Empty schools and *Silencios:* pedagogical openings for memory-making in Colombia

Abstract

This paper draws from *Silencios* –a photography series by the Colombian photographer Juan Manuel Echavarría. *Silencios* comprises more than 120 portrayals of abandoned schools due to armed conflict in Los Montes de María, Colombia. Sharing Echeverría's belief that "these chalkboards have lessons to tell us about war", in this study the author advocates for the pedagogical use of *Silencios* photography to foster and support memory works in Colombia. This analysis is aligned with the belief that hegemonic memories and narratives might ignite negative, rather than positive effects in conflict-affected societies due to their authoritarian and oppressive character. In this regard, the pedagogical use of *Silencios* seeks to incorporate alternative narratives by cherishing the multiplicity of memories that emerge and are reconstructed while the public actively interacts with the photography. The visuals become, ultimately, an educational opportunity to stimulate reflection and resistance against oblivion and against the monopoly of the past in a country that is transitioning to peace. For this analysis, the portrayed abandoned schools are considered as memory sites (Nora, 1989) and renewed learning spaces to promote reflections upon the armed conflict. Their pedagogical use can contribute to peacebuilding efforts because they open up the ground for people to reconsider essentialist conceptions of peace, memory, and pedagogy, that may hinder potential venues for enduring peace in Colombia.

Introduction

> *These schools are witnesses the horror that a community experienced (...)*
> *[they] are witnesses of war.*
> *You don't see a dead person, but you see the story behind.*
> *These chalkboards have lessons to tell us about war*
> Juan Manuel Echavarría,
> photographer of *Silencios* series

Images cannot be considered bare illustrations void of meaning. Rather, they are recognized by the manifold range of significances inscribed to them, and the potential influence they can exert over the people who are exposed to them. Today, imagery is increasingly shaping and defining the world and human relations in multiple spheres such as advertising, entertainment, politics, and science (Grau & Veigl, 2011; Mirzoeff, 2002). Debates related to the power of visual culture contribute to numerous critical perspectives that have emerged around the field of the visuals, including inquiries related to the creation, projection, distribution, and impact of images (Mirzoeff, 2002; Mitchell, 1995; Oliver & Fraser, 2016). Following Grau and Veigl (2011) invitation, "we must ask ourselves whether the power of the image will supersede our current ability and quality of reflection, or if new worlds of images will enable new support for the development of human consciousness" (p.10), this article seeks to offer a critical reflection on the use of photography as a pedagogical device to promote conversations about the armed conflict in Colombia, through the articulation of memories that the imagery might elicit. This research draws from the series *Silencios* by the Colombian photographer Juan Manuel Echavarría.

Silencios photography series includes more than 120 portrayals of former schools in Los Montes de María, Colombia that the author has captured since 2010 until today. These images have been presented in different exhibitions in Colombia, New Zealand, Belgium, France, and New York (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). Sharing Echavarría's belief that "these chalkboards have lessons to tell us about war", the present study advocates

for the use of *Silencios* photography in order to promote, what I have called, "pedagogical openings for memory-making" in Colombia.

Silencio con grieta (2011)

I chose to use the term 'pedagogical' to signify two things: first, I conceive pedagogies as educational processes that entail both teaching and learning, and which are highly linked to the act of living and interacting with the world. This is, "people when in action, constantly teach and learn" (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011, p.34). However, it is important to note that actions become pedagogical not through randomness, but through deliberate, systematic and sustained efforts, that Cremin (1976) has described, as in transmitting, evoking, or acquiring any kind of knowledge, attitude, values, sensibilities, or skills. In this sense, pedagogical endeavors are not necessarily restricted to happenen in formal settings or schools, but opened to various sites and multiple subjects. Second, the use of the plural (pedagogies) indicates that there are numerous possibilities of learning processes when these pedagogies are enacted. In other words, there is no script to follow with a single or exclusive learning procedure or outcome from the use of this photography. Additionally, I refer to 'openings' (Zembylas in

Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011) to denote opportunities for achieving social and political consciousness and critical reflections that challenge hegemonic and fixed views of the past. And with this, to open up possibilities for cultivating reconciliation between opposing and traumatized groups and subjects.

