom of sitting in the doorways of houses to talk with friends. It also welcomes the visitors with a text written in *décimas*, ten-line stanza of poetry in Spanish and translated into some native languages, such as the one spoken by the Zenú Indians. Beatriz Ochoa, community leader and co-founder of *El Mochuelo*, authored the following poem, which plays in a daily recording when the venue opens its doors:

> Now we created a museum
> Just as we dreamt about it As a bird of our territory That heals with its flight Our life project.
> We welcome
> This Mochuelo and its flight.

This poem illustrates what the creators of the Traveling Museum expect from *El Mochuelo*. The text explicitly refers to the power of words, as highlighted by Soraya Bayuelo, to their orality, therefore, their immaterial heritage. The inhabitants of Montes de María followed their common sense when they decided to represent the brutalities endured. According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, social groups resort to what is natural and obvious for them – culture – when narrating stories.[23] Therefore, when addressing violent and traumatic pasts, as these communities do in their memory sites, culture directly informs their depictions, which in turn confirms the heterogeneity of historical memories. *El Mochuelo's* second section represents Montes de María with pictures and interactive maps. It also includes postcards with images of the region's cartography, territory, women, and children. The third and fourth parts represent empowerment through music and gastronomy.

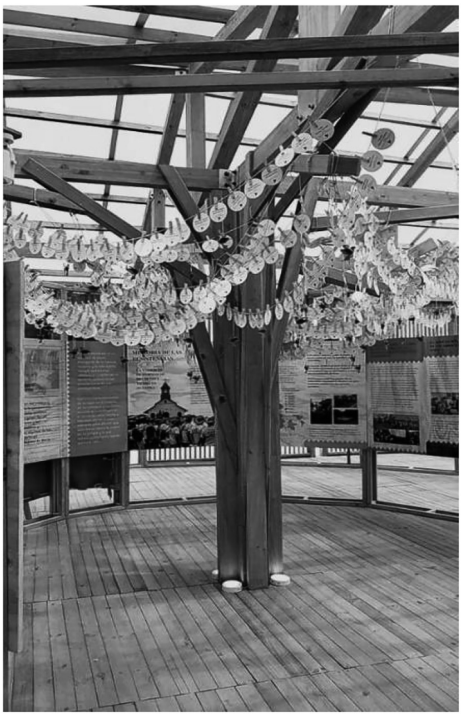

**Figure 2:** "Tree of Life." @CCCMMaL21, 2019. Copyright: Archive of the Corporación Colectiva de Comunicaciones Montes de María Linea 21.

One of the most impactful sections of the museum also refer to the ways in which the inhabitants of Montes de María endured violence and how they remember it. In a panel named "Memories of the Resistances," the visitors of *El Mochuelo* can read about the different strategies used to defend their territory and culture. Another artifact that keeps the flame of resistance alive is the so-called "memory sheet," a large cloth on which members of the communities have imprinted phrases of hope and their memories.

itinerant structure. In 2020, also, *El Mochuelo* was awarded the Alejandro Ángel Escobar National Prize for Solidarity by the Alejandro Ángel Escobar Foundation.

**22** Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).

**23** Clifford Geertz, *La Interpretación de Las Culturas* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2011).

The fifth and last section is a space devoted to the communities' children; it is a "playground." Here, it is common to see children playing the traditional *golosa*, or hopscotch game, and women singing children's tunes. It is a popular game in which players toss a small object into numbered triangles, or a pattern of rectangles outlined on the ground and then hop through the spaces to retrieve the object. This section includes games and activities related to the knowledge of the territory and the cultural identity of the municipalities of Montes de María.[24]

The aim of *El Mochuelo's* creators is for the inhabitants of Montes de María to feel proud of who they are, their history, and enrich their cultural immaterial heritage inventory. Displaying their food traditions, recipes, and material culture associated with it serves as an example of a decolonial process taking place in the area. Encouraged and promoted by El *Mochuelo's* existence, food sovereignty has been the subject of meetings and discussion about the application of the concept since 2012. Although still under development, the basic premise is:

> the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.[25]

This idea plays a significant role in the itinerant venue due to the references made to it in its displays. For instance, one of the panels of the main display is composed of the picture of a traditional bowl used to carry and drink water. The container is made from materials grown in the region: supplies that the inhabitants of Montes de María know how to work, handle, and make use of.

