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Visuality of Absence: Sensing a Community's Rupture Through Rhetorical Transport

Visualidad de la ausencia: Sentir la ruptura de la comunidad a través de la transportación retórica

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes Juan Manuel Echavarría's photographic project Silences as a piece of a visual culture produced in the last years to represent and memorialize the war in Colombia. I used Michele Kennerly's concept of rhetorical transport to describe these images' power to bring before the spectator's eyes and mind people, places, or things that are absent. I argue that these images fail to present empty and quiet spaces since it is unfeasible to see them without the presence of bodies. The stillness and immobility transmitted by them are disrupted by the viewer, who is moved to fill those spaces of emptiness with voices, sounds, and movements. In these images, the rhetorical power of condensing simultaneously the present and the absent offers contrasting sensorial experiences.

Keywords: photography; absence; presence; rhetorical transport.

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza el trabajo fotográfico Silencios de Juan Manuel Echavarría como una pieza de la cultura visual producida en los últimos años para representar y conmemorar la guerra en Colombia. Se aborda el concepto de transportación retórica propuesto por Michele Kennerly para describir el poder de estas imágenes para traer ante los ojos y la mente del espectador personas, lugares o cosas que están ausentes. Estas imágenes no logran presentar espacios vacíos y silenciosos ya que es inviable verlos sin la presencia de cuerpos. La quietud e inmovilidad que transmiten son interrumpidas por el espectador, quien llena esos espacios de vacío con voces, sonidos y movimientos. En estas imágenes, el poder retórico de condensar simultáneamente lo presente y lo ausente ofrece experiencias sensoriales opuestas.

Palabras clave: fotografía; ausencia; presencia; transportación retórica.

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INTRODUCCIÓN

The peace talks held from 2012 to 2016 between the Colombian government, led then by President Juan Manuel Santos, and the communist guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), sparked the prolific production and circulation of documentaries, paintings, monuments, sculptures, music, dances, performances, and other forms of artwork to produce meanings, representations, and memories of the armed conflict. As Sánchez (2013) emphasized, memory is a "militant response to the quotidian war and the silence imposed on many victims … It has become an instrument to assume or confront the conflict or make it visible in the public sphere" (p. 13). Juan Manuel Echavarría is a Colombian artist and photographer whose artworks, exhibited in different museums and galleries across his home country and abroad, "circulate outside the borders of the artistic world, particularly in spaces that deal with transitional justice, the construction of memory, and the peace dialogues" (Rubiano, p. 35, 2017). For seven years, he visited remote areas affected by the war to photograph more than 200 blackboards in rural schools. He co-authored with Fernando Grisalez a photographic project named *Silences*, displayed in Echavarría's official website and his photography collection book *Works*.

In this paper, I analyze *Silences* as a creation of a visual culture circulating in the last years to represent and memorialize the Colombian war. I used Kennerly's (2010) concept of rhetorical transport to describe these images' power to bring before the spectator's eyes and mind people, places, or things that are absent. Anchored in the concomitance between spatiality and bodies, I argue that these images fail to present empty and quiet spaces since it is unfeasible to see them without the presence of bodies. The pictures fail to render the body and its performances out of sight. However, this failure constitutes the rhetorical force of these photographs. The stillness and immobility transmitted by them are disrupted by the viewer, who is moved to fill those spaces of emptiness with voices, sounds, and movements. In these images, the rhetorical power of condensing simultaneously the present and the absent offers contrasting experiences.

Colombian scholar Jorge Iván Bonilla (2018), showing concern about why Colombians did not see the barbarism of war, described the fragile existence of the "regime of visibility by which we have made atrocity visible . . . fostered the creation of public spheres of deliberation … and promoted our ethical responses to the horrors of war" (p. 3). Sontag (1996) argued that "what determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness" (p. 28). Political consciousness, Sontag emphasized, names and characterizes the atrocity registered in a photograph. Therefore, it is not the photograph itself but its description what provides motives to politically act against war. Briefly, this paper is a response to the fragile regime of visibility and the need to activate the political consciousness

that provides photographs with meanings and stories, as indicated by Bonilla and Sontag, respectively. At a present time in which the Colombian society is confronting its past and going through a post-conflict reconciliation process, this piece contributes to extend the body of interpretations about the artworks engaged in constructing a more exhaustive and holistic history of the war.

