

Franziska Englert

# The Transition will be Televised

Telenovelas, Reconciliation and Transitional Justice in Colombia



Nomos

Studien zu Lateinamerika  
Latin America Studies

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Volume 45

Franziska Englert

# **The Transition will be Televised**

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**Nomos**

© Cover illustration: [www.pinterest.de](http://www.pinterest.de): Artist: Joaquin Torres Garcia (Montevideo, Uruguay, 1874–1949); Title: América Invertida, 1943.

**The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

a.t.: Köln, Univ., Diss., 2021

Original title: “The transition will be televised. Telenovelas, reconciliation and Transitional Justice in Colombia”

ISBN 978-3-7560-0407-2 (Print)  
978-3-7489-3659-6 (ePDF)

#### **British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-7560-0407-2 (Print)  
978-3-7489-3659-6 (ePDF)

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Englert, Franziska

The Transition will be Televised

Telenovelas, Reconciliation and Transitional Justice in Colombia

Franziska Englert

453 pp.

Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-7560-0407-2 (Print)  
978-3-7489-3659-6a (ePDF)



Onlineversion  
Nomos eLibrary

1st Edition 2022

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## Acknowledgements

This book is based on my PhD thesis, which I defended in December 2021 at the University of Cologne. Neither the thesis nor the book project would have been possible without the support, advice and companionship of the many people and institutions that assisted me on this journey.

I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Prof. Barbara Potthast and Prof. Anika Oettler for all their help and advice with this PhD. Thank you for supporting my rather uncommon project and believing in my idea of combining telenovelas and peace studies. I also would like to thank Jun.-Prof. Peter Schultze for acting as third supervisor on quite short notice and for providing his expertise in media studies.

Additionally, I would like to thank the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities at the University of Cologne for the scholarship that allowed me to conduct this thesis, and for supporting me academically and practically during the doctorate.

I feel thankful and honored that my PhD has been accepted by Prof. Hans-Jürgen Burchardt and the other editors to be published in the series “Studien zu Lateinamerika”.

During my fieldwork in Colombia, I conducted interviews with telenovela key actors, scholars, media experts, conflict affected groups and focus groups. My very special thanks go to all of my interview partners in Colombia who took the time to answer my questions and were willing to share their stories, thoughts and interpretations with me.

Besides the interview partners, there are some old friends and new friends that decisively contributed to making my research both academically and personally rewarding. I am tremendously grateful to my old friend David Moscoso Pinzón, without whom my fieldwork in Bogotá would not have been possible. Thank you for making me feel at home in Bogotá, for all the help, support and advice. Furthermore, I am extremely thankful to Yolanda Cárdenas and her children Mariana y Santiago for welcoming me in their home and for the countless late-night kitchen talks that helped me understand Colombia.

I was lucky enough to present my thoughts and ideas in numerous colloquia, workshops and conferences and would like to thank all the people who enriched my research with their comments and feedback. This

## *Acknowledgements*

also includes friends and colleagues who (proof-)read parts of the book, contributed ideas and helped me sharpen my focus.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my parents Barbara Gerigk-Englert and Daniel Englert for teaching me the value of education, for encouraging me to believe in myself – and, of course, for the countless sessions of proof-reading and discussion, even at the most adverse of times.

I cannot express in words my gratitude to my wonderful husband Dr. Jonathan Schaub-Englert. Thank you for your advice on legal aspects, your tireless patience in discussing ideas and the countless walks around the park with our newborn son so that I could wrap up the thesis. You made this book possible in so many ways.

Cologne, August 2022

*Franziska Englert*

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## Abbreviations

JA&A	Jaime Artega & Asociados
ACR	Alta Consejería para la Reintegración/Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración
ABC	American Broadcasting Company
ARN	Agencia Colombiana para la Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
BACRIM	Bandas criminales
CIMHM	Centro de Investigación y Memoria Histórica de la Escuela Superior de Guerra
COALICO	Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia
CONADEP	Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional
E-E	Education-Entertainment
e.g.	exempli gratia/for example
FARC	Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (political party)
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (guerrilla group)
GNRs	Guarantees of Non-Repetition
IACHR	Interamerican Court of Human Rights
ICBF	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar
ICC	International Criminal Court
IOM/OIM	International Organization for Migration/Organización Internacional para las Migraciones
LGTBI	Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Bisexual, Intersexual
LN	Telenovela LA NIÑA (only used in references)
MOVICE	Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado
NBC	National Broadcasting Company

## *Abbreviations*

NGO	non-governmental Organisation
NOMN	Telenovela NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE (only used in references)
PC	Private Conversation
PhD	Philosophiae Doctor
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
QCA	Qualitative Content Analysis
RCN	Radio Cadena Nacional
RTL	Radio Télévision Luxembourg
TJ	Transitional Justice
TV	Television
UN	United Nations
UP	Unión Patriótica
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

## Key of interview transcriptions

All interviews were transcribed by the author. Interview passages that are used within the analysis have been linguistically modified for readability. The phonetic transcription is provided in the footnotes.

Key		Example
(...)	Brief pause by interview partner	“see the good side (...) of the bad guys”
/	Interview partners interrupting themselves	“And then when a person meets a classmate who is an <i>ex-guerrillero</i> / Of course they will be cautious, but he won’t react as harsh anymore.”
(words)	Description of paraverbal (pacing, emphasis) and non-verbal elements (gestures) or other comments by the author	“And it’s a way to tell the cities that watch TV ‘Hey!’ (claps hands) ‘This happened here!’”
[...]	Omissions by the author (words, utterances or phrases irrelevant for the analysis)	“Because we often judge lightly without really knowing the person, what they went through [...] But one doesn’t know the circumstances of their lives.”
[word]	Additions to a quote by the author to clarify linguistic references	“Therefore, I think that [the telenovela] is a big lesson in acceptance.”



## 1 Introduction – A prime time to reconcile<sup>1</sup>

One of my fondest memories of my first stay in Latin America is sitting in the living room with my host sister, watching the hot telenovela of the moment. She tried to include me into everyday family life by explaining the telenovela narrative. For everyone who has ever watched a Latin American telenovela, it should come as no surprise that, despite her best attempts, it was hard for me to dive into a telenovela halfway through. Not only were my Spanish skills at that time rather rudimentary, but to complicate matters further, telenovelas are full of twists and turns: those who have died come back from the dead, evil twins emerge halfway through the story and lovers often turn out to be brother and sister. Although I had a hard time following the narrative, I was hooked and did not miss a single episode.

During my following stays in Latin America, telenovelas emerged as a constant: just as I had watched them every day with my Costa Rican host sister, I sat down with my Brazilian host mother and Argentinean roommate to do the same. I quickly realised how much telenovelas shape family life and social interactions in Latin America. The telenovelas set the pace of everyday life – they dictated meal schedules, and we never left for a party before the prime time telenovela had finished. Certain catch-phrases often uttered by telenovela characters were picked up by my host families, and the narrative developments were discussed with the grandmother, aunts and cousins at the Sunday family reunion.

My experience is backed up by scientific evidence: telenovelas are the most important television (TV) genre and popular mass culture phenomenon in Latin America (Erlick 2018). At the same time, they are often considered a shallow source of entertainment lacking societal relevance. Yet, assuming that these TV series full of star-crossed love stories are merely a source of afternoon diversion does not do their cultural importance justice. Indeed, Latin American telenovelas often tackle relevant social issues of the moment and mirror current societal developments (Erlick 2018). Moreover, telenovelas bear an enormous potential to reach wide audiences and change their hearts and minds. This cultural importance

---

1 This title has been inspired by Atencio's article "A prime time to remember", cf. Atencio (2011).

and capacity of telenovelas has even been acknowledged by the Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez:

I've always wanted to write a telenovela. They're wonderful ... the problem is we're accustomed to think that a telenovela is necessarily in bad taste, and I don't believe this to be so... In Colombia alone, in one single night, one episode of a telenovela can reach ten to fifteen million people ... It's only natural that someone who wants to reach people is attracted to telenovelas like a magnetic pole. He cannot resist it. (García Márquez, quoted in Jones 2015).

As I will show in this investigation, telenovelas can even be a critical tool to grapple with the past and foster societal transformations in times of transition.