Along with community building and developing cultural pride, the main goal of the founders of *El Mochuelo* is to make people aware of the brutalities they endured during the armed conflict and to honor the victims of the decades-long war. So far, community leader and founder Soraya Bayuelo has recorded 117 massacres committed by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the National Army of Colombia, nearly double of those recognized by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH). This exercise is an illustration of the fruitful collaboration between academics and activists highlighting community resistance actions that generally go unnoticed. Bayuelo, with help from researchers of the National Center for Historical Memory as well as history and anthropology professors from the National University of Colombia, documented and researched these massacres making them part of the official historical record of the country.

Among the first academics who got involved with *El Mochuelo* were anthropologist Italia Isadora Samudio Reyes, who investigates gender, the armed conflict, and peace, and historian and museologist Giovanni Castro. They did considerable fieldwork, along with Bayuelo and other community members. Based on the information and data they gathered, they suggested effective ways to convey Montes de María residents' memories of the war, their cultural resistance, history, and diversity via the museum. Additionally, graphic designers from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá contributed to the development of the museum's mobile structure as part of the broader working group. The museum emerged from a collaborative process involving a diverse group including a variety of perspectives, from locals who experienced the armed conflict firsthand to professionals and intellectuals from across the country. This case also illustrates how academic institutions, grassroots initiatives, and public history practices can intersect to generate outcomes that respond to shared commitments and local needs. The creators of the venue also remain deeply engaged in its ongoing activities, as illustrated in Figure 3, which captures Bayuelo leading a guided tour.

The team of *El Mochuelo* refers to the museum as "a place for words," a site where anyone can speak without fear and where everyone is welcomed. The production team believe that the three main axes of the venue, mentioned before – memory, identity, and territory – are inclusive enough to enable *El Mochuelo* to become a place in which the

**Figure 3:** @CCCMMaL21, 2022. Copyright: Archive of the Corporación Colectiva de Comunicaciones Montes de María Línea 21.

**24** Adriana de la Cruz Pallares, Los nuevos vientos del mochuelo, August 3, 2013, https://www.eluniversal.com.co/regional/2013/08/03/los-nuevos-vientos-del-mochuelo/.

**25** "Food Sovereignty," US Food Sovereignty Alliance, https://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/what-is-food-sovereignty/.

residents of the region can recreate their traditional culture. At the Traveling Museum, territory is conceptualized as a foundation that allows people to think about themselves as lead characters of their history. Territory also addresses the body and spirit of the people of the region, represented by music and other ancestral and historic traditions. The identity element refers to the Montes de María inhabitants' social organization, ways of thinking, imaginaries, and different cultural expressions. Memory, in turn, is meant to be a collective exercise, transcending the private sphere, and has become a determining activist commitment, as demonstrated with the award received in 2023. The communities involved in this process use memory as a political tool to redefine themselves and their territories. The 15 social groups of Montes de María continuously reinvent the museum spaces.

In an interview conducted in April 2022, Bayuelo highlighted a shared understanding between herself and the local community of the advantages of working with academics. She explained that these collaborations have strengthened El Mochuelo and, as a result, prompted her to recognize the importance of improving her writing skills, in her own words, learning to write "better."[26] Therefore, she is pursuing a master's in creative writing in a University in Colombia and trains the people from Montes de María through radio and television workshops. She is so attentive to the advantages that a fruitful collaboration between academics and activists brings that during April of 2022, she and her team organized the online conference *Memorias ConSentidas* (Consented Memories). This event was organized as follows: In the mornings there were presentations about *El Mochuelo* done by the people of the region, activists, teachers, and social leaders. In the afternoons, the presenters were academics who had researched and written about the traveling venue. After each block of papers there was some time for discussion where all parties gather to exchange ideas. On the first day, Bayuelo and many of the morning speakers were present, because in their own words: "We are curious to know how people who are not from the region see us. We want to know what you imagine and think about us."