This article will proceed in the following manner. I begin by briefly looking at part of the academic literature produced on visual rhetoric. Second, I explain the methodological approach to this analysis. Third, I provide a concise account of the historical context in which the photographs first appeared, followed by a brief description of them and their features. Then I address the significance of these photographs, which relies on their capacity to condense two contrasting sensorial experiences through a rhetoric of absence. I conclude this critique by echoing the need to foster public deliberation and moral judgments through the war narratives registered in photographs.

The Power of Photographs

A diverse body of literature has analyzed visual texts in the form of films, commercials, images, paintings, and comics, among other rhetorical products of equal importance. Finnegan and Jones (2006) called for a "richer consideration of the ways that citizenship, democracy, and deliberation are constructed in visual culture" (p. 490). Some scholars have addressed the photographs' power of constituting people as citizens and motivating identification with collective life. Hariman and Lucaites (2002) argued that "the visual medium is particularly good at activating aesthetic norms that can shape audience acceptance of political beliefs and historical narratives" (p. 366). As an excellent example of this approach, Gallagher & Zagacki (2005) examined how the photographs that appeared in *Life* magazine showing the Selma marches of 1965 in United States functioned rhetorically by evoking common humanity and challenging taken-for-granted ideas of democracy.

Photographs have registered different historic episodes related to violence and destruction, therefore playing different roles within public culture. Sontag (2002) argued that in an "era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it". Cloud (2004) analyzed the widely circulated images of Afghan women in building public support for the 2001–2002 U.S. war with Afghanistan. By establishing a binary opposition between the modern white Western subject and the backward and pre-modern Afghans, Cloud argued, "these images participate in justifications for the war that belie the actual motives for the war" (p. 288). The photo taken by Nick Ut for Associated Press in 1972 of a naked Vietnamese little girl screaming from the napalm burn on her body achieved the status of iconicity. This iconic photo, Hariman and Lucaites (2003) argued, was capable of confronting the conscience of U.S. citizens "because it provided an embodied transcription of important features of moral life, including pain,

fragmentation, modal relationships among strangers, betrayal and trauma." (p. 40). Hatfield (2008) analyzed the rhetorical impact of the Twin Tower images of 9/11 to conclude that these pictures not only function as a space for public deliberation and memorialization but also "reinforce feelings of vulnerability and terror" and "conjure feelings of devastation and trauma" (p. 68). The image of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse "put a shocking and monstrous face on the most brutal extremes of American racial injustice" (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 264). Moreover, Harold and DeLuca argued, "the corpse of Emmett Till became a visual trope illustrating the ugliness of racial violence and the aggregate power of the black community" (p. 266). According to Bonilla (2018), photographs can combine the past and the present in order to "provide a renewed approach to human disasters that, by remaining open to historical review and public scrutiny, constitute events capable being re-signified" (p. 338).

More specifically, other approaches to photographs have embraced the relationship between absence and presence. Foss & Domenici (2001) observed that the effectiveness of the images used by The Mothers of the Plaza in Argentina in their crusade of demanding information about their disappeared children laid in their "ability to access a different reality, to repossess what had been taken away" (p. 250). Jacksh (2013) examined the photographs of empty chairs of devastated homes in post-Katrina New Orleans. Jacksh argued that these images mediate "between the spectator and the intangible presence of an absence" (p. 105). DeLyser (2010) described how the landscape of the ghost town of Bodie, California triggers the notion of authenticity and the narratives of identification with the past. In the local context, Jesús Abad Colorado has registered some of the schools and classrooms destroyed by the war as assaulted spaces that preserve on their surface and in their folds the trace of iniquity (Giraldo, 2008).

Since this study embraces the analysis of images that represent spaces, I address the notion of space as a site of articulations between material and discursive elements. Following Dickinson (2020), I engage space as interweaving of material structures and the simultaneous and apparently disparate communicative acts that shape landscapes and the bodies interacting through them. Stormer (2004) drew on Henri Lefebvre to underline the performative essence of space. Space is "a dense, dynamic, heterogeneous network of material-semiotic elements that is the result of ordered, collective action. Space is not empty; no single person creates space, nor is it ready-made and self-contained. Space forms and reforms, and it has history" (p. 270). Indeed, Lefebvre (1991) emphasized, space cannot be reduced to a simple object. Space "is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity" (p. 73).