Sociopolitical background

In October 2012, the Colombian National Government headed by Juan Manuel Santos, and the armed group FARC[1] initiated peace negotiations ("Cronología Diálogos de Paz en Colombia", n.d.). The historical significance of these dialogues goes beyond ending a conflict; it is about ending the longest –non negotiated– conflict of the world (GRUPO, D. M. H., 2013). To illustrate part of its complexity, it can be said that scholars have not even agreed on the date in which conflict started in Colombia[2]. In addition to this, several actors have been involved throughout decades, including national armed forces; left armed groups (FARC, ELN[3], and EPL[4]); right/paramilitary armed groups (AUC[5]); drug cartels; and civilians. The consequences of the conflict are outrageous: 5,156 cases of child recruitment, 2,119 deaths by landmines and 8,070 people injured by landmines, 5,712,506 cases of forced displacement, 25,007 disappeared people reported, 11,751 victims of massacres, 1,754 reported cases of sexual violence, and 95 terrorist acts ("Estadísticas del Conflicto Armado en Colombia", 2013). These distressing statistics speak of what the scholar Gonzálo Sánchez describes as the degradation of war: "a war of the whole society to itself, a collective suicide" (cited in Hylton, 2006, p. 106). However, after six years of continued negotiations the Colombian National

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[1] Acronym for *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). This is the largest and oldest left armed group in Colombia. In the mid 90's they were present in more than a half of the total municipalities of the country (Forrest, 2006).
[2] Some argue that the roots could be established sixty decades ago with the political contention between Liberal and Conservatives political parties. Some others point it to the proliferation of paramilitary forces and drug cartels in the 80's. And some others even appeal to the agrarian disputes in the 20's.
[3] Acronym for *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army)
[4] Acronym for *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (Popular Liberation Army)
[5] Acronym for *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-defense group of Colombia)

Government and FARC reached a peace agreement, approved by the National Congress in December 1st, 2016.

Los Montes de María is one of the regions that has been most affected by the conflict. Selective murders, forced displacement, threats, massacres, kidnapping, became predominant in the villages of this area (UNDP Colombia, 2010). As Echavarría reported, in Los Montes de María illegal armed groups have been present for many years, whereas the State has been absent forever (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). However, this is far from an isolated case. Unfortunately, similar situations have been experienced across the country, contributing to the consolidation of a national narrative characterized by Human Rights violations, impunity, and violence. In this vein, academic endeavors seeking to analyze possible strategies for reconciliation and the development of a sustainable peace are of the greatest importance. Such urgency appears to be more imperative today when a peace agreement has been reached and its implementation is in process. The country is indeed contesting Gonzálo Sánchez's statement pronounced more than a decade ago: *"En Colombia el pasado no pasa porque la guerra no termina"* ("In Colombia the past does not pass because war never ends") (Sánchez, 2003).

Within this framework, the present paper aims to propose an alternative pedagogical approach to reinforce historical memory inside and outside of schools. Since "the urgency to work on understanding memory does not exist outside specific political and cultural contexts" (Jelin, 2003, p.xvi), this study is anchored in the current transition to peace in Colombia. Acknowledging the multiple challenges that such process entails, this exploration aspires to offer a opportunity to educate memory –understanding it as the continuous process of developing and nurturing collective and individual memories, rather than establishing a unifying one. Although, schools play a vital role in building the past (Jelin & Lorenz, 2004), I attempt to highlight the pivotal role of education –comprehensively– in conflict and post-

conflict situations. This means that the present analysis takes into account both formal and informal educational settings as potential scenarios to consolidate pedagogical openings for memory-making through the integration of the visuals.