This statement is an invitation for public historians to consider their own practice. Speaking for myself as a faculty member of an academic institution, my responsibilities encompass teaching history classes and conducting fieldwork whenever opportunities arise. I strive to seamlessly integrate anthropology and history into my work, recognizing the distinctiveness of each interaction with communities or groups of people. Embracing the dynamic nature of these engagements, I am reminded that there are no rigid rules or scripted approaches. Consequently, I view public history as a catalyst for bridging academia and activism, providing adaptable tools that facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaboration across disciplines.

## 3 Creativity and Memory Activism as a Decolonial Exercise

*El Mochuelo* case is a prime example of memory activism, as defined in the introduction of *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*: "The strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels."[27] Like most Colombian memory sites, *El Mochuelo* does not receive funding from the state. Its resources come from international entities, such as the French Embassy in Bogotá, which is administered by the CNMH.[28] The *Agencia Catalana de Cooperación al Desarrollo* (Catalan Agency for International Development Cooperation – AECID), also funded the final part of the research for the museum. The lack of state support demonstrates the unwillingness of the national government to memorialize the suffering of marginalized victims, an issue addressed by the government of Gustavo Petro (2022–2026), who tried to bridge the gap between academia and other social sectors, such as the economic, political, and cultural ones.

Since 1995, Colombia has witnessed a range of memorialization initiatives, beginning with the *Parque Monumento a las Víctimas de Trujillo* (Monument Park for the Trujillo Victims), established to commemorate more than 340 acts of

**26** Soraya Bayuelo, Interview by Jimena Perry, May 25, 2023.

**27** Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg, "Introduction: The Activist Turn in Memory Studies," in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, eds. Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg (New York: Routledge, 2023), 1–15.

**28** On February 1, 2020, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience suspended the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) in Bogotá from its global network of over 275 memory initiatives. Other Colombian members – such as the Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación and Museo Casa de la Memoria – remain fully supported. The suspension followed CNMH's failure to respond to concerns about biased statements and its lack of adherence to key principles, including recognition of Colombia's armed conflict and victims' rights. Reinstatement requires a public commitment to the Coalition's and RESLAC's principles, and full support for inclusive, community-based memory work. International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, *Statement on the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica of Colombia*, February 2020, https://www.sitesofconscience.org/2020/02/statement-on-the-centro-nacional-de-memoria-historica-of-colombia/.

violence – including enforced disappearances, torture, and killings – committed between 1988 and 1994.[29] Inspired by this memorial, a wave of community-based remembrance projects began to emerge across the country from the mid-1990s onward.[30] Despite their significance, most of these efforts have received little to no institutional backing. Survivors, local organizers, and victims' associations led these processes in every sense, seeking to confront the trauma inflicted by the armed conflict between 1980 and 2000. These commemorative spaces, often located in rural or underserved regions, took diverse forms such as murals, mobile exhibitions and venues, community halls, cemeteries, and photographic displays, among many others. Beyond honoring the deceased, their purpose was to support survivors in their recovery and enable them to assert control over the narratives of their past. Unlike official memory policies, these grassroots endeavors arose organically from affected communities, were sustained with very limited resources, and centered on the experiences of those who suffered violence rather than reproducing dominant or state-sanctioned accounts.

