Dissertation Prospectux

“That town is a red zone”: Geographies of the Colombian Armed Conflict in 21st-Century Testimonial Narratives

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Contents

# Dissertation Prospectus

# “That town is a red zone”: Geographies of the Colombian Armed Conflict in 21st-Century Testimonial Narratives

The term “zonas rojas” (red zones), which has pervaded State, media, and cultural discourses since the 1990s, refers to the places in which the Colombian armed conflict has been most prevalent. What is the historical and conceptual background that gives the term “zona roja” its current meaning in Colombian contemporary testimonial narratives? How do these narratives represent the relationship between such “red” spaces and their citizens? How will understanding the pervasiveness and development of the term “zona roja” contribute to the study of the testimonial genre within the Colombian context and beyond? In what ways do Colombian testimonial narratives remap, redefine and reformulate the area of Latin American Testimonial Studies?

# 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]](#footnote-22) 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]](#footnote-23) 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]](#footnote-24)

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 space as 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.

# II. Rationale

As a result of the two peace agreements with illegal armed groups over the last few decades, *memory* and *victim* have become central categories in historical and political discussions, as well as in the production of testimonial works at the beginning of the 21st century. One might say that Colombia is witnessing a “memory boom” in which attention is focused on uncovering the truth about the perpetrators and causes of the armed conflict, and on giving the victims a platform for narrating their experiences. Given the ample testimonial production from these recent decades and the new voices and perspectives that have emerged from the scenes of the memory of conflict, it is not surprising that literary criticism has begun to focus attention on contemporary Colombian testimonial works. Two recent projects stand out for the ways in which they approach contemporary narratives: the aforementioned Eduardo Suárez Gómez’s *La literatura testimonial como memoria de las guerras en Colombia* (2016), and María Ospina Pizano’s *El rompecabezas de la memoria. Literatura, cine y testimonio de comienzos de siglo en Colombia* (2019). Suárez Gómez focuses on two works that represent two different modalities of testimonial discourse: mediated testimony and direct testimony. He studies how these works take as a point of reference the collective memory of previous conflicts in Colombia to make sense of the contemporary experiences. Ospina Pizano considers a larger corpus and suggests interpreting recent testimonial production as more than representations of the armed conflict or records of contemporary history. Instead, she claims that testimonial discourses from the 21st century are interventions in the ways of interpreting the violence of recent decades that do more than merely representing the conflict: they contribute to the construction of a collective memory.

These two critical studies, among others, focus on the construction of memory about the generally traumatic experiences caused by the armed conflict by making emphasis on the events of the conflict. Given that space is a fundamental aspect of how people experience events, and of how they recall, represent, and make sense of those events, studying the representation and discursive construction of spaces where the conflict took place becomes a fundamental part of reconstructing the memory of the Colombian armed conflict. My project aims to insert itself within the ongoing “memory boom” conversation in Colombia, emphasizing a key aspect of Colombian testimonial narratives that has not yet been addressed: the representation, discursive construction, and territorial realities of the geographies of the conflict.

Furthermore, I intend to “locate” Colombian testimonial narratives on the “map” of Latin American testimonial studies, which so far have focused attention primarily on testimonial traditions from Central America and the Southern Cone. Central American studies on testimony have revolved around subalterns’ representation and self-representation, as well as their role in civil wars during the 1980s. In the Southern Cone, critics have studied mainly how testimonies reconstruct the memory of events during the military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Due to the length of the Colombian armed conflict, and its diverse causes and agents, testimonial narratives have tried to account for the realities and spaces in which there is a convergence of several historicities, witnesses, and interpretations. Studies on testimonial narratives must, therefore, pay closer attention to the specificity of Colombian testimonial narratives and how they have responded to the task of representing, remembering, and interpreting such complex realities. A conversation between Colombian and Latin American testimonial narratives is essential, not only to study how the former have shaped the latter, but also because the Colombian case allows us to question the limits, scope, and possibilities of the testimonial genre as a whole.

# III. Scope

## A. Testimonial Scope

This project’s primary sources belong to the field of testimonial discourse. I define testimonial narratives as cultural products that bear witness to an event or real-life experience through a narration. Although the primary textual sources I will study in my dissertation differ in terms of production and reception, they all represent witnesses who account for experiences related to events within the context of the Colombian armed conflict. By bearing witness to such experiences, these texts presuppose a link between the testimonial account and the facts. Therefore, one cannot study these testimonial narratives without considering how testimonial discourses produce a reality effect, how they relate to a real-life referent, and what kind of mediations exist between the account of an experience and the experience itself. While early on in discussions of testimonial narrative critics such as John Beverley (“The Margin at the Center,” 1989) considered as “genuine *tesitmonios*” the works written or edited by a professional writer, narrated in the voice of a subaltern subject who was an actor in, and a witness to, the life experiences or events to which the text testifies (Beverley 32), other scholars such as Elzbieta Sklodowska (“Hacia una tipología del testimonio latinoamericano,” 1990) suggested that testimonial discourse has different modalities and that works can be categorized by placing them in a range that goes from the most fictional-least referential to the least fictional-most referential (Sklodowska 109). My selection of testimonial materials has followed Sklodowska’s proposal: the dissertation’s corpus comprises diverse modalities of Colombian testimonial discourse, which I have classified under five categories.