Understandings about memory

There are two preliminary premises that I would like to consider before embarking on the main proposal of this paper. First of all, in this analysis "memory" is not conceived as a noun with fixed and essential attributes, but as a verb that comprises two unceasing actions: to remember and to forget. For this reason, my references to "memory" are linked to a continuous process; the memory-making. As Marita Sturken (1997) argues, "memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relieved. It is thus an inquiry into how cultural memories are constructed as they are recollected and memory as a form of interpretation" (p. 7). In this regard, it is also important to recognize that memory denotes individual and social constructs, meaning that memories "do not simply emerge out of thin air, rather, they result directly from people's commemorative decisions and actions as embedded within and constrained by particular socio-spatial conditions" (Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu, 2008, p.161). In other words, memories are elaborated, they are constantly on the making course; they are not arbitrary, they exist and recur (to remember or forget repeatedly) through individual or collective selective processes. Memory, therefore, is the perpetual elaboration of the past and its meanings for the present and the future, "and how we retrieved [the past] says as much about desire and denial as it does about remembrance" (Sturken, 1999, p. 7).

Second, multiple distinctions have been made between individual and collective memory. In one hand, individual memory is related to personal experiences of the past that make sense to the subject through his/her singular impressions. In the other hand, collective memory emerges from a group or society, thus, the selective process about the past happens

in relation to common or shared beliefs or ideas (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, 2011; Zerubavel, 2012). The present analysis does not seek to give prevalence of one over the other. Conversely, it aims to put both sets of memories into conversation, and to highlight the possibility of becoming conflicting memories within themselves or between them. However, it is vital to acknowledge that the process of remembering or forgetting does not happen in isolated individuals, but subjects who are embedded in social, cultural, and political scenarios and who are continuously relating to each other. Hence, individual and collective memories are highly associated at multiple levels, and subjects have to deal with the tensions or alignments that might emerge between them.

Elizabeth Jelin (2003) asserts that memory is traditionally related to the capacity of remembering, and as such, what worries humans the most is precisely not remembering something, or not holding that something into the memory. Although this is what people are most concerned about, memory also gives an account for what –intentionally or unintentionally– is not remembered. As we are mentally unable to remember everything, and as we do not want to remember everything, the absence of such memory is equally important. Then, at this point, it is significant to question why do memories matter? For the purposes of this paper, I will only focus on three elements that attempt to answer this question: 1) memory as a support mechanism of identity, 2) memory as temporal anchoring and reference, and 3) memory for non-repetition.

In regards to the first point, John Gillis (in Jelin, 2003) sustains that the ability of recalling something from one's own past is precisely what sustains the identity. As he clarifies, "identities and memories are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*. As such, they have no existence beyond our politics, our social relations, and our stories" (p.15). Elaborating on this idea, Jelin (2003) asserts that for establishing and delimiting one's identity, one selects certain elements of the past and the present to simultaneously produce an

identity (differentiation in relation to others) and a sense of belonging (similarities in relation to others). Experiences, places, or people, for instance, can be orientation elements that support the construction of the self. The process of establishing that subjectivity is contingent upon what the subject recalls from the past; what one has lived, where one has lived it, and in relation to whom one has lived this. In other words, the way in which and individual creates his/her identity is by making sense of the present through interpreting the past.

Nonetheless, the relationship between memory and identity is not restricted to the individual sphere. Group identities are also enforced, when memory operates as a social activity or binding force (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004) that provides people any kind of association and correspondence with others (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2014). As Edward Said (in Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004) frames it, "people now look to this refashioned memory, especially in is collective forms, to give themselves a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world" (p.349). Within frames of violence, memories and the understanding of such memories play a key role in shaping people's identities at the individual and collective level, because they are linked to emotional components derived from physical and/or mental suffering. These emotional gears (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011) enlarge the complexity of the act of remembering: excess of remembrance can turn into trauma; occasional memories with periods of stress for those recalling the past; or lack of remembrance that becomes avoidance or oblivion (Jelin, 2003). The intricacies of memories related to conflict are also evidenced in the emergence of social categories of identification that influence the relations between individuals and between individuals and the State, such as victim/victimizer.

