

## Book Review

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

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Social justice has become an increasingly important concern within public history, and museums play a significant role in advancing this commitment. In *Museums, Exhibitions, and Memories of Violence in Colombia: Trying to Remember*, Latin American historian Jimena Perry critically examines the social roles and functions of museums, situating them within the complex interplay between public history and social justice. Perry explores how different groups use museums and exhibitions as “aids to grieve and restore social fabrics destroyed by war” (3). The book focuses on how public history frameworks shape the study and representation of violent pasts in Colombian memory sites, which narratives are privileged, how representations differ across museums and exhibitions, what roles these sites play in society, and how both elite and marginalized communities construct narratives of national belonging and citizenship. Perry’s study makes a valuable contribution to scholarship on museological production and the representation of Colombian political violence by situating these processes within a broader Latin American context and highlighting their significance for the wider field of public history.

The book presents four case studies, each exploring the production and representation of memories of violence. Chapter 1 examines debates over the National Museum of Colombia Director’s initiative to acquire and exhibit an object belonging to a perpetrator. While shedding light on the local museological dynamics of representing perpetrators, the chapter primarily investigates how Colombians negotiated what to include – and exclude – in the National Museum’s narrative. It reveals the tension between the Director’s aim to present a more inclusive history that confronts painful episodes without glorifying the perpetrator (34) and widespread perceptions that the museum should embody a “high level of education and status” (47). Critics saw museum professionals as equating the perpetrator with national heroes (35), while the object itself evoked deep trauma, perceived as “a threat, a transgression of the beliefs about what a good citizen had to be – patriotic, loyal to the state, and respectful of the law” (50). Perry

argues that issues of taste and class largely shaped the rejection of the proposal, determining what was acceptable for national representation. Crucially, the timing mattered: the perpetrator was still alive and actively defying the state. Chapter 2 similarly explores how journalists, politicians, and the public negotiate representation, but focuses on a successful 2010 exhibition celebrating another guerrilla leader who was killed in 1991 while running for president. Here, taste and class again influenced outcomes, but unlike the first figure, this leader came from a prominent family, had formal education, charisma, and, most importantly, had demobilized to embrace reconciliation and peace (72). This discourse secured the exhibition’s inclusion in the museum, reflecting the political context of 2010–2011, which favored peace and dialogue (71, 80). The curators also sought to bridge elite and popular cultural divides, challenging entrenched hierarchies. Together, these contrasting cases demonstrate how class, taste, and political timing intersect to shape which memories of political violence societies choose to remember – and which they prefer to forget.

In contrast to the first two chapters, the subsequent chapters explore grassroots initiatives that represent violence experienced by marginalized provincial communities. Chapter 3, arguably the most distinctive, provides a compelling account of the Salón del Nunca Más (Hall of Never Again) in Granada, emphasizing the link between memory and transitional justice. Although the local population does not define it as a museum – believing conventional museums “often fall short in their diversity and inclusivity” (107) – they chose to address their violent past on their own cultural terms. This chapter shows that local people made a cultural choice to recall violence in two ways. One is individual, intimate grieving, found in *bitácoras* – personal journals accompanying the permanent exhibition that offer families and friends of victims a space to express grief, keep memories alive, and support communal healing. The other is group remembering, presented in the permanent exhibit, which contributes to Granada’s “social fabric restoration” (108). At the individual level, Perry describes the interaction between survivors and artifacts (and, through them, with victims), highlighting the agency of this material culture for healing – an important function of memory museums. This individual remembrance is closely tied to transitional justice, which serves as a resource for social justice, recognition, and prevention of future violence. The focus on grassroots initiatives continues in Chapter 4, which discusses the Museo Itinerante de la

Memoria e Identidad de Los Montes de María, otherwise known as El Mochuelo (Traveling Museum of the Memory and Identity of Montes de María). This project is an effort by rural communities to remember and represent the violence they experienced, relying on traditional oral expressions. The chapter analyzes another cultural choice about what and how to remember, emphasizing the link between memory and intangible heritage. The creators chose to restore and preserve traditions to rebuild the social fabric that had been fractured by violence. Their choice to showcase oral traditions instead of graphic depictions of violence, as in the Hall of Never Again, highlights the diversity and local dynamics of remembrance among Colombian communities (148). As Perry notes, these differences stem from distinct cultural choices rather than rigid binaries (170).

There are several areas where the book invites further reflection. Despite its strong engagement with museum and memory theory, it pays surprisingly little attention to scholarship on memorial museums in a broader global context – particularly theorizations of Amy Sodaro and Paul Williams, which arguably could have deepened Perry's exploration of how Colombian memory sites fit into global debates about memorialization of violence. Another notable issue is the question of prevention and resistance. Unlike many other countries, as noted in this book, memory museums in Colombia have a distinct feature: they are being created amid ongoing war and violence (179). Given the very real danger of repeated violence during conflicts, it is difficult to envision a meaningful notion of social justice without considering how to prevent the recurrence of atrocities. Consequently, readers may fault the author for not examining more thoroughly how these museums and exhibits address the issues of preventing the recurrence of

atrocities and fostering resistance, especially in Chapters 3 and 4. Finally, while the book covers a wide range of topics, some sections might have benefited from greater concision – though this remains only a slight reservation.

Beyond the points raised above, *Museums, Exhibitions, and Memories of Violence in Colombia: Trying to Remember* is a well-researched book grounded in rich primary and secondary sources. It makes several important contributions to scholarship, enriching our understanding of museological representations of violence within the Colombian context while situating it within a broader Latin American framework. Most significantly, the book enhances our understanding of the interplay between public history and social justice in Latin America. Notably, Chapters 3 and 4 provide valuable insights into the local dynamics of grassroots initiatives aimed at remembering and representing the violence experienced by survivor communities – an increasingly popular focus among scholars studying memory. Lastly, this work encourages researchers to explore similar unconventional ways of remembrance and representation in the Latin American context and to consider their implications.

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