Despite my personal interest in telenovelas, I had initially no intention to research this genre when I embarked on the journey of pursuing my PhD degree. The topic I had set my mind on was the Transitional Justice (TJ) process in Colombia that has been employed in the country since 2005. TJ refers to a bundle of measures implemented in countries dealing with the legacy of massive violence resulting from authoritarian rule or civil war. These efforts typically entail initiatives to achieve truth, justice and reparation (de Greiff 2012, p. 34). Yet, a couple of months into my PhD, I stumbled upon two telenovelas that quickly turned out to be a fascinating object of inquiry.

The social and political earthquake that the peace and TJ process meant for Colombia seems to have left its imprints on television fiction. In 2016, while the leftist guerrilla FARC-EP<sup>2</sup> and the Colombian government were struggling to reach a peace agreement in Havana and decide how to grapple with the past, that very past was already being dealt with on screen:

---

2 *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia – People's Army). In the aftermath of the peace agreement, the guerrilla has turned into a political party. While they kept their acronym, it now stands for *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común* (Alternative Revolutionary Force of the Common). In order to distinguish the guerrilla from the party, I use the acronym FARC-EP to refer to the guerrilla and the acronym FARC to refer to the political party. In early 2021, the party changed its name to *Comunes* (the Commons). Since at the time of my fieldwork and investigation the party was known under the acronym FARC, I continue to use this party designation.

### *1.1 Establishing the point of departure of the investigation*

Caracol's<sup>3</sup> leading prime time telenovela LA NIÑA<sup>4</sup> was telling the story of the Colombian conflict and the struggles of demobilisation from the unusual perspective of a former child soldier. LA NIÑA was not the only Colombian telenovela to deal with aspects of the TJ process: in 2017, when the peace agreement had been signed and TJ measures were being implemented, the competing TV channel RCN<sup>5</sup> aired NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE<sup>6</sup>, a telenovela about conflict, peace and dealing with the past in a fictional rural village.

Being a pretty experienced telenovela viewer, I immediately noticed that something about LA NIÑA and NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE was different from other telenovelas of the time. Although they also had complicated love stories, passion and drama, the way they dealt with TJ, and that they were aired in parallel with the TJ process is striking. These two unusual telenovelas, which I label as “reconciliation telenovelas”, are the point of departure of this investigation.

### *1.1 Establishing the point of departure of the investigation*

In the following section, I stake out the territory of this research. After sketching the scope and aim of the investigation, I describe my methodological approach to the phenomenon of the reconciliation telenovelas. To that end, I map out the relationship between TJ and cultural-artistic production and introduce the notion of “cultural-artistic production”. Based on these explanations, I establish the research gap and explain the significance of my research. To give insights into my research process and thus ensure the transparency of my investigation, I provide reflections on the research process that concern my position as a non-Colombian doing research on Colombia. A short sketch of the Colombian conflict provides an overview over the actors and processes necessary to understand the telenovelas to be analysed in the course of the investigation. Finally, I introduce the materials and methods that form the cornerstones of this research.

---

3 Caracol stands for Cadena Radial Colombiana, in English: Colombian Radio Chain. At the same time, *caracol* means snail in Spanish.

4 In English: THE GIRL (Juana Uribe 2016).

5 Short for Radio Cadena Nacional, in English: National Radio Chain.

6 In English: YOU WON'T FORGET MY NAME (Fernando Gaitán 2017).

### 1.1.1 Scope and aim of the research

Based on the observation that the telenovelas *LA NIÑA* and *NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE* differ from other productions and seem connected to the topic of dealing with the past, this investigation sets out to explore their role in the national TJ process.

Wende underlines that the impact of filmic production with historical content cannot be overrated. What people know about history is not dictated by history books, schools and university professors but is, to a significant degree, influenced by audio-visual media. Fictionalised stories about the past and the dramatisation, personalisation, individualisation and emotionalisation of that very past that go hand in hand with them, are an essential part of a society's memory culture. This is true regardless of whether the image of society displayed in the audio-visual media meets historical scientific standards or solely evokes an illusion of authenticity (Wende 2011, pp. 8–10).

Political processes often find a manifestation within culture. The emerging cultural-artistic production both captures a given society's universe of belief and contributes to shaping its values. Cultural-artistic productions create new sources of knowledge and can trigger reflection and debate. Thus, the narratives and moral interpretations reflected in cultural-artistic productions have a profound impact on how societies understand themselves and their specific past and have consequences for the future (Ramírez-Barat 2014a, p. 32). What makes *LA NIÑA* and *NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE* especially interesting is that they were not only about the past but also depicted the transitional moment itself.

Since telenovelas have a massive impact on a society, examining them is important in understanding how the Colombian society remembered the armed conflict and reflected upon TJ at the time they were aired. Against this backdrop, this study uses a cultural studies approach to examine the phenomenon of these telenovelas, explore their relationship with the TJ process and assess their benefits and dangers. In the course of the investigation, I develop the notion of “reconciliation telenovelas” to refer to a subtype of the telenovela genre that is intrinsically linked to the TJ paradigm.

1.1.2 TJ and cultural-artistic production

At first sight, interlocking TJ and telenovelas from an academic perspective appears slightly unconventional: a paradigm rooted in legal discourse and the genre of popular culture seem to have little to do with each other. Yet, TJ scholarship is concerned with the question of how nations address past wrongs to (re)establish civil order in the aftermath of large-scale human rights abuses (Corradetti et al. 2015a, p. 2). Consequently, if past wrongs are addressed through a telenovela, they should be included in the analysis to fully grasp any TJ process. In this light, Ramírez-Barat underlines the importance of engaging with cultural-artistic productions that emerge in TJ contexts:

In this respect, among the many types of historical experiences that tend to be culturally appropriated, transitional justice processes and the periods of abuse and distress that precede them are especially noteworthy (Ramírez-Barat 2014a, p. 32).

This investigation is concerned with telenovelas, a product of popular culture I label as “cultural-artistic production”. The term popular culture normally refers to culture understood both as a particular way of life and as the works of artistic activity. Examining the former, like the celebration of Christmas, is usually referred to as analyzing a cultural practice while the scrutiny of works of artistic activity (as for example soap operas or pop music) is usually referred to as the analysis of cultural texts (Storey 1993, p. 2). Cultural-artistic productions are understood here as cultural practices of aesthetic representation and comprise all cultural products that can be at least partially understood artistically and as artistic means of expression. In this sense, cultural-artistic productions are works of artistic activity, signifying practices or cultural texts.

A telenovela text is a media unit with both formal and communicative coherence and is framed by paratexts that provide the boundaries to the text (Stanitzek 2005, p. 40). It can be distinguished from other TV texts because it is a finite unit with a beginning and an ending and a coherent inner composition because of the re-iterating communicative situation. Paratexts comprise all texts that have a relationship with a text, such as trailer, merchandising activities, dedications or reviews (Waack 2019, pp. 2–3).

I choose to denote telenovelas as cultural-artistic production for two reasons. First, recent TJ scholarship such as Rush and Simić (2014), Bahun (2015) and Garnsey (2020) underlined the importance of artistic interven-

tions and turned to analysing books, films, plays and visual arts that emerged in TJ contexts. This scholarship on art and TJ provides a point of departure for my investigation to explore the relationship between TJ and the cultural texts of the reconciliation telenovelas. In this vein the “artistic” in cultural-artistic serves to fruitfully interlock this investigation with scholarship on TJ and the arts. Second, the “cultural” in cultural-artistic aims to highlight the cultural studies approach that underlines this investigation and does justice to the fact that telenovelas are – unlike other artistic productions analysed in TJ contexts – fundamentally a culture specific format of popular culture in Colombia. Thus, reconciliation telenovelas are understood as cultural texts in this investigation. While the cultural practice of watching telenovelas is briefly touched upon in section 2.2.3, the investigation is merely concerned with the texts, their production and distribution and the societal reception.

### 1.1.3 Originality and state of the research – Approaching reconciliation telenovelas through Cultural Studies

Research on TJ<sup>7</sup>, and specifically TJ in Colombia has boomed in previous years in a way that makes it almost impossible to keep track of all new books and articles.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the role that mass-mediated cultural-artistic productions play in making sense of the past, dealing with violence and seeking a peaceful future has been insufficiently acknowledged. Although telenovelas play such an important role in Colombian culture, they have not been analysed yet from a TJ perspective. Therefore, the originality of this investigation lies in the way in which it offers a new perspective on how Colombians cope with their past: by approaching the topic via the cultural phenomenon of telenovelas, and because these are examined through an interdisciplinary cultural studies approach.