Perspective

To rhetorically examine the heterogeneous elements in these photographs, I used a postmodern view of criticism, which stands on the premise that "every rhetorical analysis inherently conveys multiple and contradictory meanings" (Brock, et al., 1990, p. 438). Drawing on Roland Barthes's (1986) distinction between *work* and *text*, I take on the reader's role to address the plurality of meanings and associations contained in these images. Finnegan and Kang (2004) pointed out John Dewey's emphasis on the consumer of art rather than the producer of art. For Dewey, they noted, "statues, poems, and paintings are the *products of art*. The *work of art*, by contrast, is the activity of meaning-making on the part of audiences. … Such a conception endows the audience with an important (and relatively democratic) role: that of co-creator of meaning, 'engaged seer'" (p. 384). Likewise, Helen Langa called attention to the need to include the viewer's perception in the analysis of images since "the relevance of social viewpoint themes … exists not on the artist's intention alone but also in viewer's skills in reading iconographic clues and relating them to historical and ideological contexts" (as cited in Finnegan & Jones, 2006, p. 496). Accordingly, I experience these images as a resource for meaning making, as being available for rewriting; thus, breaking the notion that meaning consists of authorial intent.

Mirroring Violence

To put these photographs in context, I provide a brief account of the Colombian armed conflict. Melo (2017) described violence as "the major tragedy of Colombian society and constitutes its greatest historical failure" (p. 324). As Chernick (1999) pointed out, violence left and returned, "one period of violence gave rise to another, almost without truce, and without the initial conflict being overcome. The actors of the violence were transformed; the motives were redefined" (p. 20). Uribe de Hincapié's (2004) words resonate today: "A generalized image of the nation's past prevails in the Colombians … A succession of senseless fratricidal confrontations, bloodshed, and abuses that do not end, that are never resolved and reproduced in a circular and perpetual way" (p. 13). It seems that violence refuses to detach entirely from the reality and the past and present of a country unceasingly haunted by the ghosts of war and misery.

The widespread political violence among Liberals and Conservatives in the 1940s and 1950s was contested by an agreement known as *Frente Nacional* (National Front), which operated from 1958 to 1974. To put an end to violence, murder, and escalating hatred, Liberal and Conservative leaders "settled on a power-sharing arrangement in which the two leading parties agreed to alternate the presidency and to share all elective and appointive positions" (Mason, 2003, p. 393). Although this accord aimed to regain political stability and governance, it resembled authoritarian rule and excluded third parties from power. As a response to violence, political exclusion, and economic disparities,

four major guerrilla groups emerged during this period. Having the background of the Cold War and inspired by the Cuban Revolution, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP), the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and the 19th of April Movement (M-19) formed, separately, each developing a political and military plan to establish a communist regime in Colombia. Indeed, in the face of social justice and limitations of democracy, the idea of changing the regime through armed action by the discontent people was seen as legitimate (Melo, 2017). The guerrillas exponential growth was contested through the creation of the paramilitaries, a "State-sanctioned rural self-defense units that protected landowners from guerrilla actions, criminal gangs that worked with drug mafias, and vigilante organizations" (Mason, 2003, p. 395). Paramilitarism rapidly spread through different zones in the country with the purpose of annihilating left-wing political, labor union, and social leaders (Medina, 1990).

In the 1980s, guerrillas and paramilitaries turned into sophisticated narco-trafficking organizations. The massive production of cocaine became their most important source of income. Between 1985 and 2012, more than 220,000 people died in the conflict, and 4.744.046 were internally displaced (Bello, 2013). The widespread violence and systematic violation of human rights include massacres, sexual violence, torture, kidnapping, extortion, and forced disappearances and recruitment. As Mason (2003) pointed out, "much of Colombian rural society lives in what might be described as a Hobbesian state of nature" (p. 395). Civilians and communities in rural areas have witnessed and endured the clashes and confrontations between four main actors: guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug cartels, and the Colombian Armed forces.

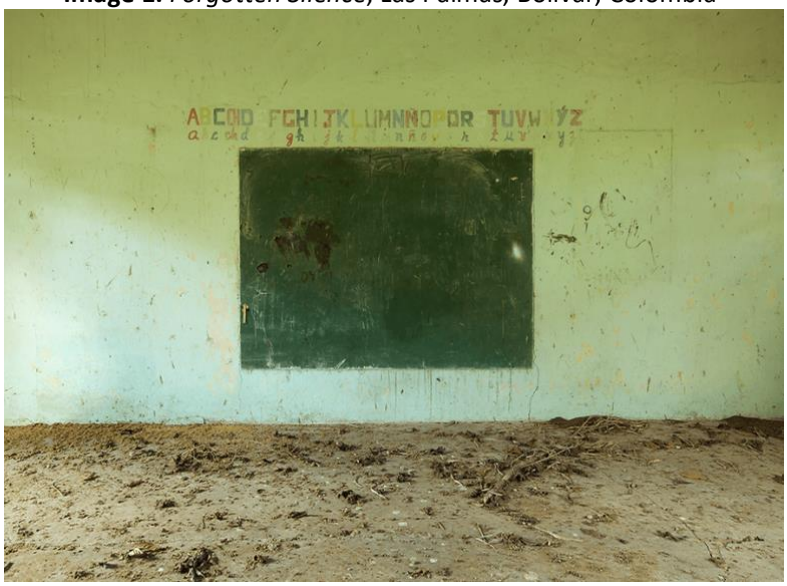
According to the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (National Center for Historical Memory), "more than fifty massacres, thousands of missing and displaced people, devastated towns, among other factors, made the Montes de María one of the areas of the national geography with the greatest impacts within the context of the armed conflict" (Recorridos por los paisajes de la violencia, 2018). *Silences*, a photographic series that comprises 37 pictures of abandoned rural schools in Colombia, is an artistic response to this convulsive period of violence. Echavarría (2018) described the origin of this project as follows:

> On March 11, 2010, I was invited to the old town of Mampuján, in the district of Los Montes de María, Bolívar, Colombia. The community commemorated the 10th anniversary of their displacement by the paramilitary group "Heroes de los Montes de María" (Heroes of Los Montes de María). In the abandoned Rural School of Mampuján, which had no roof and a floor covered with vegetation, I found a blackboard in one of the classrooms, and on the wall next to it, vowels were drawn. The calligraphy and colors of the letters caught my attention. They seemed to be fleeing from the blackboard: the a, e, i, o, u were legible despite the

> damp and the abandonment…the "o" was vanishing. In a second classroom, I saw a blackboard hidden in the thick vegetation, faded and in very bad condition. I hesitated to photograph it. (p. 108)

After Mampuján, Echavarría and Fernando Grisalez visited more than one hundred abandoned rural schools of remote areas heavily affected by the war to photograph classrooms. Each of these pictures focuses on the blackboard wall. The voices and bodies that occupied these spaces left and fled, somewhere. As images of the war, they do not frame violent actors, suffering and martyrized bodies, or destruction. Instead, they transmit emptiness, absence, abandonment, or the traces of displacement. The lack of human presence has been replaced by the course of nature and the growing vegetation, by fractures and fissures in the walls, by roofs that no longer protect from sunlight and rain, and by surfaces covered with mold and peeling and cracked paint. However, some of these classrooms were converted into rooms with beds and hammocks, clothes and backpacks hanging from ropes and walls covered with damp, and tools and equipment to work the land. Rather than abandonment, some these photos speak of spatial reoccupation.

Image 1. *Forgotten Silence*, Las Palmas, Bolívar, Colombia[1]



Source: https://jmechavarria.com/en/work/silencios/

The significance of the photographs comprised in *Silences* rests in their capacity to condense contrasting experiences through a rhetoric of absence. In other

[1] Las Palmas is a small village located in the rural area of San Jacinto, in a region known as Montes de María, in the department of Bolívar. According to Rutas del Conflicto, a digital independent media focused on reporting about the armed conflict in Colombia, "on September 27, 1999, paramilitaries arrived in the village … They gathered the population in the square, including children, and murdered four farmers known by the community … Before leaving, they threatened to carry out a massacre in December of that year, so nearly 500 families moved mainly to San Jacinto, the cities in the Coast [Caribbean], and the neighborhood of Suba in Bogotá. The displacement was massive and turned Las Palmas into a ghost town" (Masacre de Las Palmas, Bolívar, 2019). Lara Ramos (2015) described the war consequences for Las Palmas as follows: "By the 2000s, a place that was inhabited by more than 500 families had been left with less than 20, abandoned fields; a dismembered community."

words, these images bring into view what is not present. In what follows, I present two different approaches or instances to see these pictures as exhibitions of absent happenings.

The rupture of the social fabric

In war contexts, as Sontag (2002) pointed out, "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain" is keen. However, *Silences* did not capture atrocious suffering or bodies enduring cruelty. In these empty spaces, the martyrized body is absent; there is no battered face to look at or skin to read the traces that violence has produced. The human being subjected to pain has already left. These photographs do not represent students and teachers in all their individuality and immediacy. Similar to Jesús Abad Colorado's photographs, in which space turns into the memory of expulsion and the trace of degradation (Giraldo, 2008), *Silences* is about the transformation of space produced by abandonment, by not returning, by the absence of bodies, by the relentless passing of time. *Silences* doesn't register physical devastation but the destruction of the pure essence and nature of a community. Towns and villages in Colombia were founded and constructed around two symbolic and geographic centers: The Church and the school. These places embody the ritual view of communication as described by Carey (1992): communities constituted them to cultivate the values of communion, sharing, fellowship, and association. Moreover, beyond their traditional roles, the priest and the teacher became spiritual leaders and mentors committed to maintaining unity and solidarity.