In addition to be supportive mechanism for developing identity, memories are also temporal anchors. This means that memory helps to situate events in time and to develop a chronological narrative from them. Locating facts, events and people on a timeline provide the possibility of giving an account of oneself and others. However, the act of remembering

does not necessarily imply an exact reproduction of the events that occurred, or a similar reproduction of them each time one remembers. In this regard, memories do not have clear-cut beginnings or endings, rather, they are permanently exposed to changes when individuals evoke such memories, or due to the circumstances in which they are evoked. Consequently, remembering "is better conceptualized as a process that is constantly unfolding and changing" (Hoelscher, 2003. p.661), that provides with meaning the temporal frame present-past-future.

In regards to the third point, Jelin (2003) reminds us that when memory labors emerge in societies that have suffered conflict, repression, and political violence, those who are committed to define what happened and to establish commemorative actions/places, do it with the aspiration of securing the "*Nunca Más*" (Never Again) (p.3). Hence, memory becomes exemplary (Rüsen, 2004) as individuals and social groups take it as a historical evidence to avoid or reducing the likeness of repetition in the present or the future.

The last clarifying fact that I would like to comment is the impossibility of having *one* and just *one* memory, or unique interpretation of the past shared by a society. I highlight this matter because this paper is based on the belief that memory endeavors should not be seeking for unifying narratives of the past that silence the possibility of individuals feeling, experiencing, remembering and reconstructing events in a way that differs from others. This paper is precisely inscribed on the position that hegemonic memories and narratives might ignite negative, rather than positive, effects on society because of its authoritarian and oppressive character (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011). Although there are periods in which there is a larger consensus about a particular script of the past –generally written and told by 'the winners' or the ruling force– there will always be marginal stories, alternative memories, and different interpretations that endure in spaces of resistance (Jelin, 2003). This analysis aims to appreciate the multiplicity of memories by promoting spaces of reflection and spaces of resistance in which they can be shared and discussed.

Silencios: Displays of memory, sites of memory

Andreas Huyssen's (2012) statement (2012): "the past is not simply there in memory but it must be articulated to become memory" (p.3), serves us to contemplate memory through social, political, and cultural dimensions (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, 2011). In this vein, the articulations of the past can become "displays of memory" (Hoelscher, 2003) – as they are "active vehicles in producing, shaping, and giving meaning to cultural memory and heritage" (p.661). In the case of Colombia, such cultural memory has been linked to a heritage of violence and cruelty evidenced in decades of war. Since original experiences are irreplaceable in a strict manner, the remains of those experiences (images, events, objects, or representations) are the channels through which one comes to understand and socialize memories in relation to events (Hoelscher, 2003). On this matter, Pierre Nora (in Hoelscher, 2003), indicated that memories rely "on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (p.661), thus making such displays auxiliary tools in the process of evoking the past.

In this regard, I take the photographs comprised in *Silencios* as part of the materiality of the trace that the armed conflict has left in Colombia. As registered by Juan Manuel Echavarría, more than 120 schools in Los Montes de María were closed due to war. The imagery that he has reproduced speaks for one of the many effects of an armed conflict: the abandonment of space because of forced displacement, and with this, the permanent closure of educational settings.

Lo bonito es estar vivo (2010)

In fact, the first two photographs that motivated Echavarría to undertake *Silencios* project happened in 2010, during the commemoration of the 10 years of forced displacement that the community of Mampuján experienced back in 2000. Then, paramilitary forces killed 12 men from a neighboring village and obliged the population of Mampuján to leave the town ("Mampuján: ¿verdad a medias, reparación inconclusa?", 2016), forcing them to take refuge in a new setting and starting their lives from zero. Echavarría recalls that in 2010, the population of the 'new' Mampuján invited him to go to the 'old' Mampuján to commemorate. In the old Mampuján, he entered a school and took pictures of the only two classrooms that had not been 'devoured' (sic) by nature yet. Days later, after revealing the images in his studio in Bogota, he realizes that barely noticeable after ten years, in one of the chalkboards it was written '*lo bonito es estar vivo*' ('the beautiful thing is to be alive'). Echavarría commented: "*En ese pueblo [...] alguien escribió en el tablero 'lo bonito es estar vivo'* " (In that town [...] someone wrote on the chalkboard 'the beautiful thing is to be alive') (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). Through these photographs, Echavarría reveals the parallel process of memory, a personal framing of the past, and the sharing of that framework with others –by creating a site of memory (Nora, 1989)– so they might also connect past to present meaningfully.