Although TJ studies are by definition an interdisciplinary area of research, the field is characterised by fragmentation and a lack of exchange

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7 Due to the sheer amount of research on TJ, a comprehensive account of the literature is not possible here. For an overview over the concept and its development, confer Mihr et al. (2018b), Buckley-Zistel and Oettler (2011), Bell (2009), Simić (2017a). A more detailed description of the concept and the evolution of TJ will be provided in section 2.1.

8 Given the abundance of literature on TJ in Colombia, I do not attempt to present a comprehensive state of the literature here. Those publications I deem most relevant for this investigation can be found in section 3.1.

### *1.1 Establishing the point of departure of the investigation*

and communication across disciplines. The extreme specialisation on processes of dealing with the past has turned TJ studies almost into a discipline of its own. This specialisation leads to a decoupling from other disciplines, with the findings of neighbouring research fields often ignored (Weiffen 2018, pp. 95–97). Therefore, there is a lack of fruitful dialogue between TJ scholars and their colleagues from peace and conflict resolution studies (Aiken 2013, pp. 2–3). In a similar way, TJ studies and memory studies have co-existed somewhat disconnectedly (Lazzara 2018, pp. 22–23). At the same time, the topic of civil wars is seldom approached via the interdisciplinary lens of cultural studies. Notwithstanding, cultural studies allow an analysis on how societies are influenced by armed conflict, how they are impacted by the ending of conflict and how they cope with the experiences of violence (Ferhadbegović and Weiffen 2011, p. 9; pp. 22–23).

The systematic analysis of the interplay between telenovelas, TJ and societal transformation transcends disciplinary boundaries. It is concerned with a mass mediated product of popular culture, produced and aired at a particular moment of Colombian history, dominated by the discourses and practices of TJ. Given these characteristics, cultural studies are a promising approach to answer the research question about the role telenovelas play in the TJ process.

Cultural studies are an interdisciplinary field in which different methods and approaches have converged. The benefit of this convergence is that cultural studies allow phenomena and interrelations that cannot be accessed through other disciplines to be grasped, scrutinised and understood (Turner 1990, p. 11). The trademark of the empirical cultural studies approach is an interest in the interplay between lived experiences, texts or discourses and the social context (Saukko 2003, p. 11).

Cultural studies employ a definition of culture that stresses the practices and processes of everyday life (Giles and Middleton 1999, 2008). Consequently, cultural studies have rescued the media, popular culture and everyday life from the neglect and disdain of established disciplines and have placed the construction of everyday life at the centre of research in the humanities (Turner 2012, p. 34). Cultural studies part from the position that cultural products can only be fully understood when all relevant contexts, influences and interests are taken into account. Therefore, it is necessary to contextualise cultural forms and audiences in historically specific situations (Kellner and Durham 2001, 2006, p. xxi). Through this approach, telenovelas can be analysed as enclosed texts regarding their content and aesthetic aspects while at the same time conditions in which they were produced and aired.

Generally, cultural studies denote the school of thought that emerged from a specific interpreting them against the backdrop of the political, social and cultural political and intellectual climate in Great Britain in the 1970s known as the Birmingham School. This approach carved itself a space between positivist empirical inquiry and leftist thinkers like the Frankfurt School and welded together humanist, structuralist and New Left Marxism philosophies (Saukko 2003, p. 13).

Within Latin America, cultural studies originated independently from the Birmingham School. Latin American cultural studies are a distinct field of inquiry, historically configured by the Latin American critical tradition which is in constant, yet often conflictive, dialogue with the European and Anglo-Saxon schools of thought. They emerged within the social sciences in the 1960s, fusing the traditional cultural essay with sociological research on events taking place on the continent (including dependency theory, liberation theory, critique on internal colonialism).<sup>9</sup> While Anglo-Saxon and Latin American Cultural Studies should not be equated, in the very spirit of the cultural studies approach this investigation draws on authors, concepts and approaches from both traditions, as this makes it possible to trace the interrelation between the global discourses of TJ and the local cultural product of the telenovela.

Approaching Colombian reconciliation telenovelas through the interdisciplinary lens of cultural studies promises to be fruitful because it allows to combine and interconnect perspectives from diverse disciplines. In this investigation, I bring together diverse strands of literature stemming from a variety of research areas to fully grasp the phenomenon of reconciliation telenovelas, examine their relationship with the TJ process and assess how they could contribute to societal change and reconciliation. Since reconciliation telenovelas are a mass-mediated genre of cultural-artistic production, this investigation combines two strands of literature within TJ scholarship.

Findings on the interplay between TJ and the mass media provide a relevant backdrop for this investigation. This topic has only recently been picked up in TJ studies. Within this realm, I can draw on the work of Laplante and Phenice (2009, 2010), Laplante (2015), Price and Stremlau (2012), Hodzic and Tolbert (2016) and Ahmetašević and Matić (2014). Notwithstanding, those investigations focus solely on the role that news plays in the TJ context and do not take entertaining genres into account.

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9 For a more detailed overview over the forerunner and development of cultural studies in Latin America cf. Ríos (2004).

### *1.1 Establishing the point of departure of the investigation*

The relationship between cultural-artistic production and TJ has only recently been made topic of systematic research. Ramírez-Barat (2014b) and Rush and Simić (2014) have pioneered this research with their influential collections. Furthermore, the works of Bahun (2015), Garnsey (2020), Atencio (2014), Schneider and Atencio (2016) and Sierra León (2018b) provide an important point of departure for this investigation. Although none of those investigations analyse the role of telenovelas, their findings can be abstracted to the case of Colombian telenovelas to a certain degree. Related to this literature are investigations that scrutinise cultural-artistic production after periods of violence without referring specifically to the TJ paradigm, such as Milton (2014a) and Bisschoff and van de Peer (2013).

Of course, this investigation also draws on media and communication studies, such as the research on telenovelas in general, media psychology and memory studies. This research will be introduced in more detail in section 2.2 and especially in chapter 4.

#### 1.1.4 Reflections on the research process

This investigation is influenced by the fact that I am an outsider to the Colombian conflict, the TJ process and the national TV landscape. Doing research on Colombia and in Colombia while not being Colombian myself comes with certain implications. All my interpretations of the cultural texts and interviews are mediated by a set of European social and cultural tropes and influenced by the fact that I am a white, German woman whose life has not been affected by the Colombian armed conflict.

This outsider position also had a number of implications on how I approached the world of telenovelas, which I had so far only known as a spectator. In my attempt to get to the bottom of the phenomenon of reconciliation telenovelas, I tried to compile as much information as possible about them. In a first step, I talked to the production teams behind the telenovelas. Given a lucky coincidence, a Colombian friend put me in touch with the scriptwriter of LA NIÑA. From there, I worked my way forward in concentric circles and interviewed more people involved in the production. Since I felt that the ratings provided insufficient insights into telenovela reception, I decided to interview representatives of groups related to the concept in a second step. Furthermore, I conducted focus group interviews with people who had watched the telenovelas. Due to my background as a PhD student at a German university, I had very privileged access to sources. All interview partners were willing and eager

to contribute to the research and gave me insights into processes that are normally not accessible to the Colombian public.

I do not claim that my outsider perspective equals an unbiased, objective or neutral approach to the investigation. As in any research in the area of peace and conflict, supposing that one's own political beliefs would not influence the research is naïve. My research is impacted by a peace and conflict studies perspective. This area of research is a committed science in the sense that it has a normative component. Peace and conflict studies do not approach peace-building as a neutral object of inquiry, but they are specifically in favor of peace (Nasi and Rettberg 2005).

My reception of both telenovelas was influenced by my academic interest in them because I watched them in the course of the PhD investigation. My consumption of the telenovelas was untypical for the genre. I watched both telenovelas two years after they were aired in Colombian TV. My reception was not interrupted by the commercial breaks that characterise the TV transmission. Since all episodes were available to me at once, I did not adhere to the natural distribution of one episode per week-day and instead watched multiple episodes in a row. Naturally, I was not involved in everyday chats about the telenovela because I was not in Colombia and consumed the telenovelas after the original broadcasting.