In Colombian rural and remote areas, the teacher and school are signified as the means by which poor communities can surmount states of poverty and economic underdevelopment. Rural teachers engage with service, perform the role of fierce defenders of education against illegal armed actors, and are critical to rural communities' sustainability. Equally important, education is the medium of acquiring consciousness and political awareness. In a chronicle titled Wikdi's journey, Salcedo[2] (2012) described the everyday life of Wikdi, a boy who lives in the remote Colombian Pacific Coast who must walk five hours a day to go to school and come back home. Salcedo emphasized:

> "Ah, if it was enough to appear in the Universal Atlas to be considered! Our indolent rulers have never been interested in this poor remoteness, and that is why the paramilitaries are in command. In practice, they are the patrons and legislators recognized by the people. How could the vicious cycle of backwardness be broken? With education, I guess."

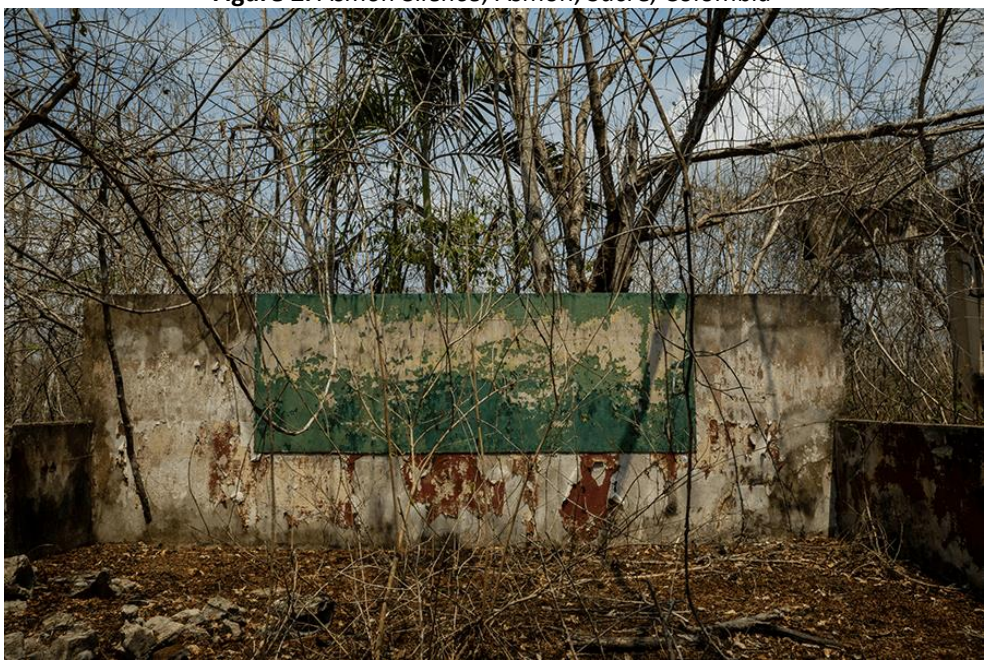
The school appears as the place and institution by which the new generations can make remote territories worth of the government's attention and interrupt

[2] Alberto Salcedo Ramos is a Colombian writer of non-fiction works. In some of his chronicles he has described the harsh reality of the people who have endured the armed conflict in remote areas across the country.

the violent authority imposed by armed actors. However, in Echevarria's work *Silences*, there is no school to go.

In the photographs comprised in *Silences*, the empty and abandoned classrooms signify the rupture of the social fabric, the breakdown, and the disintegration of a community. These images comprise the history of the foundation of the community but also of its dismemberment. The fellowship and association principles that bring people together to construct the essence of a community turned into stories of separation and abrupt detachment. *Silences* communicates a disheartening sentiment of social breakdown. The rupture of the social order represents the failure of living together. Faced with the unfeasibility of living as a community, the only choice to make is to follow the routes of dispersion, displacement, and the diaspora. Without a school, there is no community. In other words, following Carey (1992), this rupture conveys the failure to maintain a society in time, a purpose to which the ritual view of communication is directed.