First of all, the commemoration itself is one of the non-material sites that the community created to evoke the past (the forced displacement that happened 10 years back). In this sense, the commemoration event is a site of memory not only because it is a practice to recall that something happened, but also because it reveals what that community has intentionally conceived as valuable to remember (Zerubavel, 2012). Within this violent context, commemorations are filled with celebratory features such as dances, music, and sports, as a way to speak of and demonstrate the resiliency of the people. As Echavarría affirmed: "it feels like the community is saying: the beautiful thing is to be alive" (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). Here it can be evidenced that the intended collective reminiscence becomes a social practice of collective healing, as well as a mnemonic socialization for new generations, so they can appropriate narratives about the past, and get familiarized with the tacit rules of what to remember and how to remember (Zerubavel, 2012).

Second, the old town of Mampuján, where the celebration happened becomes another site of memory. In addition to the commemoration, the physical space also encompasses a remembrance process for the subjects. Going back to the town is also going back in time to when they had not been displaced yet, or to the very moment when they were displaced. The town embodied tangible notions of the past that are concrete and material (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004), such as the school, the classrooms, or the chalkboards that Juan Manuel Echavarría captured. In those physical spaces, memories are crystallized and secreted (Nora, 1989) through tangible elements of the past. The relationship between the town and the commemoration is a public involvement in the re-making of both material and non-material sites of memory of Mampuján.

Third, the photography taken by Juan Manuel also becomes another site of memory that freezes time and space in one image, conveying information in regards to what they

frame –the abandoned schools. Memories emerge and circulate with and within these photos. Thus, imagery becomes a technology of memory rather than a vessel of memory (Sturken, 1997). Commenting on Daniel Hernández-Salazar's photographic work to promote historical memories of atrocity in Guatemala, Hoelscher (2008) claimed: "images, whether cast in stone or printed on paper, are technologies of remembrance through which people construct the past and give memory its texture. No technology or media is more associated with memory than camera image, especially the photograph" (p.198). Indeed, mnemonic media includes visual images (television, sculptures, advertising, etc.) that anchor the subject to his/her capacity to remember –and by definition to forget– something. However, what is compelling about images in this sense is that they "arrest time and appear to hold memory in place as they provide an immediately accessible vehicle for collective remembrance" (p.198). In alignment with this idea, Susan Sontag (in Hoeslcher, 2008) asserted that "when it comes to remembering, the photograph has deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image" (p. 198). The freezing of time also helps to measure transformations over time, allowing the viewer to review the past and the changes over the years, or even decades (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2014). This ultimately serves in endeavors of mnemonic transitivity (Zerubavel, 2012), so communities can preserve memories and transmit them to future generations.

Not very different from these conceptions, Juan Manuel Echavarría also expressed his impression of photography as a tool of memory: "there are many and plural ways of saving memory; the writing, the painting, the drawing, but I think that photography is a tool that I call new, marvelous, which etymologically means giving light, writing with light (…) and I think that what they [the photos] have done is to provide light to that that we do not see, that that is so far away, like those schools. Making visible what is invisible" (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). His words motivate us to conceive him as a "memory worker"