1. Testimonial fictions: works of fiction that refer to historical events or real places. For example, María Ospina Pizano’s short story titled “Policarpa” (2015) –which fictionalizes the writing process of a former guerrilla woman’s testimony– or Daniel Ferreira’s *La rebelión de los oficios inútiles* (2019) –which, narrated as if it were a piece of investigative journalism, tells the story of a fictional 1970s peasants’ collective that occupies a vacant lot in the outskirts of a small town in Colombia.
2. Testimonial novels: works that represent real events and places, emphasizing their factuality. For example, in *Río muerto* (2020) by Ricardo Silva Romero, the author-narrator reconstructs the last days of the Palacios family in Belén de Chamí after the father is murdered by a paramilitary group, and presents the story as based on the testimony of a survivor of the Palacios family, who told the author-narrator his story while sitting in Bogotá’s heavy traffic. *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2012), by Juan Gabriel Vázquez, is a testimonial novel that reconstructs the story of the birth of the drug trafficking business in Medellín.
3. Testimonios: texts written or edited by a professional writer, whose narrator is a person who witnessed and took part in the events and experiences told in the text. For example, *Ahí le dejo esos fierros* (2009) gathers six stories written and edited by Alfredo Molano, who gives voice to demobilized militants of different armed groups who bore first-hand witness to the complexity of Colombian conflict. *Los niños de la guerra. Quince años después* (2015) by Guillermo González Uribe is a compilation of stories that testify to the scars left by the armed conflicts on the children and teenagers of Colombia.
4. Autobiographic testimonies: works in which the author-narrator was a witness to the narrated events. For example, Mery Yolanda Sánchez’s *El atajo* (2014) and *Cómo mate a mi padre* by Sara Jaramillo Klinkert (2019). In *El atajo,* Sánchez narrates, in the first person, her experience as cultural promoter in Nariño, a region besieged by violence. In *Cómo maté a mi padre* Jaramillo Klinkert recounts her and her family’s life experiences after the father was killed by a hitman in Medellín in the 1990s.
5. Journalistic chronicles: works based on documentation and journalistic research. For example, *Rutas del conflict* is an investigative journalism website dedicated to tracing the effects of the conflict in different regions of Colombia. The podcast *Relatos anfibios* presents a group of journalists’ narrations of the stories and experiences of people living in different regions of Colombia, especially in those regions most affected by the war.

## B. Conceptual Scope

The concept “zona roja” (red zone) is part of the discursive apparatus employed by the Colombian State to control its territory. By classifying a geographic space as a red zone or conflict zone, the State decides what resources to invest in those territories. Over time, however, this classificatory term has permeated most discourses about the armed conflict and the nation, from media to popular culture and fiction. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre claims that space is socially and discursively constructed--that is, space is not just the physical setting where human interactions and conflicts occur, but a symbolic entity subject to disputes over its interpretation and representation (Lefevbre 38). Both the concept of “zona roja,” and the spaces considered as such in Colombia, have been subject to both real and symbolic disputes over their control and interpretation. In this regard, testimonial narratives –which I define as discursive productions that give voice to witnesses’ experiences– promote, at least in theory, discourses that may challenge spatial configurations imposed by the State, including the notion of “zona roja.”

Mapping is a method states use to represent, shape, and control their territories. More than accurate representations of reality, maps are interpretations of the relations between spaces, territories, and populations that are produced by an individual or a society.[[4]](#footnote-28) Devising a map requires studying, generalizing, homogenizing, and hierarchically organizing a territory and its inhabitants; it requires a selective operation that highlights the aspects of a territory that its author wants to emphasize. Maps can therefore be read, not only as state control tools, but as purposely crafted visual discourses about a territory and its inhabitants. Likewise, the narration of an event involves creating a context; it is a selective exercise that highlights the relevant aspects of a reality and thereby embeds it with meaning. I propose to read primary testimonial works as discursive maps, so to speak, as representations of real events that also interpret the relations between spaces, places, and people within conflict zones, and that shape and are shaped by the notion of “zonas rojas.”