Figure 2. *Asmón Silence*, Asmón, Sucre, Colombia[3]



Source: https://jmechavarria.com/en/work/silencios/

Kennerly (2010) emphasized that "rhetoric's work often consists of giving presence to the unseeable—something not yet or never capable of being seen—or to the unseen—something visible but ignored" (p. 269). To account for the capacity of rhetorical works to bring the absent into view, Kennerly proposed a conceptualization of rhetorical transport originated on civic *phantasia*. Drawing on Hispano-Roman rhetorician Quintilian, who defined *phantasia* in Greek and *visio* in Latin as that "by which images of absent things

[3] Asmón is a small village located in the rural area of Morroa, a municipality in the region of Montes de María.

(imagines rerum *absentium*) are presented to the mind in such a way that we seem to see them with our eyes (*oculis*) and to have them before the senses (*praesentes*)," civic *phantasia* "promotes a journey of judgment" (Kennerly, 2010, p. 270).

From another perspective, Dickinson (2020) pointed out, rhetorical criticism needs to think of space and body as co-implicated, that is to say, of "space governing the body even as the body produces space and produces its own spatiality" (p. 303). Criticism of existing spaces is not limited to the movement of the body but expands to "movement from attending to my embodied experience of the places out to discursive, cultural, and material formations; movement from the present of the spaces into traces of its past" (p. 305). Drawing on Kennerly's (2010) concept of rhetorical transport and Dickinson's (2020) approach to critiquing space, I argue that it is not possible to read these spaces without the presence of bodies. Reading the meanings embedded in the blackboards and the classrooms inescapably move the spectator to fill the absence with presence, to think of bodies and movements inhabiting spaces. In doing so, the spectator engages with two contrasting sensorial experiences. First, the imagery of school, which represents the living of a community and reaffirmation of the social fabric. Second, its disruption and disintegration of the community, followed by the need for displacement.

Rhetorical transport collapses time and distance between people and places, between the seer and the seen. The rhetorical force of these images is such that "we find ourselves transported, and the conditions of the here, the now, and the self altered" (Kennerly, 2010, p. 270). Initially, the photographs carry the viewer into the classroom to fill the silence and the inhabited spaces with the most quotidian and ordinary expression of everyday village life: the bodies entering and leaving the classroom, the movement of squeaky chairs and desks, bodies playing games at recess, learning voices repeating the alphabet after the teacher, the pencils adding and putting words together. These noises, bodies, and objects fill the empty classroom through a first sensorial experience. In Common Sense, Kennerly (2010) indicated, Thomas Paine "appeals through speech to judgment-enabling human qualities like fellow-feeling to rhetorically transport readers from an inner world of *sensus privatus* to an outer one of *sensus communis*" (p. 284). Through *Silences*, the spectator turns a landscape devoid of life into a sensory stimulation and performance that imagines the school, thus representing the essence of a community.

However, after sensing an occupied space, the viewer experiences its disruption by imagining and embodying the tragedy of displacement. The viewer undergoes a contrasting sensorial happening. Displacement is a long process preceded by moments of tension, suffering, and intense fear. The imperative of leaving destroys the cohesiveness of the community and the certainties and routines that sustain daily life. Leaving is the obligation to appropriate a new space, which is sensed through alienation, disorientation, and strangeness.

Silences transcends the space of the classroom and puts the spectator's eye on the trajectories forced by the diaspora, therefore covering the body with feelings of anxiety and despair.

The failure to present empty and quiet spaces constitutes the rhetorical force of these pictures, which is the condensation of contrasting sensory experiences through the convergence of the visible and invisible. That which is not visible in the pictures draws its contours from absence to render presence. Rather than a repertory of hard-to-look brutalities, *Silences* move the viewer to imagine a series of bodies, performances, and trajectories that produce different meanings of space. In the following section, I address a second instance of contrasting sensorial experiences that happens through the simultaneity of two separate spaces.

Two contrasting spaces: the present and the absent

Colombian writer William Ospina (1997) opened his essay *Sobre Bogotá* (About Bogotá) with a statement loaded with a historical narrative of exclusion: "For centuries, Bogotá has been characterized to be the capital city of a country with which it didn't identify. … and the country got used to looking at its capital as it looks at something illustrious and distant that disqualifies us, and in whose order, we don't fit" (p. 36). Here, the word Bogotá functions as a metonymic slide to generate likeness (Ahmed, 2004); that is, it contains other cities, urban life, and the state's authority and power. Ospina speaks of two contrasting worlds, of two conflicting realities. A binary opposition between Bogotá and the rural regions. Colombia is two countries in one. The war deepened the division between two distant territories, separated not only by rugged geography but above all, by the contempt of the one towards the other. And the other, with an unbearable sense of orphanage, got used to living the violence alone, without protection and shelter. The existence of each is grounded in the existence of the other.