(Hoeslcher, 2008), who is precisely pursuing labors of memory (Jelin, 2003) through his art. His labor as a memory worker is not only limited to capturing the images of abandoned schools; it also extends to sharing these visuals as means to stimulate public engagement on the elaboration of memories related to the armed conflict. The transformational power of this artistic work can be grasped in its aspiration to get the audience actively involved in the elaboration of the meanings of the past and its symbolic transformations for the present (Hoeslcher, 2008). Therefore, imagery can elicit affective responses concerning the past, which can turn into political responses concerning the present (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2014). Juan Manuel himself said: "one as an artist proposes something (…) me as an artist, I propose to look at these chalkboards. You, as the spectator, receive them, and have a dialogue with the chalkboards (…) each person completes the work" (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). As Sontag (in Butler, 2016) claimed, photography by itself cannot offer an interpretation; the image provides evidence –operating as a document– of the sites/times that captures, and offers frames to interpret what is seen –operating as a selective frame of what is seen and what is not–, but images by themselves do not provide interpretation. Instead, they demand the presence and engagement of the observer to construct interpretations out of them. The spectators' agency remarks a participatory dynamic that incessantly links the photographer, the photography and the (active) observer. This partaking element upholds the idea that in the memory-making there is not *one* way of elaborating the meanings of the past, as I previously mentioned. In fact, each person that approaches the photography adds a new version of engagement and interpretation. In this sense, interacting with this imagery implicates that the viewers participate in endless processes of making and interpreting the visuals, and such interpretative work becomes in itself a political action disturbing the present, as to "impede the eradication of a troubling past" (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2014, p. 270).

Desalambrando Silencios: From a memory device to a transformation device

Desalambrar or 'overrun fences' (Frazier et al., 2003) is an idea to which this paper seeks to engage with, in order to propose strategies to overcome the possible hindrances for mutual respect and reconciliation. *Desalambrar* is "an explicit call to action" (p. 281) that aims "to take down the wire fences that surround one in a space, or metaphorically a category, [and] open up new spaces and possibilities" (p.289). Thus, *Silencios* is conceived here as an artistic work that taken under a pedagogical perspective might allow to *desalambrar* memory efforts related to the armed conflict, and more specifically, *desalambrar* hegemonic memories that obstruct reconciliatory efforts (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011).

Desalambrar in educational terms also refers to provide with reconstructive meanings practices and spaces that are originally detrimental for a community. In this vain, Daniel Friedrich's (2011) analysis on the Museum of Memory located in the former Navy's School of Mechanical Engineering (ESMA) in Buenos Aires, evidences that the narrative that was chosen to direct the visitors' tour is one of resistance rather than horror. This is, the space was intentionally left 'empty' as means to avoid representing or recreating the morbid horror of the dictatorship. According to him, the emptiness feature of the space is directed towards more productive and pedagogical ends that encompass a narrative of resistance. In fact, he acknowledges that the decision of non-representation is already "full of representations in itself" (p. 175). In other words, the void physical space is packed with meanings and history. Friedrich expands on this idea saying that: "this movement of emptying and refilling of spaces and stories produces a space that is never empty to begin with. Thus, the ESMA (re)presents horror in ways that go beyond the inclusion of pictures or dioramas of torture scenes" (p.176).

In the case of *Silencios*, Juan Manuel Echavarría conveys a similar aim: "In the chalkboard there is horror without seeing horror. It is a metaphor. The art allows symbols and

metaphors, that a direct look like a massacre in photography would petrify you" (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). In this regard, the emptiness that this photography represents, evokes void spaces that have absence at the very core of the portrayal: human absences, schools that are no longer functioning as such, nonappearance of activity, cracked walls, wrecked roofs, among others. However, to go back to Friederich's point, the void that spectators witness is filled with social and political meanings that appeal to memory-making in regards to what the Colombian population has experienced amidst war. Indeed, this allegorical art draws on rational and emotional components that emerge when the public engages with these images, and with these elements they reconstruct memories. The sociopolitical possibilities embedded in these visuals extend from "absence as a traumatic materiality of an immemorial wound" (García in Friedrich 2011, p. 177), to the prospect of sociopolitcal reconstruction and reconciliation.