## *1.2 The Colombian Conflict*

The reconciliation telenovelas at the core of this investigation can only be adequately understood against the backdrop of the armed conflict in Colombia, which the Colombian government sought to end and deal with via TJ, starting in 2005. The period of violence Colombia aimed to end and confront via TJ covered the second half of the 20th century and the first decades of the new millennium. In that phase, the conflict was fought between the Colombian state, guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and a number of criminal organisations.<sup>10</sup> As Theidon underlines: “In the course of the struggle, all these groups have committed serious human rights violations” (Theidon 2016, p. 51). It is beyond the scope of this investigation to provide an exhaustive overview over the Colombian conflict since the armed confrontation has been lengthy, complex and involves a number of

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10 This group comprises drug cartels (especially in the 1980s) and neo-paramilitary organisations that emerged after the alleged dismantling of the paramilitaries.

actors.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this section will only roughly sketch those aspects of the armed conflict in Colombia that are essential to understand the TJ process and the related telenovelas. I will portray the most important armed actors of the conflict and the following TJ process, namely the FARC-EP and the paramilitaries, and their rise and consolidation throughout the 1960s–1990s. Afterwards, I sketch the approaches of the presidents that implemented TJ measures under their administrations, looking at how they dealt with armed conflict.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.2.1 Violence and armed conflict in Colombia

Colombia is one of the oldest formally existing democracies in Latin America. At the same time, Colombian history, more than the history of any other Latin American country, is replete with violence, armed struggles and war (Meernik et al. 2019, p. 3). There is no such thing as a singular Colombian conflict. Instead, “[w]hat Colombians refer to casually as ‘the conflict’ is really an overlapping and interrelated set of different conflicts staggered through history” (Fattal 2018, p. 3). Notwithstanding, Colombian think tanks often aggregate the statistics of various periods of violence into reports on one singular conflict (Fattal 2018, p. 3).

Oettler describes how the conflict that the Colombian society aimed to cope with and end via TJ – and that is dealt with in the telenovelas – is the culmination of a number of prolonged conflicts. The violence can be traced back to Conquista and violent Colonial rule and has continued throughout a number of violent periods: the struggles for independence, the civil war between Liberals and Conservatives, *Bogotazo* and bipartist violence, the guerrilla insurrections, and the escalation of conflict due to drug trade boom and paramilitaries (Oettler 2018, p. 5). Since these numerous waves of violence have swept across the country, the causes of the long-lasting armed conflict in Colombia are increasingly difficult to grasp. In this context, Jaramillo Marín argues that the causes for violence overlap with factors that prolonged the conflict. While he enlists structural poverty, unemployment, rural-urban inequalities, weak institutions and administrative inefficiency of the state as well as military interventions of

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11 For a more extensive overview of the conflict, cf. Sánchez and Peñaranda (2007), Safford and Palacios (2002), Pearce (1990), König (2008).

12 The concrete TJ measures implemented by Uribe and Santos will be discussed in more detail in section 3.1.

the United States (US) as causes for violence, he also names numerous factors that prolonged the conflict: illegal armed actors, lack of regulation of land titles, forced displacement, an environment of danger and a lack of interest among the elites to solve the problem, to name but a few (Jaramillo Marín 2017, pp. 177–179).

Colombia has a long-standing history of social contrasts. Status, power and wealth are unequally distributed among the population. These contrasts have persisted throughout history or re-appeared and lead to profound social differences that shape Colombian society (Safford and Palacios 2002, pp. xi–xx). Especially acute in this context is the issue of land concentration. The inequality in Colombian land tenure structure has changed little despite agrarian reforms and changes in legislation (Safford and Palacios 2002, p. 309). Today, Colombia is the most unequal country in Latin America in terms of land distribution: 1% of the population (owners of large properties or *latifundistas*) hold 80% of the land (Oxfam 2017). The country is fragmented into regions, which developed distinct regional economies and cultural characteristics. Furthermore, the regional fragmentation has contributed to a relative weakness of the state and of state authority (Safford and Palacios 2002, p. ix).

Given these aspects, one characteristic of the Colombian conflict is a heterogeneity of local and regional dynamics and patterns of peace and conflict (Oettler 2018, p. 5). While the conflict that originated in rural areas spilled over into the metropolises in the 1980s due to the influence of drug cartels, the most significant part of violence takes place in the countryside (Zuluago Nieto 2001, p. 28). Consequently, the main victim of the conflict is the rural civilian population. While presenting numbers is almost impossible due to the length of the conflict, in 2012 the National Memory Centre estimated that the Colombian civil war had cost the lives of 218,094 people (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2012), of which 81% were civilians (López 2018, p. 30). In 2020, the National Registry of Victims<sup>13</sup> registered over 1 million victims of homicide (Unidad para la Atención Integral a las Víctimas 2020). While the National Memory Centre estimated in 2012 that the conflict had displaced more than 4 million (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2012), this number grew to over 8 million victims of displacement registered by the Registry in 2020 (Unidad para la Atención Integral a las Víctimas 2020). According to the data of the National Registry of Victims, the largest share of registered victims suffered forced displacement (Unidad para la Atención Integral

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13 In Spanish: *Registro único de víctimas*.

a las Víctimas 2020), which resulted in thousands of hectares of land in illegal possession (López 2018, p. 30). Furthermore, the Registry recorded over 180,000 victims of disappearance (Unidad para la Atención Integral a las Víctimas 2020).

It is important to bear the specific context of the long and violent Colombian conflict in mind as the context in which the current transition is happening, and therefore, the context of the reconciliation telenovelas. Only a minority of the Colombian population have experienced peaceful co-existence while the majority has personal experience with loss and violence (Wlaschütz 2012, p. 141). The armed conflict and violence have left their imprints on politics and shaped everyday life. Therefore, the civil war has become equated with Colombian identity and a hegemonic explanation for all aspects of Colombian social reality. As Rincón sums up:

Colombia has been at war for 52 years. First came the guerrillas, then the drug lords and the paramilitaries, and the landowners and the corrupt have always been involved. They all make, produce and live off violence. Perhaps for this reason, the ruling class, business elites, academia and the media have turned the war into the hegemonic story to understand and explain social reality and dispute the power of the state<sup>14</sup> (Rincón 2019, p. 190).

### *Revolutionary insurrection – FARC-EP and other guerrillas*

The context that favored the emerge of leftist guerrilla groups in Colombia in the 1960s was shaped by political and economic factors and exacerbated by international processes (König 2008, pp. 136–153). After a period of violence referred to as “*La Violencia*” (The Violence)<sup>15</sup> and military

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14 Own translation, Spanish original: “Colombia lleva 52 años en guerra. Primero vino la guerrilla, luego los narcos y los paramilitares y, desde siempre, los terratenientes y los corruptos. Todos hacen, producen y viven de las violencias. Tal vez por eso, la clase dirigente, empresarial, académico y mediático convirtieron la guerra en el relato hegemónico para comprender y explicar la realidad social y disputar el poder del Estado” (Rincón 2019, p. 190).

15 This period had started when the already existing political partisanship had escalated after the assassination of the liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on 09.04.1948 in Bogotá. This triggered an eruption of violence known as the *Bogotazo* and resulted in a civil war state between conservative hitmen, military and police, liberal guerrilla fighters and peasant self-defense (Safford and Palacios 2002; Schuster 2008; Fischer and Jiménez Ángel 2017; König 2008).

dictatorship by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957), Colombia underwent a phase of limited democracy called the “national front” (*Frente Nacional*) from 1958-1974. The liberal and the conservative party had agreed to this power-sharing agreement, in which they alternated in power, to end the violence and overcome the dictatorship (Safford and Palacios 2002; Schuster 2008; Fischer and Jiménez Ángel 2017; König 2008).

At the same time, Colombia was experiencing a disparate economic growth, in which elites progressed while peasants did not (König 2008, pp. 136–153). In this context, the unequal distribution of land played a crucial role (Gutiérrez Sanín 2016, p. 346). Finally, the triumph of the Cuban revolution and the international communist movement must be regarded as factors influencing the consolidation of Marxist guerrillas in Colombia (König 2008, pp. 136–153). However, Colombian guerrillas differ from other Latin American guerrillas because they emerged as a political actor long before the Cuban revolution. Already in 1949, peasants had formed self-defense groups against state violence. These groups were the precursors of the guerrilla groups (Pizarro Leongómez 2007, p. 321). There were a number of guerrilla groups in Colombia, among which the FARC-EP and the ELN<sup>16</sup> were the biggest ones and the ones that persist until today.