The wide range of memory initiatives in Colombia demonstrates the complex and multifaceted ways in which remembrance and historical representation are approached. The material expressions of these projects – such as their spatial configurations, curated artifacts, and narrative frameworks – reveal distinct cultural logics and symbolic intentions. Together, they underscore the dynamic and heterogeneous character of collective memory. While many of these spaces were conceived as sites of mourning and tribute, they also served critical pedagogical and political purposes, presenting counter-histories that questioned official accounts and reoriented public interpretations of the armed conflict. The expansion of such commemorative endeavors in Colombia during the 1990s and 2000s corresponded with wider movements across Latin America, where societies similarly grappled with the aftermath of state-sponsored repression and paramilitary violence.[31] Though differing in form and context, these spaces often paralleled conventional museum practices by engaging in archival research, safeguarding testimonies, and curating exhibitions related to recent atrocities. Their contributions were central to truth-seeking efforts and the reweaving of social bonds in post-conflict settings. On the international stage, the creation of the International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes (ICMEMO) in 2001 marked a pivotal step in recognizing and legitimizing these institutions. According to ICMEMO, memory museums are established to honor those harmed by violence rooted in political, social, or ideological motives.[32] Frequently situated at the locations where such events occurred, or in sites selected by those directly affected, these museums strive to maintain historical accuracy while forging links with ongoing demands for justice, acknowledgment, and reconciliation. Though many memory museums predated ICMEMO's formal definition, the organization's work helped categorize and give visibility to venues that previously operated without institutional validation. In Colombia, this institutionalization took shape with the controversial and unsuccessful establishment of the *Museo Nacional de la Memoria* (National Memory Museum),[33] a state-sponsored initiative mandated by Law 1,448. Under the direction of the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, the museum was intended to fulfill several key objectives: uncover the truth about the violence committed since 1980, promote respect for the diversity of memories related to the war, dignify victims, restore the social fabric disrupted by armed conflict, and contribute to the prevention of future violence.

The case of Colombia's memory initiatives – particularly the tension between grassroots and state-sponsored projects – illustrates the political and cultural complexities of representing violence in post-conflict societies. While grassroots memory sites like *El Mochuelo* have emerged as spaces for healing, resistance, and community engagement, institutional projects such as the controversial and stagnant National Memory Museum are vulnerable to shifts in political power that can undermine their credibility and purpose. At stake in these debates is not only the interpretation of the past but also the construction of national identity and the possibilities for justice and reconciliation in the present. As memory remains contested terrain, the work of preserving inclusive and participatory narratives continues to be a vital, even if fraught, endeavor in Colombia's ongoing reckoning with its violent history. Significantly, from June 15 to September 17, 2023, *El Mochue*lo was featured at the National

29 "Trujillo Massacre," *Peace Brigades International – Colombia Project*, August 7, 2016, https://pbicolombia.org/2016/07/08/trujillo-massacre/.

30 Red Colombiana de Lugares de Memoria, "Red Colombiana de Lugares de Memoria," *Sitios de Memoria*, https://sitiosdememoria.org/es/institucion/red-colombiana-de-lugares-de-memoria/.

31 Jimena Perry, *Trying to Remember: Museums, Exhibitions, and Memories of Violence in Colombia* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

32 "What Is ICMEMOHRI," *International Committee of Memorial and Human Rights Museums (ICMEMOHRI)*, International Council of Museums, https://icmemohri.mini.icom.museum/about/what-is-icmemohri.

33 "Museo de la Memoria de Colombia sería declarado obra inconclusa: problemas con su construcción," *Infobae*, February 5, 2025, https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/02/05/museo-de-la-memoria-de-colombia-cuya-construccion-se-decreto-en-2011-y-empezo-en-el-2020-seria-declarado-obra-inconclusa/.

