# I. Premise

My research interrogates the configuration and representation of the concept of the “zona roja,” and how Colombian 21st-century testimonial narratives represent these zones’ territorial realities. The Colombian armed conflict has a long and complex history dating from the bipartisan civil war known as “La Violencia” (1925-1958). Today, the armed conflict continues, but its agents are no longer the two original and distinct factions (*liberales* y *conservadores*) motivated by opposing political ideologies.[[1]](#endnote-1) Furthermore, as the country’s agricultural and economic centers have shifted, the agricultural frontiers have also moved, along with the conflict’s geographic axis. Thus, the conflict’s participants, settings, and intensity have changed throughout its unfolding history. One thing, however, remains the same: the Colombian armed conflict takes place predominantly on the fringes of rural and urban areas (i. e., in populated areas where State control is in dispute). Most victims of the conflict therefore come from communities in rural areas and urban outskirts that have been classified by the State, at different times, as “*Zonas Especiales de Orden Público*” (Law Enforcement Special Zones) or “*Zonas Estratégicas de Intervención Integral*” (Strategic Zones of Comprehensive Intervention) – or, as they are more commonly known, “zonas rojas” (red rones).[[2]](#endnote-2) This representation of the “zonas rojas” homogenizes the characterizations and problems of the territories and populations most impacted by the conflict, perpetuating the idea that war is the same everywhere, undifferentiated by local context. Moreover, the pervasive usage of this term fuels the discourse that claims that red zones lack State presence, and that both the territories and their inhabitants are irremediably “violent,” “disorganized,” and “uncivilized.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

The armed conflict has not been foreign to representation. In fact, historians, journalists, sociologists, and victims have documented and fictionalized the struggle in historical novels, articles, chronicles, and *testimonios*. To date, studies on such texts have focused, with good reason, on how these accounts represent, document, and divulge the facts of what occurred during the conflict. These studies about contemporary testimonial narratives allow us to have a better perspective of the armed conflict in Colombia, and the regions in which it has taken place. Beginning from an understanding of spaceas a socially and discursively constructed entity (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*), I intend to examine a group of testimonial narratives about war in Colombia published in the last twenty years, emphasizing their portrayal of space and how the armed conflict and its representations have affected the relationship between certain territories and their inhabitants. My goal is to question the uses, meanings and pervasiveness of the term “zona roja” in Colombia, and to contest the importance of the term in shaping the views held by the general population about regions affected by the armed conflict. Especially, I aim to analyze changes in testimonial narratives between the first and the second decade of twenty-first century: how these works localize and represent the spaces where armed conflict has taken place. I intend to examine the political, social, and cultural factors that may have contributed to these changes and whether readers’ understanding of the so-called “zonas rojas” have been influenced by these testimonial accounts.

1. Due to its length and diverse causes and actors, the Colombian armed conflict has been an interpretive and representational battlefield. There is no consensus about when the conflict began nor its timeline. In this project, I side with those traditional interpretations that place the beginnings of the armed conflict during the time of “La Violencia.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. By Decree 0717 of 1996, President Ernesto Samper declared a state of internal disturbance and gave himself the power to establish as Law Enforcement Special Areas “those geographic areas where it is necessary to apply one or more of the exceptional measures referred to in the following articles (...), to restore the security and coexistence of affected citizens due to the actions of criminal and terrorist organizations.” ‘… [A]quellas áreas geográficas en las que con el fin de restablecer la seguridad y la convivencia ciudadanas afectadas por las acciones de las organizaciones criminales y terroristas, sea necesaria la aplicación de una o más de las medidas excepcionales de que tratan los siguientes artículos…’ (my trans). Subsequently, Law 941 of 2018 states that “The National Security Council may declare Strategic Zones of Comprehensive Intervention those regions where crime affects national security, to protect the population and guarantee that State actions is unified, coordinated, interagency, sustained and comprehensive.” ‘El Consejo de Seguridad Nacional podrá declarar zonas estratégicas de intervención integral a regiones afectadas por la criminalidad que afecte la seguridad nacional, con el fin de proteger a la población y garantizar una acción unificada, coordinada, interagencial, sostenida e integral del Estado’ (my trans). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In her book *El revés de la nación. Territorios salvajes, fronteras y tierras de nadie* (2011) Margarita Serje claims these areas “… [today] are known as ‘law enforcement areas,’ where law is not enforced, they are perceived as the least national among national territories. They are the ‘internal borders’ in the eye of the storm of today’s intense armed conflict. These areas’ landscapes and inhabitants have been reduced to representation” ‘…[H]oy son conocidas como “zonas de orden público”, donde reina el desorden público, igual que durante muchos años fueron territorios nacionales, los menos nacionales de los territorios, las “fronteras internas” que están hoy en el ojo del huracán del intenso conflicto armado que vive el país. Sus paisajes y sus habitantes se han visto reducidos a pura representación’ (Serje 17; My trans). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)