The FARC-EP was officially founded in 1964, and they formulated an agrarian program to improve the living conditions of the rural population (Schuster 2015, 62–63; 74–75).<sup>17</sup> The Marxist guerrilla had a proclaimed revolutionary agenda to topple the government. Through their armed struggle, they sought to redress the grievances related to social marginalisation, limitations for political participation and inequality and proposed to install a socialist regime (Guáqueta 2007, p. 418). The FARC-EP managed to gain control over a number of rural areas in which the Colombian state had a low presence. In these regions, the FARC-EP substituted the state authority and installed a jurisdiction and a tax system (Wlaschütz 2012, pp. 144–146). Given that the FARC-EP had no legitimation to act as an authority, the tax system was more reminiscent of extortion and the guerrilla kidnapped and blackmailed local elites and shop owners. As most Marxist guerrilla groups, the FARC-EP had a significant degree of female combatants. It is estimated that 40% of the militants were women (Theidon 2016, p. 55). Furthermore, a significant number of FARC-EP

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16 Short for *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (Army of National Liberation).

17 For a more detailed analysis of the emergence and consolidation of the FARC-EP, cf. Medina Gallego (2009b).

members were introduced into the group as minors (Fagan and Owens 2016, p. 2).<sup>18</sup>

*Drug wars and escalating violence: the rise of the paramilitaries and the modification of the FARC-EP*

The 1980s brought a turning point in the armed confrontation and shaped the characteristics of the current conflict. The most important factors in this context were the consolidation of the drug economy in Colombia and the rise and consolidation of paramilitary groups (Zuluago Nieto 2001, pp. 16–17). The emergence of the drug mafia and paramilitaries as new actors added complexity to the armed confrontation (König 2008, pp. 161–164).

Ever since *La Violencia*, landowners had organised protection squads to guard their property (König 2008, pp. 161–164). These groups were the precursors of paramilitary groups. Theidon explains how there had been a variety of armed groups in Colombia that have been referred to as “paramilitary organisations” and “self-defense groups” (Theidon 2016, p. 52). When guerrilla groups gained more territories and threatened landowners with extortion and kidnappings, the paramilitaries intensified their activities. They were guided by regional alliances consisting of landowners, drug lords, local politicians and members of the armed forces (Meernik et al. 2019b, p. 4). In their own understanding, the paramilitary groups sought to protect landowners from extortion and repel guerrilla influence in the absence of the state. Yet, the paramilitaries sought no longer solely to defend the landowners property but acted in a preventive manner to impede peasant support for the guerrillas (König 2008, pp. 161–164). In a climate in which the counter-insurgency policy of the state had criminalised and repressed social protest (Reyes Posada 2007, pp. 355–358), their actions led to killings of civilians associated with guerrilla ideas, such as students, leftist party members and trade unionist (König 2008, pp. 161–164).

The Colombian state and the paramilitaries have a complicated relationship. As Theidon highlights, the paramilitaries were initially used as auxiliary forces by the state. They were central in the government’s counter-insurgency plan. Thus, while the paramilitaries were promoted as “self-defense committees” to protect local communities from the guerrillas,

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18 This aspect will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

they actually played a greater role in state-organised “search and destroy” operations designed to eliminate the guerrillas (Theidon 2016, p. 52). Consequently, the paramilitary forces frequently served as natural allies of the military in the battlefield (Guáqueta 2007, p. 418).

Zuluaga Nieto reasons that in the armed conflict in Colombia, there are two factions but three actors: on one side, the guerrillas, and on the other, the state and the paramilitaries. While he does not deny the historical and current linkages between army and paramilitaries, Zuluaga Nieto argues that the latter have gained a significant degree of autonomy and serve mostly private interests (Zuluaga Nieto 2001, pp. 23–24). In a similar way, Zelik reasons that the Colombian paramilitaries are a hybrid structure since they are both linked to and independent of the state. As he points out, they are, first, an outsourced parallel structure of the military. Second, they are the private army of parts of the Colombian elites and landowners and third, they are part of organised crime driven by their own economic interests (Zelik 2010, pp. 83–143).

The rise of the paramilitaries was accompanied and accelerated by the consolidation of the drug economy in Colombia. Especially the illegal cocaine trade modified the dynamics of the Colombian conflict. While cocaine – derived from the leaf of the coca tree, a plant native to Latin America – was declared illegal worldwide in the 1950s, illegal production and trafficking blossomed. Colombian cartels, especially the Medellín and Cali cartel, controlled the worldwide cocaine business in the 1970s and 1980s (Contreras Saíz 2017, pp. 26–27). The consolidation of the drug economy weakened the Colombian state and paralysed the country since politics, economy and drug cartels were entangled. It also provided both paramilitaries and guerrillas with financial resources to widen their territorial expansions and military capabilities (Kurtenbach 2017, pp. 101–102). Furthermore, both factions of the conflict developed drug-trade-related interests (Zuluaga Nieto 2001, p. 22).

An intimate relationship arose between paramilitaries and the drug trade to the degree that one could speak of narco-paramilitarism. As Zelik points out, important paramilitary groups emerged from violent entrepreneurship situated within the drug economy. The paramilitaries quickly constituted an important interface between drug trade and informal politics and served to impose order on the illegal economy (Zelik 2010, pp. 233–251). Eventually, 70% of the paramilitaries’ income came from drug trade (Bird 2015, p. 125). Drug lords stood out among the people who had bought land that they now sought to protect from guerrilla influence (Reyes Posada 2007, pp. 355–358).

At the same time, the FARC-EP also became more firmly linked to cultivating coca plants (Safford and Palacios 2002, pp. 357–364). As Medina Gallego points out, the 1980s and early 1990s were a decisive phase for the future of the FARC-EP. The expansion of paramilitary groups and their dirty war on leftist organisations resulted in a new military strategy, which required significant economic resources (Medina Gallego 2009b, pp. 215–217). Yet, the end of the Cold War meant the loss of international support to sustain the confrontation in Colombia. Thus, the FARC-EP intensified their involvement in drug trafficking and increased kidnappings and extortion (Pizarro Leongómez 2007, p. 338). These criminal means to generate income included a number of human rights abuses. Regardless, the guerrilla insisted on being understood as a political movement (Fischer and Jiménez Ángel 2017, pp. 50–51). Yet, their ideological underpinnings weakened and the lines between insurgency and criminality became blurry (Delgado 2017, pp. 307–308).

While these criminal activities allowed military expansion, they cost the FARC-EP popular support (Zuluaga Nieto 2001, pp. 18–20). Especially the fact that the kidnappings and extortions increasingly targeted the middle class undermined the FARC-EP's legitimation within the population (Zelik 2010, pp. 30–31). With the economic revenue, the guerrilla groups could increase their members and also moved from marginal zones to richer, more populated areas (Safford and Palacios 2002, pp. 357–364). The FARC-EP managed to almost double their combatants between 1986 and 1996 from 3,600 to 7,000 (König 2008, pp. 170–172).

At the same time, paramilitaries were efficient in expelling guerrillas from some regions (Reyes Posada 2007, p. 353). In 1997, the paramilitaries united under the umbrella organisation *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC)<sup>19</sup> (König 2008, pp. 170–172). Under this new dynamic, violence escalated (Kurtenbach 2017, pp. 101–102). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the AUC employed terror campaigns against alleged guerrilla social bases in collusion with the Colombian military. By 2002, the AUC had approximately 12,000 combatants organised in military and vigilante units, death squads, logistics and intelligence units (Bird 2015, p. 125). The state authorities lost control over large parts of the rural territory, which were controlled by guerrillas and paramilitaries. As a result, the number of displaced people grew from the mid-1990s onwards as people moved from the countryside into the metropolises due to violence (Mertins 2001, pp. 45–49).

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19 In English: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia.

*Elusive peace: failed peace negotiations under the Pastrana administration and Plan Colombia*

Against this backdrop of escalating violence, the conservative Andrés Pastrana won the presidential election for the period 1998-2002 with the promise to finally pacify the country through peace negotiations (Hörtner 2013, p. 35). The peculiarity of the peace negotiations of El Caguán, named after their venue, was that they happened during ongoing conflict. There was no ceasefire between the negotiating parties, but a demilitarized zone (*zona de destención*) of the size of Switzerland was established for the peace dialogues (Medina Gallego 2009a, pp. 87–155).