Museum of Colombia, marking a watershed moment as the first community-based memorial site to be showcased in Bogotá. This unique convergence of a museum within a museum underscored the profound impact of grassroots initiatives in shaping collective and activist memory as well as facilitating crucial conversations about Colombia's complex history and ongoing struggles.[34]

Memory activism in this context resonates with climate justice advocate Anjali Appadurai's insights about this type of work when stating that it is "the practice of addressing any issue by challenging those in power." *El Mochuelo*, as do the other Colombian memory museums, illustrates the nuanced relationship between the state, academia, and communities.[35] It illuminates a spectrum of political, ethical, and creative endeavors, underscoring the diverse expressions that activism can assume. By accentuating resistance and innovative elements, which vividly exemplify the dynamics of cultural diversity, my aim is to illustrate how activism, academia, and public history can converge to challenge the belief that scholarship can be neutral.[36] In the case discussed here, this creativity and resistance not only contest what are considered official powers' memories and their narratives about the country's ongoing armed conflict – which severely affected the communities of the Montes de María region – but also make the concept of activism more approachable. Unfortunately, in Colombia many activists and social leaders face being victimized or killed daily, leading some of them to take refuge in the perceived security academia can bring. Here is where creativity and resistance come into play allowing activists to collaborate with academia in novel ways that defy still historically established powers. Thus, in this text, I am using memory activism as a synonym of resistance and decoloniality based on creativity.

Talking about decoloniality is not new in the Latin American context. Museum professionals and other scholars, activists, and researchers have been thinking and working with this concept since the 1970s and even before. The emblematic Santiago de Chile Roundtable in 1972 – when the debate on museums in Latin America was brought to the forefront, discussing how to think about them, for whom, and how – not only initiated a discussion around these institutions, but also paved the way for other topics such as memory, social justice, activism, political commitment, and even decolonization to be addressed.[37] It led to discussing how everyone should have access to museums, technology, resources, local venues, political positions, among other topics, which remain relevant. For example, in the museum field, curators, activists, collectors, and individuals involved in these spaces recognize the profound and detailed knowledge invested in what, since 2003, has been called intangible heritage and previously folklore.[38] Additionally, the influence of new museology and social museology has been acknowledged, where the emphasis shifted from the object to knowledge, leading museums in the region to focus more on storytelling than on exhibiting artifacts solely for their aesthetics.[39] This applies to the *El Mochuelo* case and its team of professionals even take it further by following Brazilian museologist Mario Chagas statement: "Museology that is not useful for life is useless." According to him, social museology is,

> a set of practices that articulate the ideas of memory, heritage, and living culture over time, combining past, present, and future. It supports certain values, including social dignity, social cohesion, and respect for differences. At the same time, it is a combative museology because it encourages the fight against colonialist ideas, sexist practices, homophobia, xenophobia, and prejudices, while respecting all differences. But it is not only about combat and denunciation; it also announces new possibilities for transformation and social change.[40]

Chagas' words remind us of the struggle for decolonizing not only museums but ways of thinking and being in the Global South that have been present for a very long time. What memory activism does is make it more visible and noisier. It helps us realize that museums should not be about the representation of only one social class, race, ethnicity, etc. They should be appropriated by people and communities who need a critical insight into their own history to fight against the subtle and continuous forms of

**34** Redacción Cultura, "'El Mochuelo' Anidará Por Tres Meses En El Museo Nacional," El Nuevo Siglo, https://www.elnuevosiglo.com.co/cultura-y-sociedad/el-mochuelo-anidara-por-tres-meses-en-el-museo-nacional.

**35** Anjali Appadurai, "What is Activism?" Ted Talks, May 25, 2013, 12:21 min, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDVA7r7r0d0.

**36** Ruramisai Charumbira, "Memory Activism and the Global Production of Knowledge," in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, 449–53.

**37** "Memoria Chilena," Mesa de Santiago (1972) – Memoria Chilena, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-543530.html.

**38** "UNESCO, Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," Intangible Cultural Heritage, https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention.

**39** Peter Vergo, *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989); and Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69, Special Issue Grounds for Remembering (Winter 2000): 127–50.