To account for the way in which testimonial narratives “map” red zones, I propose three concepts to guide my analysis of the representation and construction of spaces: delocalization, hyperlocation, and displacement. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, several novels were published with the conflict zones as their main setting. Among those novels, two were critically acclaimed both nationally and internationally: Héctor Abad Faciolince’s *Angosta* (2005) is a metaphorical spatial depiction of Colombian reality and Evelio José Rosero’s *Los ejércitos* (2006) tells the story of a man from a rural area who witnesses how his town –a fictional place located in an undetermined place within Colombian territory– gets caught in the crossfire between several armed groups. Both novels invent fictional spaces that can be read as metaphors of conflict zones in Colombia. By delocalizing conflict zones –that is, by placing them in unspecified spaces in Colombia, or refraining from giving them a name that connects them to a real place, these narratives do more than preserve memory of the armed conflict; indeed, they contribute to the homogenization of the “zonas rojas.”

In recent years, however, testimonial works (journalistic chronicles, documentaries, and testimonial fictions), have shifted to a hyperlocation of the spaces where the narrated events of conflict take place. Instead of setting stories in metaphorical or unnamed places, these narratives constantly name, describe, and locate in detail the spaces where events occur, and sometimes provide geographical location coordinates. Both Phillip Potdevin’s *La sembradora de cuerpos* and Juan Miguel Álvarez’s collection of articles titled *Cuadernos de los encuentros. Verde tierra calcinada* –published in 2019--are examples of works that “hyperlocate” the “red zones.” Finally, in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, many people have had to leave their homelands to escape violence. Forced displacement has, therefore, inevitably shaped the way in which space is represented, remembered, and imagined in a significant number of testimonial narratives. For example, Alfredo Molano’s *Desterrados, crónicas del desarraigo* and the collection *Yo sobreviví” Memorias de guerra y resistencia en Colombia* (2018), by the team of Rutas del Conflicto, talk about the space from a position of exile or displacement--that is, they talk about a space that no longer exists, or that is no longer what it used to be, and therefore cannot be recovered.

## C. Historical Scope

Historians, sociologists, and political scientists continue to debate about the precise timeline for the history of the Colombian armed conflict. Despite the lack of a consensus about the timeline, I believe that the conflict can be organized into four main periods: the phase of bipartisan violence (La Violencia bipartidista) (1925-1958),[[5]](#footnote-30) the Frente Nacional (1958-1974),[[6]](#footnote-31) the emergence of drug and paramilitary violence (1980s and 1990s), and the Plan Colombia period (from 2001 to the present day). This periodization coincides partially with the phases suggested by Carlos Miguel Ortiz (“Historiografía de la violencia,” 1994) and Jorge Eduardo Suárez Gómez (*La literatura testimonial como memoria de las guerras en Colombia*, 2016) regarding all written testimonial materials about the Colombian armed conflict. I intend to focus on testimonial narratives that narrate events that have taken place during the two last periods of the above timeline. I have selected this time frame for my reseach for two reasons: first, the armed conflict grew more complex after the 1980s due to the incorporation of new participants and sources of funding; second, in the last two decades the government and several illegal armed groups reached peace agreements that, albeit imperfect, brought about a “memory boom” that has significantly increased the production of narratives about the comtemporary armed conflict.

Drug cartel and paramilitary violence emerged between the 1980s and 1990s. In this period, the increase in production and distribution of cocaine completely altered the scene of war in Colombia, diversifying both the types of violence and its agents. Initially funded by powerful drug lords and landowners, diverse paramilitary groups emerged with the initial goal of confronting the communist guerrillas. The emergence of these groups intensified violence in areas traditionally controlled by guerrillas. In this period there were battles not only between the National Army and guerrillas, but also between the guerrillas and paramilitary groups fighting over control of the territory. Furthermore, during this period the peasant massacres increased greatly: paramilitary groups terrorized civilians as a means to gain and maintain control over guerrilla-influenced areas. Moreover, both guerrillas and paramilitary groups began to fund themselves with drug money, and drug-related violence spread both in rural areas and in the main cities.

In 1987 the government appointed a commission to study “La Violencia,” which resulted in the publication of *Colombia, violencia y democracia.* Partly thanks to this research, public understanding of the Colombian conflict underwent a transformation: originally seen as an essentially political problem--or a confrontation between left and right--the conflict came to be understood as a multi-causal and multi-modal confrontation. Testimonial narratives played a key role in shifting public perception of the conflict as they “addressed stories of violence different from political violence” (Suárez Gómez 58; my trans). Precipitated by the diversity of causes and types of violence within the Colombian armed conflict, testimonial texts from this period portrayed the experiences of individuals from all social classes (60). As in other parts of Latin America, the mediation of intellectuals (journalists, sociologists, and writers) became essential to the testimonial narratives from this period, but, unlike most testimonial narratives in other Latin American countries, whose paradigm was Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), Colombian testimonial narratives did not only emphasize political struggle and the experience of subaltern subjects.