The peace dialogues of El Caguán were not the first undertaken to bring peace to Colombia. Many Colombian presidents had sought to end violence by opting for one of two approaches: by peace negotiation<sup>20</sup> or by violent pacification through military defeat. With regard to the FARC-EP, the most far-reaching and important attempt to negotiate peace was undertaken in 1984 under the Betancur administration (Graaff 2017, pp. 17–19). This process, for the first time, opened a possibility for the left to legally politically participate, and the FARC-EP started the process of becoming a political force (Medina Gallego 2009a, pp. 55–78). Thus, the political party *Unión Patriótica*<sup>21</sup> emerged, comprised of civil FARC-EP members, communists and social democrats (Zelik 2010, pp. 26–27). Yet, paramilitaries, at times supported by political and economic elites, fought a dirty war against civil leftist organisations. Important *Unión Patriótica* members were selectively killed by death squads (Zelik 2010, pp. 26–27), which led FARC-EP to end the ceasefire (Graaff 2017, pp. 17–19).

The peace negotiations of El Caguán were fruitless for numerous reasons, among them the lack of a negotiation agenda and the creation of the demilitarized zone. In 2002, Pastrana declared the negotiations had failed (Graaff 2017, pp. 17–19; König 2008, pp. 170–172). Ironically, the episode of peace negotiations resulted in a strengthening of military structures on both sides; while the FARC-EP had regrouped and re-organised in the

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20 The country had been a pioneer in negotiating and achieving peace agreements with smaller guerrilla groups in the 1990s (Melamed Visbal 2016, p. 188). The new constitution of 1991 was an intent to end violence by regaining state legitimacy and to establish more social justice, more political participation and decentralisation (König 2008, pp. 165–168). In the aftermath of the ratification of the new constitution, peace negotiations led to the demobilisation of various guerrilla groups (Graaff 2017, pp. 17–19).

21 In English: Patriotic Union.

demilitarized zone, Pastrana had raised funds to strengthen the military capacity with the help of the US government (Graaff 2017, pp. 17–19).

The rise of the drug economy led to an internationalisation of the Colombian conflict through US involvement (Zuluaga Nieto 2001, p. 22). The conflict increasingly collided with US interests, especially regarding the War on Drugs (Meernik et al. 2019, pp. 4–5). Cocaine had been acknowledged in the US as an epidemic that challenged public health and led to an increase in crime and corruption. Therefore, there was a political consensus of zero tolerance in the US, which led to the implementation of various War on Drugs' programs that greatly affected Colombia (Safford and Palacios 2002, p. 339).

After relations had deteriorated under its predecessor, the Pastrana administration (1998-2002) marked a renewed approximation between Colombia and the US (Fischer 2001, pp. 209–217). In conjuncture with the Clinton administration, Pastrana developed the Plan Colombia (Meernik et al. 2019, pp. 4–5), a program intended to boost economic development to foster peace. Yet, the superordinate goal of Plan Colombia was the fight against the illegal drug trade via modernisation of armed forces and spraying areas of coca cultivation with chemicals from the air (König 2008, pp. 170–172). Fischer points out that the reasons for the US' heavy economic support of this program was also geo-strategic (Fischer 2001, pp. 209–217).

Plan Colombia increased US aid for Colombia from 50 million US dollar to a billion, of which 80% went to the armed forces (Bird 2015, pp. 125–126). After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the Colombian armed conflict was situated within the global war on terror by the Bush administration and Plan Colombia was bolstered by even more money: the US provided over 6 billion US dollars to support Plan Colombia from 2000-2008, making Colombia one of the top aid recipients (Bird 2015, pp. 125–126). While the US security agenda had formerly only included counter-narcotics, it now explicitly targeted the FARC-EP (Delgado 2017, pp. 303–305). Furthermore, this inclusion of Colombia in the war on terror led to a change in how guerrillas were denominated; they were now considered terrorists<sup>22</sup> (König 2008, pp. 170–172). Thus, paradoxically, the Pastrana

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22 The incident leading to the international classification as a terrorist organisation took place in 2002. Five months after 9/11, the FARC-EP took a plane hostage and forced it to land to kidnap a member of congress who was on the plane. After this incident, the FARC-EP was internationally designated as terrorist group, including by the US and European Union (Delgado 2017, pp. 303–305).

administration, who had proclaimed a negotiated solution to the conflict, laid the foundation for intensifying the military combat against the FARC-EP.

*Ruling with an iron fist – the Uribe administration (2002-2010)*

The societal climate changed after the failed peace negotiations in El Caguán (König 2008, pp. 172–173). After Pastrana's pacification attempts had resulted in strengthening the FARC-EP, people voted as his successor Álvaro Uribe, who pursued a diametrically opposed approach to pacifying the country. Uribe took over presidency in 2002 with the promise to militarily defeat the guerrillas (Sánchez León et al. 2016, p. 253).

Uribe's policy followed the ideology of democratic security. The government adopted a repressive strategy to fight guerrillas to re-gain control over the territory (Kurtenbach 2017, pp. 98–103). To that end, Uribe passed a number of decrees and laws that extended military competences and fostered the militarisation of the country. The democratic security doctrine denied the existence of armed conflict in Colombia and framed the violence exclusively as terrorist attacks (Luna 2014, p. 85). Thus, Uribe refused to acknowledge the historically grown socio-political factors that contributed to the conflict (Jaramillo Marín 2015, pp. 159–160). Consequently, he denied the FARC-EP any political nature or legitimacy (Monteiro Dario 2015, p. 104). Furthermore, Uribe abused his authority to stigmatise the opposition and social movements, which created a polarisation of opinion that was useful for his political interests (López de La Roche 2015b, p. 126).

With the strengthened military capacity of the Colombian army through Plan Colombia, the government significantly improved the sense of security for wide parts of the population (König 2008, pp. 172–173). The military efficiently weakened the FARC-EP, pushing them back into peripheral areas and successfully attacking their camps in jungle zones, which had been considered impossible to touch. These successes led to an increased trust in travel on the main highways of the country, which had been impossible to use for the constant fear of being kidnapped, and fostered investors' confidence towards investing in Colombia (López de La Roche 2015a, p. 6). Uribe gained enormous respect in public opinion through his successful fight against the FARC-EP (López de La Roche 2015b, p. 126). The achievements brought him media praise and ensured

high approval rates from the population (Fischer and Jiménez Ángel 2017, p. 53), achieving at times 85% support (Graaff 2017, pp. 20–21).

Yet, the Uribe administration was also characterised by deficits and scandals regarding democracy and the rule of law (Graaff 2017, pp. 20–21). The re-installment of the state's monopoly of force was only possible by restricting civil liberties and constitutional rights. To present results, the military was part and parcel to human rights abuses, at times collaborating with paramilitaries, which was tolerated by the government (König 2008, pp. 172–173).

The most notorious practice of human rights abuses were the over 3,000 cases of so-called false positives (*falsos positivos*) (Graaff 2017, pp. 20–21). In this criminal practice, soldiers kidnapped and killed civilians to later present them as *guerrilleros*<sup>23</sup> fallen in battle (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013a, p. 65). The extrajudicial killings of civilians were performed by soldiers eager to present results in the fight against the guerrillas and to receive benefits such as days off and promotions (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, p. 133). Besides these incentives, the National Memory Centre states that the practice of false positives resulted from the pressure put on the military under the Uribe government to produce constant positive results in the fight against the guerrillas (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013a, p. 234). As Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez underline, the false positives served to demonstrate that the war against the guerrillas was being won and to justify the use of resources and limitations of rights (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, p. 134).

### *A glimpse of peace – the Santos administration (2010-2018)*

Since Uribe could not run for a third term, he supported the candidature of his Minister of Defense, Juan Manuel Santos. Santos was elected under the expectation that he would continue Uribe's policy (Díaz Pabón 2018a, pp. 27–28). Therefore, it came as a surprise when Santos revealed that the government was conducting secret peace negotiations with the FARC-EP (Romero 2015, p. 46). Gutiérrez Sanín refers to Santos' new approach and strategy as a "glasnost of sorts" (Gutiérrez Sanín 2016, p. 346). In contrast to Uribe, Santos acknowledged the existence of armed conflict

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23 Though I aim for a gender-neutral language in this investigation, I employ the Spanish term *guerrillero* to refer to both male and female guerrilla combatants for the sake of readability.

and no longer dismissed the violence solely as terrorism (Wlaschütz 2012, p. 165). Thus, Santos employed a diametrically opposed approach to end the conflict. He no longer sought to militarily defeat the guerrilla, opting instead for a negotiated solution.