**40** Bibiana Fulchieri, "'La Museología Que No Sirve Para La Vida No Sirve Para Nada': Número Cero," La Voz del Interior, April 6, 2021, https://www.lavoz.com.ar/numero-cero/la-museologia-que-no-sirve-para-la-vida-no-sirve-para-nada/.

contemporary colonization.[41] It also means that combat and denunciation, as stated by Chagas, are concerns for activists, academics, and communities alike and not necessarily imply physical violent actions.

In Latin American violent contexts, such as the Colombian one represented at *El Mochuelo,* memory activism is layered. At the venue, members of the stakeholder communities demand for the forgotten inhabitants of Montes de María to be acknowledged by the government, insist on regional and transnational recognition based on their forgotten histories, and appeal to wider audiences to those who want to know what happened in the region. It is not just a matter of making them visible, it is about shifting the perception of these communities as the exotic and timeless "other," according to anthropologist Johannes Fabian. Colonial perceptions are not gone for good and will persist if we keep thinking in terms of giving voice to those who already have one instead of talking with them as equals and implementing horizontal collaborative practices. As Fabian states,

> A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the "primitive"; it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought.[42]

Fabian's reflections prompt us not only to reconsider the language we use to acknowledge people from other cultures, but also to question what anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards describes as colonial thinking.: "For the colonial is not merely a question of continuity or rupture, of influence or appropriation, but a presence that is all-saturating, overflowing, ever-present, persistent and fundamental to the experience of contemporary life."[43] The above-mentioned scholars remind us that *El Mochuelo* is a venue where the communities had no mediators for their cultures to be represented. The people of the region actively participated in curatorial decisions and demanded for their traditions and heritage to be at the same level as any official narrative of the country's history, including representations of the armed conflict.

In Latin America, the debate on social justice and activism has not only been dedicated to making historically marginalized voices visible but also to creating conducive spaces for these marginal groups to find ways to participate in and take ownership of citizenship and nation-building projects. Furthermore, it includes the element of reparation, which, in most cases, is symbolic due to the impossibility of turning back time and pretending that repairing is synonymous with compensating or indemnifying. This has been fertile ground for the proliferation of the so-called community museums in the region because it has paved the way for the implementation of social justice to be understood as a dynamic and ongoing project. Inspired by these concepts, many such institutions resort to the concept of memory as an act of symbolically repairing what colonization and violence have stripped away from the various Latin American cultures. But if Europe and the United States of America do not turn its gaze to these processes – initiated decades ago in the region – with not only discursive recognition but also joint practice, which involves unlearning and relocating the debate, public history runs the risk of falling into the neoliberal scenario that makes it difficult to discuss the deep traces of colonialism and contemporary racism.[44]

As noted before, these reflections are not novel and were addressed, for instance, in the book *Radical Roots: Public History & a Tradition of Social Justice Activism.*[45] In this 23-essay volume the authors discuss topics related to the political role and ethical commitments public historians should have with the communities they collaborate with. Agreeing with most of the scholars in this piece, I strongly believe that the time for public historians to practice the field as merely observers is over. In current landscapes, such as the one *El Mochuelo* portrays, it is impossible to remain detached or indifferent from the fifteen communities that compose the Montes de María region. Public historians are political actors too.

Thus, at *El Mochuelo*, the concept of memory activism acquires practical implications, concurring with Kaitlin M. Murphy and Kerry Whigham, when they state that it is a practical term that "only becomes tangible through actions."[46] The narratives displayed at the peripatetic Montes de María venue and the memories they are creating go against conventional and state archival knowledge. The communities that created the museum are foregrounding their oral traditions and cultural practices to emphasize their commitment to peace. Their activism consists in

**41** Fulchieri, "'La Museología Que No Sirve Para La Vida No Sirve Para Nada': Número Cero."

**42** Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 18, https://doi.org/10.7312/fabi16926.

**43** Elizabeth Edwards, "Addressing Colonial Narratives in Museums | The British Academy," April 19, 2018, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/addressing-colonial-narratives-museums/.