It is at this point where I would like to transition from absence to presence though pedagogical openings. And for this, I need Juan Manuel Echavarría's interpretation on the schools and the chalkboards as metaphors, or what he called as "indirect looks of the art", in relation to the Colombian armed conflict:

> These schools are witnesses of the horror that the community experienced. I see the chalkboards almost like a window, a metaphoric window. I see them as witnesses that tell me that behind them there is forced displacement, deaths, massacres, and the most vulnerable population. They are witnesses of war. You don't see a dead person, but you see the story behind. These chalkboards have lessons to tell us about the war. (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication)

His perspective on the chalkboards as metaphors serves as a starting point to consider this imagery as a pedagogical opening for memory-making. When looking at Echavarría's chalkboards, the *absence* of formal education in those schools are literally perceived, but also the *presence* of a possibility to transform the imagery into an alternative non-formal and non-physical settings of education that promote dialogues between the public and the photography

as sites of memory. This is, the presence of potential transformative pedagogies of memory-making that welcome multiple narratives throughout the process. For this to happen it is required to de-essentialize pedagogy and memory frameworks.

In terms of pedagogy, there is a generalized supposition that knowledge transmission is be the core function of education. This, at the same time, undertakes knowledge as the representation of something that happened or had presence in the past. In this matter Friedrich (2011) comments: "For instance, when history is taught, the assumption is that those narratives re-represent for the students, events that at some point were present and that will be presented again every time the are re-told" (p.177). However, this essentialist belief is contested in ESMA's empty spaces and the different pedagogical principle of the Museum of Memory, as much as it is in *Silencios'* empty schools and the transformational pedagogical principle that I attempt to suggest. In these two cases, the igniting inquiry is not grounded on *what* knowledge is transmitted, but on the possible effects that the absence may have in the public (Friedrich, 2011). This is because there is no strict knowledge to be taught or transferred, but pedagogical openings that stimulate discussions about the armed conflict through the knowledge and memories that the spectators hold (even beyond these visuals). Thus, it is worth returning to Graus and Veigl (2011) interrogation about the power of images in the support of human consciousness, and to ask ourselves to what extent *Silencios* can visually influence our ability and quality of reflection, and potential re-action: Does it enrage us? Does it excite our moral sentiments? Does it confirm or contest our sociopolitical paralysis? (Butler, 2016), Does it confirm or contest our sociopolitical amnesia? In summary, what kind of responsiveness do these photographs invoke, if they do at all? As Sontag declared, "if a photograph becomes effective in informing and moving us politically, it is […] only because the image is received within the context of a relevant political consciousness" (in Butler, 2016, pg. 67). From this, I claim the current transition to post-conflict as a moment

of historical and political rising consciousness, and *Silencios* as one of the many venues to nurture such historical and political consciousness.

In terms of memory, as previously stated, *Silencios* as a pedagogical opening does not appeal to one/unique way of providing with meaning the past. Homogenizing perspectives of the past, or hegemonic memory, tend to gravitate around asocial and political benefits of victimhood that ultimately operate as a dividing elements to nurture rivalry between groups. Therefore, opposing to reconciliatory ideas and practices in conflict situations (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011). This is particularly important in the Colombian context because the armed conflict has been protracted, and has involved diverse social, political, economic actors. Currently, in the implementation of the peace agreement, reconciliatory approaches are of the greatest importance. Thus, in order to de-essentialize memory, Bekerman and Zembylas (2011) propose to approach historical narratives through "dangerous memories" (Zembylas and Bekerman, 2008), that have the potential to be threatening for hegemonic narratives –to be disruptive to the status quo, or breaking down what is assumed as univocally true. Under this reasoning, there is no truth to be grasped in *Silencios* about the armed conflict, but multiplicity of memories that might emerge from the interaction of spectators with the photography and the ways in which they reconstruct the past, interpret it, and reproduce a narrative about it.

Here is where Echavarría's words "these chalkboards have lessons *to tell* us about the war" become significant because they reflect an aspiration for non-hegemonic narratives: the story, not the truth. Although he phrases it as the chalkboards providing these narratives, I would rather recognize them as openings (windows that can be opened) for people to provide their stories and their memories. In other words, photography does not simply tell the past by itself, but it contains as many pasts as active-viewers engage with it. When the public dialogues with the image, narratives about the past may arise in the form of an individual

(what I have personally experienced) or collective memory (what the country or this community has experienced).