Since Santos had not taken office with the promise to pacify the country via peace negotiations, his election cannot be understood as a sign of popular support for the peace process. The support can only be deduced from his re-election in 2014, yet Santos won this election only by a close vote in the second round. This result shows that the people were not as enthusiastic about the peace process as they were in the late 1990s (Romero 2015, pp. 46-47).

### 1.2.2 Post-accord, not post-conflict

By signing the peace agreement in 2016, the FARC-EP agreed to lay down their arms, turn into a political party and veil for their objectives by democratic means. Notwithstanding, referring to Colombia as a post-conflict society is not correct. There still is ongoing conflict within the territory, e.g., with the ELN or neo-paramilitary groups. Therefore, a number of scholars have named the environment after the signing of the peace agreement as a “post-accord”<sup>24</sup> phase, which underlines that the peace agreement between the FARC-EP and the government was indeed an important event yet should not be seen as putting an end to the internal armed conflict.<sup>25</sup> Having this valid differentiation in mind, this investigation still draws on literature concerned with post-conflict phases, which explains why the word post-conflict is employed at times in this thesis. Furthermore, Theidon has compellingly coined the term “pre-postconflict” (Theidon 2007, p. 66) to refer to the special TJ situation in Colombia, which I will explain in greater detail in section 3.1.

### 1.3 Material and methods to analyse Colombian reconciliation telenovelas

The complex phenomenon of reconciliation telenovelas can best be addressed through an interdisciplinary approach. This investigation therefore

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24 Or in Spanish, *posacuerdo* phase.

25 There are scholars who argue that the term post-conflict is misleading, also in cases other than Colombia, for there are no societies in which there is no conflict.

requires compiling a number of diverse sources and the corpus consists of audio-visual, written and oral sources. The different sources will be analysed using different methods to be explained in the following section.

### 1.3.1 Audio-visual and written sources

The crucial components of my corpus are the telenovela texts of both *LA NIÑA* and *NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE*. Furthermore, the analysis is enriched by referring to other Colombian and Latin American telenovelas, as well as to YouTube videos related to them.

The written sources do not only include laws and reports by institutions such as the National Memory Centre but also texts related to the telenovelas themselves. These sources include paratexts, such as the legal disclaimers, dedications or credits, and press releases by the TV channels. Furthermore, I systematically searched major Colombian newspapers, *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*, as well as the weekly magazine *Semana* for articles about the telenovelas. All major reviews, articles and opinion pieces about the telenovelas *LA NIÑA* and *NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE* are included in the analysis. Additionally, I included relevant articles from *El Nuevo Siglo*. From within the TV channels, I was able to obtain a number of sources that are not accessible to the public, including the telenovela ratings, internal documents about production, project fact sheets and an impact study<sup>26</sup> on the reception of the telenovela *NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE*.

### 1.3.2 Oral sources

Oral sources in the form of self-conducted interviews – expert interviews and focus group interviews – form the second cornerstone of the corpus. Not much information is available to the public about the production and reception of the reconciliation telenovelas. Therefore, this information had to be gathered from diverse experts who were involved in producing the telenovelas. I compiled oral sources in the form of interviews with

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26 I refer to this study as “impact study” since this is the term chosen by the channel and the agency that carried it out. Whether it actually grasps the telenovelas impact is debatable, as will be explained in Section 6.4.

three different groups of people: telenovela key actors<sup>27</sup>, representatives of groups related to the conflict and focus groups. Given that these three groups have different relationships towards the telenovelas and provide different insights, I approached them with slightly different interview techniques.

*Using interviews to gain insight into telenovela production: Interviewing experts and elites*

Interviewing experts<sup>28</sup> is a crucial method employed in this investigation to gather information concerning the telenovelas produced by private channels and their relationship with the TJ process.

Experts serve as informants and can share explicit, tacit, professional or occupational knowledge otherwise inaccessible to researchers. The definition of an expert underlying this investigation builds on Littig: “Ultimately, anyone who is responsible for and has privileged access to the knowledge of specific groups of people or decision-making processes can be seen as an expert” (Littig 2009, p. 100). All expert interviews were conducted during a research stay from February to May 2019 in Bogotá, either in the interview partners’ respective institutions, private homes or at coffee shops as semi-structured, guided interviews.

Telenovela key actors

Most information on the telenovelas resides within the TV channels that produced and aired them and is not freely available. Especially insights into the creative process, production and intentions behind the telenovelas can only be gained by talking to those involved in the telenovela production. Therefore, I identified as relevant interview partners staff of

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27 To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the term “actor” in this context does not refer to the actors of actresses starring in the telenovelas. Instead, “telenovela key actors” are those who played an important role in shaping the telenovelas, while “armed actors” refers to representatives of the armed groups involved in the Colombian conflict.

28 The predominantly German concept of the expert interview is rarely encountered in the Anglo-American sociological debate, where the elite interview is more common. However, these two forms of interviews do not differ substantially from another (Littig 2009).

the channels and TJ related institutions who were involved in production. While a telenovela is the product of the joint efforts of numerous people who each have an essential and particular role, whenever possible I opted to interview people who significantly shaped and influenced the final product. To account for this fact, I will refer to these expert interview partners involved in the telenovela production as telenovela key actors. This term underlines how the interview partners are not only specialists on the topic of reconciliation telenovelas but were also actively involved in shaping the production.

I conducted 10 interviews with telenovela key actors, namely staff of the channels Caracol and RCN and of TJ related state entities who were responsible for the telenovela.<sup>29</sup> I was able to interview the following people:

Juana Uribe, scriptwriter of both LA NIÑA and vice president of Caracol

Nubia Baretto, scriptwriter of NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE

Marta Ruíz, the supporting expert for the scripts in NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE

Ana María Guerrero, the head of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department of RCN

Laura Pareja, the head of the project of NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE

Rodrigo Triana, the director who was responsible for both telenovelas

Karin Gonzalez, the former head of communications and responsible for NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE at the Victims Unit

Jorge Alvarez, the person responsible for NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

Joshua Mitrotti, the former president of the Reintegration Agency<sup>30</sup>

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29 At the time of my field research, a number of people who had worked on the reconciliation telenovelas had left their working place. Yet, I was able to contact most of them. Sadly, it was not possible to interview NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE inventor Fernando Gaitán, who had recently died when I arrived in Colombia.

30 In cases where it was impossible to interview those directly involved, I relied on other representatives of the respective institutions. Due to his new position, I was unable to interview the former president of the Reintegration Agency responsible for the production of LA NIÑA. In this case, I was able to talk to his successor, who had already left the Agency at the time of our interview.

Furthermore, I conducted an expert interview with Mauricio Rodriguez, head of the Caracol rating department to gain an accurate understanding of how ratings are assessed in their usefulness as a tool to measure who watched the telenovelas.

*Groups related to the conflict – victim organisations and armed actors*

In addition to the telenovela key actors, I conducted expert interviews with representatives of social groups related to the conflict, namely victims and armed actors. These interviews were not aimed at gaining procedural knowledge about the telenovela production since these actors were not involved in production. Instead, I conducted those interviews to grasp how the relevant groups experienced the telenovelas. For the purpose of this investigation, I find it crucially important to take the perspective of the protagonists of the conflict into account. Since no official statements about the telenovelas were issued by armed actors or victims,<sup>31</sup> I opted for interviews to include their perspective on the topic into the investigation.

Victim organisations

Victims are the most important social group impacted by the armed conflict, and the telenovelas' protagonists are victims. Therefore, I deemed it of utmost importance to learn about what victims thought about the telenovelas and how they were depicted. For this purpose, I conducted interviews with the president of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) MOVICE and the head of the research department of the NGO COALICO (Hilda Molano). These two NGOs were strategically chosen and contacted via the mail addresses provided on their institutional websites.

MOVICE<sup>32</sup> is an umbrella organisation of over 200 smaller organisations that represent victims of the Colombian state (MOVICE 2015a). MOVICE's goal is to vindicate the victims of crimes committed by the state, by action or omission. These crimes include those perpetrated by members of the public forces and paramilitary groups who were in cahoots

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31 Polemic telenovelas had in the past often led to an official reaction of certain institutions, as e.g., the telenovela TRES CAINES.