On the one hand, there is the Colombia of the metropolis and urban life. Refurbished cities with streets and highways that follow the highest standards of modern urbanism. This is the Colombia of globalized capitalism, of corporations and business, in which appeals to consumerism and a multiplicity of brands circulate within popular culture. If one visits the Colombian cities without knowing the country's history, it would be difficult to perceive the imprints of war in their surroundings. These territories are the geographical center of economic, political, and state power, from where the government bodies design public policies for a country that only exists within the perimeters of malls, parks, and neighborhoods with multifaceted socioeconomic status. This is the urban Colombia absent in *Silences.* This urban Colombia has been historically unaware and insensitive to other spaces surviving beyond its borders.

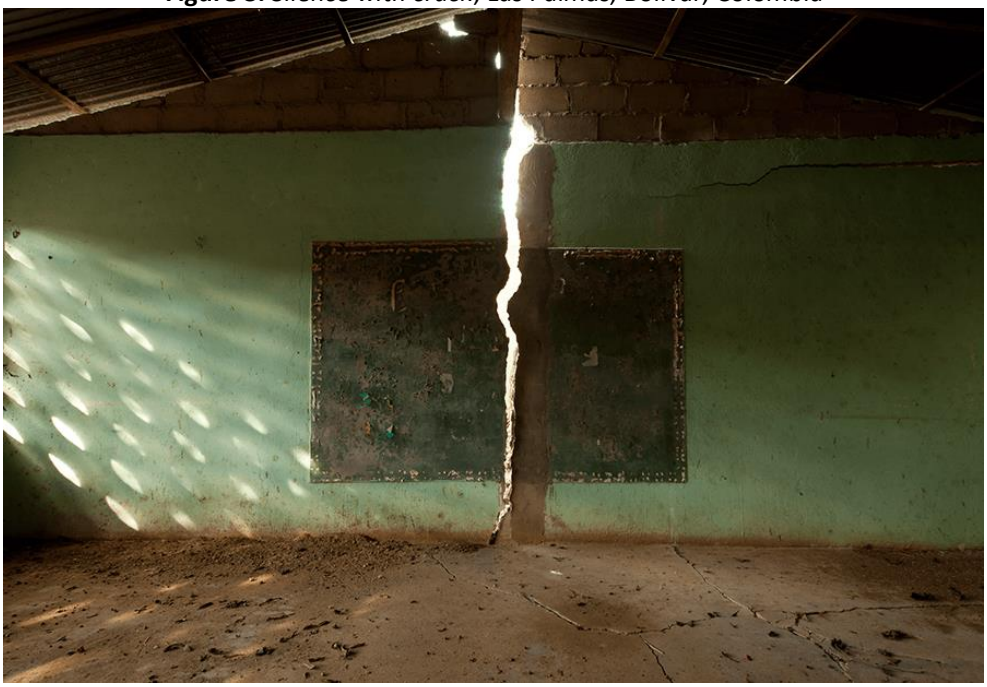
The rural Colombia, on the other hand, has been withdrawn from the economic development and social investing programs. It has been forgotten, ignored, and subjected to abandonment. Another country of rural and remote territories exposed to the war vexations and humiliations. It is the poor and economically backward, the neglected nation that endured the armed conflict, so complicated to resolve, that the state decided to turn its back on it. Although this is the Colombia erased from minds and imaginations, it forces us to look at it when it faces cruelty and violence, and it haunts us. In Salcedo's (2009) words, this is the country that we learned through bullets and deaths, but not in textbooks or tourist catalogs. In his words, "The inhabitants of these poor and secluded places are only visible when they face a tragedy. They die, then they exist" (para. 1). This is the Colombia present in *Silences*. Abandoned schools and blackboards are visible through absence. They stop being, then they exist.
For instance, the village of Las Palmas has been left unattended and forgotten by the state for years. It was only through Constitutional Court´s ruling that the community regained their rights to

> "a dignified life, physical integrity, human dignity and health of 138 families … the protection of the Constitutional Court rejoices because the rights of a reduced and devastated community are recognized, but there is concern that it will be through judicial action that compliance with what was promised for them to return to their lands will be achieved … Las Palmas has begun to rebuild, and due to its status as victims of the conflict, it deserves adequate attention so that the community can consolidate its social processes and its daily life becomes increasingly friendly." (Lara Ramos, 2015).