In 1999, the Andrés Pastrana administration began peace dialogues between the government and Farc guerrillas, which eventually broke down in 2001.[[7]](#footnote-32) Along with the negotiations with Farc, President Pastrana negotiated an economic and military aid plan with the United States--the Plan Colombia--to combat drug trafficking and, by extension, Colombian guerrillas. When the peace talks failed, the Pastrana government, and that of his successor Álvaro Uribe Vélez, implemented strategies to defeat the insurgency militarily, funded in great part by the US thanks to Plan Colombia. Uribe based his government on the pillar of Seguridad Democrática (democratic security), a policy that strengthened the presence of the State in areas traditionally controlled by guerrillas through the militarization of those territories. Although this policy hurt the guerrillas, especially the Farc, it also increased violence against civilians in certain regions of the country.

During his administration, Uribe negotiated the demobilization of paramilitary groups in exchange for lower sentences for its members.[[8]](#footnote-33) In 2012, Juan Manuel Santos, who succeeded Uribe in the presidency, began new negotiations to reach a peace accord with the Farc. These negotiations, which took place between 2012 and 2016, resulted in the *Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera* (General Accord to End the Conflict and Build a Stable, Enduring Peace). The implementation of the accord began with the demobilization of all the Farc guerrilla fronts and the creation of their political party –initially named Farc, and now the Comunes party. However, this accord did not put an end to conflict: there was a power vacuum that followed the Farc demobilization, which, together with the State’s failure to fulfill the accord, led to intensified violence in territories that enjoyed a period of peace.

Suárez Gómez characterizes Colombian testimonial literature produced at the beginning of the 21st century as an explosion of stories about drug trafficking and kidnappings, rather than about guerilla and paramilitary violence. Although he rightly points out that publishing houses promoted “instant books” of former hostages during the first years of the 21st century, testimonial narratives from this period didn’t deal exclusively with kidnappings. The 2006 and 2016 peace accords with, respectively, the paramilitaries and Farc changed how the nation dealt with the memory of the armed conflict, as the public debate began reconsidering guerrilla and paramilitary violence. Alongside the peace accords there have been State initiatives that aim to reveal what really happened during the conflict and to give a voice to its victims. At the same time, independent journalistic projects have taken an interest in telling the stories of the regions most affected by guerrilla, State, and paramilitary violence. Furthermore, testimonial fictions are addressing anew events that occurred during the last decades of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st centuries and have thereby diversified testimonial cultural production about the conflict.

# IV. Structure

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* **Conclusion**

1. A possible definition of “map” is Jeremy Black’s in *Visions of the World: A History of Maps*: “One definition that simply will not do, therefore, is that a map is a representation of reality. It is fairer to argue that it is a depiction of spatial relationships. This definition accepts the range of ‘mapped’ as the variety of ways in which such relationships can be represented” (Black 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. “La Violencia” was a time of armed confrontation that took place mainly in rural areas, between members of the liberal and conservative parties. Although typically understood as a conflict between partisan ideologies, this phase of the struggle was essentially a conflict related to land distribution and ownership. During “La Violencia” several peasants’ self-defense groups of liberal ideology emerged. These groups were the precursors of communist guerrillas formed during Frente Nacional. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. The Frente Nacional (National Front) was a political pact between elites from both liberal and conservative parties that aimed to put an end to bipartisan violence. During the Frente Nacional, the government promoted the pacification of the rural areas affected by “La Violencia.” However, the government did not introduce land reform to resolve the problems of land distribution and ownership, so several of the liberal self-defense groups that originated during “La Violencia,” continued to exist, were persecuted by the State, and later became liberal and communist guerrillas. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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7. Peace talks between the Pastrana administration and Farc took place in the so-called “Zona de distension” (demilitarized zone), an area of about 16000 square miles between the provinces of Meta and Caquetá. The government demilitarized this area so that the peace talks could be conducted safely. In practice, Farc took advantage of the situation by strengthening its power over the territory and expanding its drug trafficking routes. In the collective imagination this region therefore became one of the “zonas rojas” par excellence. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
8. In 2003, the AUC--the Colombian United Self-Defense group (that at the time gathered paramilitary groups from different regions of the country)-- signed the Ralito Accord with the Uribe administration. As a result, 18,000 AUC members demobilized. The Ralito Agreement was harshly criticized as it gave too many concessions to the paramilitaries without demanding reparation for their victims in return. In 2005, Colombian Congress passed the Justicia y Paz law (justice and peace), which provided a legal framework for the demobilization of paramilitaries who were supposed to testify before the Justice and Peace Courts. Under that law, another 30,000 paramilitaries demobilized. However, years later paramilitary leaders confessed to the Justice and Peace Courts that some of the 2003 mobilizations were a sham. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)