32 Short for *Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado* (National Movement of Victims of State Crimes).

with the Colombian state (MOVICE 2015b). I chose a representative of MOVICE as an interview partner for three reasons. First, it is one of the biggest and most important victims NGOs in Colombia. Second, both reconciliation telenovelas showed crimes similar to those committed by the Colombian military and paramilitaries, and thus exactly those crimes MOVICE is concerned with. Third, MOVICE was an important voice in the public debate about the conflict related telenovelas. Therefore, I regarded MOVICE as a crucial interview partner to learn about their impressions of the telenovela.

COALICO<sup>33</sup> is an NGO comprising various national and international civil society organisations campaigning for child rights. COALICO seeks to improve the situations of minors impacted by the armed conflict in Colombia, with special emphasis on recruitment of children in armed groups. COALICO's goal is to contribute to preventing recruitment of minors through monitoring and research, initiatives and lobbying work (COALICO n.d.). I chose to interview an expert at COALICO because the recruitment of minors and their subsequent reintegration into society is the key topic of the telenovela LA NIÑA. Since, due to ethical considerations, it was not possible to interview former child soldiers themselves about their opinion of the telenovela, I opted to talk to a representative of COALICO, who could provide an approximation to the perspective of child soldiers.

### Armed actors

After attending a conference on the topic of memory at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, I decided to also conduct interviews with representatives of armed actors of the conflict. Armed actors have largely been excluded from processes of constructing memory after conflict in TJ processes around the world (Quishpe 2018). Yet, currently in Colombia armed actors are starting to express their collective memories, most notably the FARC and the public forces, and thus add a different layer of interpretation of the past to the already known memory of victims (Quishpe 2018, p. 110). Since the telenovelas prominently depict militaries and guerrilla combatants, I deemed it necessary to learn these actors' attitude towards

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33 Short for *Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia* (Coalition against the engagement of boys, girls and adolescents in the armed conflict in Colombia).

the telenovelas and their opinions on the topic. I opted to interview representatives of the armed groups who were connected to the issue of memory to gain an institutional perspective, rather than the personal opinion of a lower-ranking foot soldier. The contact with both representatives was established at the conference, where they agreed to provide their insights in expert interviews.

I conducted interviews with the founder of the Investigation and Historic Memory Centre of the Higher War Academy<sup>34</sup> of the Colombian military (Carlos Velasquez) and a representative of the cooperative NC Producciones, member of the FARC party and former FARC-EP combatant (Jorge Suárez). Due to security constraints, I was unable to interview representatives of paramilitary organisations.

The Investigation and Historic Memory Centre of the Higher War Academy is, as its name suggests, linked to the Colombian armed force's institution of higher education. It is in charge of investigating, analysing, documenting and disseminating the institutional memory of the Colombian military (Escuela Superior de Guerra "General Rafael Reyes Prieto" Colombia n.d.). In his position as the mouthpiece of military memory in Colombia, I deemed a representative of the centre to be an important interview partner to include the voice of the Colombian armed forces.

NC Producciones is a communication cooperative created by 54 ex-combatants of the FARC-EP in December 2018 as part of their social and economic re-incorporation. It maintains a news channel, a publishing house and a printing service. Its main issue is memory, which is reflected in the fact that the first books published by NC Producciones had a strong memory component (Agencia Anadolu 2019).<sup>35</sup>

### *Focus group interviews*

While the telenovela ratings provide quantitative information on the audience, they are unable to depict what people thought about the telenovelas. Ethnographic approaches to audiences show that encounters between viewers and texts are more complex than textualist theory suggests. There-

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34 In Spanish: *Centro de Investigación y Memoria Histórica de la Escuela Superior de Guerra* (CIMHM).

35 Among the first titles to be published by NC Producciones were "Una guerrilla por dentro, memorias de la resistencia" and "Guerrilleras, testimonios de cinco combatientes de las Farc" (Agencia Anadolu 2019).

fore, in-depth interviews with a small number of people are now acknowledged as one of the best ways to scrutinise people's engagement with television.<sup>36</sup> The ethnographic attitude has the potential to keep interpretations and readings of the texts context-sensitive (Ang 2001, 2006, p. 189).

I conducted focus group interviews since this method enables researchers to understand peoples' lived experiences and their points of view, providing a deeper, broader and richer understanding of certain phenomena (Davis 2017, p. 125).<sup>37</sup> Focus group interviews are a moderated form of discussion in which small groups are stimulated to have an in-depth discussion on a topic determined by the researcher. (Schulz 2012, pp. 9–10). Furthermore, I chose focus group interviews to provide a counterbalance to the expert interviews. As Davis underlines, focus group interviews privilege the participants' points of view and can thus be a useful tool in critical research (Davis 2017, pp. 4–5). Focus groups are especially useful in providing bottom-up information on social contexts and thus serve as a valuable corrective to experts' top-down perspectives.

Focus group participants are not randomized but specifically chosen, e.g., as consumers or impacted population (Schulz 2012, pp. 13–15). Therefore, I aimed to conduct focus group interviews with people who had watched at least one of the reconciliation telenovelas. Yet, within some focus groups there were also participants who had not seen the production but nevertheless contributed important comments, questions and points of view to the topic.

The focus group interviews emerged from personal contact with Colombian friends and colleagues. Friends put me in touch with the church group *Lazos de Amistad*, a middle-class family in Bogotá and a three-generation family in Zipaquirá, and colleagues gave me the opportunity to conduct focus group interviews within their universities. Therefore, these focus groups provide insights into the reception of reconciliation telenovelas within a certain sector of Colombian society: urban population with a significant degree of formal education, with a focus on a female and younger population, which in many cases coincides with rather progres-

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36 As Ang points out, the book "The 'Nationwide' Audience" by David Morley (1980) is the key publication in the study of media audiences, a field that developed rapidly in the 1980s, characterised by a growing popularity of ethnographic approaches to media audiences (Ang 2001, 2006, p. 189).

37 Besides the characteristics mentioned here, focus group interviews enable natural communication and social interaction to be observed. The interaction among the group is of less relevance for this investigation and will not be observed in detail.

sive political opinions.<sup>38</sup> Although I established contact with victimised population, I was not able to conduct focus group interviews with them.<sup>39</sup>

I conducted five focus group interviews, which comprised 30 participants in total: an urban middle-class family from Bogotá (3 people), a church group (4 people), a group of students from a private university (14 people) and a group of students of advanced media studies from the same university (4 people). To incorporate population from a more rural area and reflect different perspectives among generations, I included a 3-generation family from the provincial town Zipaquirá (5 people). Of all participants, 18 declared having watched LA NIÑA occasionally or regularly, while only 1 participant declared having watched NO OLVIDARAS MI NOMBRE. All groups were pre-existing bone fide groups and the interviews were conducted in private homes of group participants or university classrooms.

### 1.3.3 Methods – Qualitative Content Analysis and reconciliation strategies

Since the reconciliation telenovelas and the interviews constitute two very different sources and will be used to answer different elements of the research question, I employ different methods to analyse them. Those written and audio-visual sources that are not directly related to the reconciliation telenovelas, such as laws, provide mainly information on context and background. They are approached methodologically as historical sources.

The interviews with telenovela key actors provide insights into the production of the telenovelas and their relationship with the TJ process. In contrast, the interviews with representatives of the conflict-affected groups and the focus groups are useful sources to learn more about the telenovela

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38 Of the 30 focus group participants, 20 were female, 9 were male, 1 auto-defined as other. Regarding the age group, 19 participants were 18-24 years, 4 participants were 25-39 years, and 7 participants older than 40 years. In terms of their educational level, 19 participants had a high school degree (*bachillerato*), 2 participants a college degree (*técnico*), 6 participants a university degree (*universidad*), one participant a post-graduate degree (*posgrado*) and two provided no data.

39 While I was in contact with various groups of population that had been displaced by the violence in the countryside and moved to Bogotá, I did not have enough time to establish a connection deep enough with the people so that they would trust me. Many feared that the information they gave we would somehow end up in the hands of dissident guerrilla members, neo-paramilitary groups or the military. Additionally, many of them expressing their fear of suffering secondary trauma.