Besides judicial action, writers and journalists such as Salcedo and Lara Ramos have contributed, through their stories and reports, to make visible those people and places neglected because of the war and the state´s apathy and indolence.

Despite their separateness, both the urban and the remote converge in this photographic project through a rhetoric of absence. The emptiness of the classrooms and the blackboards damaged by weathering speak of a state that is present in urban spheres but was never present here to exercise sovereignty and laws. Jacksh's (2013) visual analysis of the pictures of empty chairs after Katrina portrayed the chairs as "the haunting ground for the ghost of racial prejudice, classism, and political apathy" (p. 110). In *Silences*, the ghost is the failure of political institutions to guarantee basic rights, life, and dignity in these isolated regions. Photograph #10, titled *Silence with crack*, shows the blackboard in a wall about to collapse, fallen into partial ruin. It displays a dilapidated classroom with sunlight coming through a crack that extends from the fractured floor across the blackboard up to the roof. This image symbolizes the breach between two countries, but above all, their condensed presence in the same space.

Figure 3. *Silence with crack*, Las Palmas, Bolívar, Colombia



Source: https://jmechavarria.com/en/work/silencios/

Even though the photographs that comprise *Silences* show blackboards spatially located in neglected Colombia, they form a silhouette of the urban Colombia that is not materially or visually present. These photographs reinforce the solidity of the boundaries between both worlds as they figuratively mark the limits where one ends and the other begins. These images work to direct our attention to the rupture and divisiveness between two spaces and territories. They operate rhetorically to make noticeable previously unseen abandoned spaces impacted by the war. In doing so, they move the spectator to acknowledge and be cognizant of the contrasting realities that constitute two countries in one. In other words, *Silences* bring the disdained Colombia from a distant region into the domain of the urban life to confront and question it.

As images that work to shape public awareness, they function transformatively by enabling viewers to experience the sense of isolation and abandonment left by the war out of the urban borders. These images break the silence surrounding the classrooms to speak about the need to erase cracks and borderlines. In brief, they drive us to reckon with the other Colombia we would rather not see.

Conclusion

This study engaged with the analysis of a photographic project that registered rural schools impacted by the war. Juan Manuel Echavarría implies unseen elements and past circumstances by visually framing spaces empty of human presence, while revealing in these spaces inconographic clues of previous

habitation and activity. In other words, this analysis emerged from the need to foster public deliberation and moral judgments through the war narratives registered in photographs. Echavarría's project *Silences*, having the rhetorical power to activate facets of imagination and induce judgment, can improve the public response to the need to confront a violent past and the present and the exigencies to come. Following Bonilla's (2018) assertion: "by looking at what previously lacked sufficient attention, societies can learn from their catastrophes" (p. 338).

Photographs of abandoned schools in remote areas of Colombia invite the reader to see the war with a new set of eyes: those that draw the silhouette of tragedy emerging from the intersectionality between silence, absence, deterioration, forgetting and government's apathy. It is the rhetorical power of these concepts, all condensed in similar visual compositions, what moves the viewer to perceive the violent history of our country through the lens of disaster and trauma. This power could potentially dismantle the indifference and disinterest by which public officials and a significant body of citizens have related to the remote rural areas and the people severely hit by the war. On June 28, 2022, Father Francisco de Roux, the President of The Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence Commission created as a result of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and FARC, presented a final report about the conflict. He regretted the Colombians' apathy and disregard by saying: "It hurts us to see that all this was known in Colombia, the world knew it, we saw it on TV and heard it on the radio, but we let it go for 50 years as if this barbarism didn't belong to us" (p. 2). The abandoned classrooms portrayed in *Silences* compel us to reckon with the certainty we would rather not see. To relate with this certainty, entirely permeated with the negative essence of silence, absence, damage, and neglect, fills the spectator with a seemingly contradictory mixture of disgrace and responsibility.

Now that Colombia is going through a post-conflict reconciliation process, the need to discern and compare gives impulse to bringing the previously unseen into view. The activation of civic phantasia suggests the didactic power of rhetorical transport, Kennerly (2010) underlined, "teaching and instructing those who are moved from the comfort of their own circumstances to the misery of those of others" (p. 285). *Silences* shows the heretofore unrecognized face of war through the visualization of abandoned classrooms and disused blackboards, allowing the spectator to relate to others who endured violence and displacement. As Gallagher and Zagacki (2005) pointed out, "in a way photographs may function to force us to look at subjects we have otherwise chosen to ignore, making us think about then, and, even, imagine ourselves in their situation" (p. 116). These images carry with them the potential of allowing judgment by putting two disparities before the spectator.

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