**44** Maria Elena Bedoya i Jimena Perry Posada, "Restitucions, racisme i història (històries) pública (públiques). Una proposta d'exercici d'escolta des dels Suds," traduït per Jaume Soler, *L'Espill* 71 (2023): 146–52.

**45** Denise Meringolo (Ed,), *Radical Roots. Public History & a Tradition of Social Justice Activism*, vol. 1 (Amherst College Press, 2021).

**46** Kaitlin M. Murphy and Kerry Whigham, "Introduction: Memory Activism as Embodied Practice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, 353–54.

disrupting official narratives of the Colombian armed conflict by creating activities such as games, dance, and workshops to produce different stories about who they are and want to be. The members of the communities and the ones actively involved with *El Mochuelo* are the true memory activists, so returning to the discussion posed in *Radical Roots*, how are public historians going to position themselves to work in these kinds of scenarios?

In the *El Mochuelo* case, I believe that the work of the so-called memory activists and public historians has more intersections than not. Both criticize officialized memories and strive for more inclusive and comprehensive accounts of the past, they also tend to upset political and social orders and attempt to at least think of different social orders. And both have responded to the Montes de María context and used tools, concepts, strategies, and tactics for the realities they address with the purpose of disrupting harmful accounts of traumatic events that still need to be healed.

Embedded in the mentioned discussions, is also the concept of creativity, which is linked with processes of resistance. As Colombian artist Adolfo Albán notes,

> Creative actions are deconstructive practices that must lead us to unlearn [others' sensibilities] and open the possibility to decolonize our minds, if we can, hand in hand with pedagogy understood as a reflexive practice of the human condition. We should be able to express ourselves without fear, constraints, restrictions, shyness. We should be able to let out all that crush our soul. To create or be creative is to dig into our own being, where our realities are; is to give our imagination the chance to talk about our own subjectivity.[47]

Albán's quote echoes the notion of memory activism presented above. Creativity is fundamental in disrupting official narratives and recovering or creating new ones. That is why I understand creativity not only as an artistic process but also as a powerful political and ethical tool that opens pathways for marginal voices to be present.

## 4 Convergences, Encounters, Confluences

When I started my PhD in history, one of my professors told me: "You are a scholar not an activist," a statement that confused me a bit because of my background. I was trained as an anthropologist in Colombia and firmly believed, and still do, in fieldwork and having an ethical and political commitment with the communities I interact with. After listening to my professor, I thought: "Can I be both? Are these activities incompatible?" These questions were on my mind constantly until I came across the public history field in 2018. Since then, I have been getting closer to its practice and have confirmed that it provides enough flexibility to ask questions and do research without the limitations that disciplines sometimes impose. Public history has also provided me with the opportunity to become more interdisciplinary in my approaches to the social phenomena I am interested in. And this does not imply losing investigative rigor, it is about focusing more on the questions and how to address them.

The public history scene in Colombia is a prolific ground to combine research and memory activism, understood as resistance and creative processes. Due to the nature of the ongoing violence of the country, Colombians have learned to develop cultural strategies for enduring traumatic, and violent pasts. Following historian Francois Hartog in his article *Time and Heritage*, for example, when asserting: "Heritage is a recourse in times of crisis," the word heritage could be replaced by resistance, creativity, oral traditions, cultural preservation, and even cultural identity in the Colombian context of *El Mochuelo*, and it would make sense for the communities involved. What *El Mochuelo* does is to reinforce social groups; it serves the conviction that their strength and power to overcome their difficult pasts relies on their own culture.

**47** Adolfo Albán Achinte, "PEDAGOGÍAS DE LA RE-EXISTENCIA. Artistas Indígenas y Afrocolombianos," in *Pedagogías Decoloniales: Prácticas Insurgentes de Resistir, (Re)Existir, y (Re)Vivir*, vol. 1, Pensamiento Decolonial (Quito, Ecuador: ABYA YALA, 2013), 443–68.