In this sense, the reconceptualization of pedagogy and memory along these lines is what might ignite productive openings to foster alternative memory practices in Colombia. Within this framework, *Silencios* is an opening "for cultivating an alternative political consciousness and criticality against fixed and reified categorizations of the past" (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008, p, 95). And here is where the potential for transformation lies. Although I do not argue for a transformational aspiration of the whole country or an entire society though this photography, I strongly believe that considering it as a pedagogical resource of memory-making and dialogues inside and outside of schools, provides the space for small disruptions (even momentarily when the person is looking at them) that challenge the monopoly of memory and appeal to the acknowledge of common suffering and common humanity required for social reconstruction of troubling communities (Zembylas and Bekerman, 2008). These ruptures that *Silencios* might promote are essential today when undertaking a sociopolitical attempt to transition from conflict to post-conflict. Therefore, I claim *Silencios* as an artistic entering point that can endorse 'positive peace' efforts (peace-making and peace-building initiatives that challenge structural and cultural violence) that move beyond initial 'negative peace' efforts (peace-keeping efforts to remove direct violence) (Cremin, 2016).

Under this reasoning, Echavarría's labors of memory though photography become highly political. As he asserted: "my projects, are projects against war". In this regard, the imagery as a site of memory does also become a site of political struggle. Therefore, the pedagogical openings that I propose through the use of *Silencios* are deeply political too. Not only because education is a political activity (Kincheloe, 2008), but because the alternative pedagogies that I am arguing for have political inscriptions (the Colombian armed conflict that entails a troubled society) and political implications (an attempt to support

transformational memories for the post-conflict era) in disrupting hegemonic narratives and accounts of the past.

Silencio con sombras (2011)

As Jelin (2003) reminds us, "there is an active political struggle not only over the meaning of what took place in the past, but over the meaning of memory itself. The space of memory is thus an arena of political struggle that is frequently conceived in terms of a struggle against oblivion: *remember so as not to repeat*" (p.xviii). In the case of Colombia, it should be rephrased as "remember so as not to continue", for conflict to be ceased.

Final remarks

Juan Manuel Echavarria commented that he came up with the name *Silencios* in a very personal experience that he had when photographing one of the initial chalkboards. He recalled that after several hours walking in the bushes and under an unbearable weather, he finally arrived to an abandoned school, where he entered to the only accessible classroom: "it was roofless, covered by vegetation, I felt that such classroom was embalmed in time, in

silence, wrapped by nature. I looked at the chalkboard before taking the photograph and I felt it was telling me 'I have waited for you for a long time' " (J.M. Echavarría, personal communication). The same long time that Colombia has been waiting for a peace process to happen, after decades of being embalmed and paralyzed by conflict.

These abandoned schools "simultaneously embody presences and absences, voids and ruins, intentional forgetting and painful remembering" (Till in Hoelscher, 2008, p. 200). Within the emptiness that this photography represents, ghosts rise as haunting reminders of protracted conflict in Colombia. As Karen Till says, "ghosts are summoned when forgotten sites or events are reconsidered, when prevailing discourses of oblivion are challenged by memory workers" (in Hoelshcer, 2008, p. 200) like Echevarría. In this sense, the ghosts that emerge from

Testigo limón (2010)

Silencios are deeply political in calling upon resistance against war: for those who survived the conflict ('the beautiful thing is to be alive') and on behalf of those who did not. But above all, it resists against hegemonic dividing narratives that hinder Colombia from having an enduring peace.

Therefore, I assert that *Silencios* (silences) become, paradoxically, deafening social and political noises that call for resistance; visual noises that resist to war and resist to oblivion, especially oblivion in regards to rural remote areas where the State's absence has been mainly the root of conflict. And with this, to achieve pedagogical openings that will allow us to *desalambrar* or unfence a transition to post-conflict that cherishes the multiplicity

and complexity of memories of the Colombian armed conflict. In this regard, *Silencios* is a memory site and a renewed learning space for Colombia.

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