DEVP0022 Individual Assignment- Glossary for Ethical Practice

<u>*From Observer to Participant: A Reflexive Journey on the Importance of Meaning and Semantic Ambiguity of Terminology*</u>

Starting my journey

Partaking in the case study of Santa Rita, a neighbourhood on the periphery of Bogota, a word that immediately spun a narrative of urgency for me and provoked ethical dilemmas, was *invasión* or *invasion*. Before the OPE, I was vaguely aware of the implications of language and the importance of terminology in setting narratives. Throughout the OPE, I was confronted with the variations of meaning of this word both in Spanish and English, and the impact of various positionalities in attaching meaning and narratives. This entry documents the journey I unknowingly embarked on- before, during and after the OPE- shifting from an observer of the term's usage and interpretations, to an active participant enacting a pre-determined meaning of the word, and finally to a reflective practitioner sharing my insights here. I document the encounters I have with the term, both in the field and internally, and the differences in usage by various individuals shaped by their positionalities.

1. *The Observer*

I observed the first usage of *invasión* during an initial online meeting with our partner, Junta de Acción Comunal (JAC) or Community Action Board of Santa Rita, and its leader. When referencing the key issues persisting in the neighbourhood, she stated, "*Tenemos invasión al espacio público*" which we had interpreted in English as "*We have an invasion of public spaces*". This is in reference to impacts on pedestrian mobility due to street vending, recycling, moto-taxis, and motorbikes on pedestrian streets. The translation to *invasion* echoed its militant meaning, instantly framing an 'us vs them' situation and an urgency towards the infringement of her and other resident's rights to the streets. The danger of this sentiment is analysed in neighbour dispute discourse, highlighting how the normalisation of 'us vs them' speech results in othering and creates a 'normative us vs deviant them' (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003). *Invasión* in this context, gives the sense that the public space needs to be 'defended' against the 'usurper' which already creates 'antagonism' between groups, shaping my initial observations of Santa Rita's challenges (Olarte and Wall, 2012).

My second encounter with the word was its usage in governmental communications in which the Mayor of Bogota toured Suba and visited the embankment park in Santa Rita, noting "*invasión del espacio público*" as a key issue (Alcaldía de Bogotá, 2024). Again, I observed the translation to "*invasion of public spaces",* though it was not clear to me what the meaning was in this context, so I had attached the JAC leader's one. However, my preconceived understanding of the statement was soon challenged on the first day of the OPE when I observed another JAC member refer to *invasion* of public spaces by the government. This new observation resonates with the meaning that Bottomley and Moore (2007) outline, similar to *invasión's* alternative Spanish meaning of encroachment: the mechanism of public space becoming "legally privately owned or controlled property" for regulation and control, impacting access (Bottomley and Moore, 2007).

As an observer, I began noticing the contradictions in the meaning of the same term. I also began to reflect on my personal interpretation of *invasion* at the time, leaning to the literal militant connotation and the negative discourse on usage of public space in Santa Rita, and more widely in Bogota. Specifically, wasted spaces, also referred to as 'residual spaces', which

can be vacant lots, empty buildings, spaces under bridges, and what we classified the embankment or La Bota as (Díaz Cruz, 2021). These spaces prompt negative emotions of anxiety or fear, also known as 'topophobia' (Díaz Cruz, 2021; Relph, 1976). Díaz Cruz highlights how these '*invasions'* of residual spaces through street vending, informal settlements and others, are a form of spatial practice enacting 'territorialization' or the claiming of wasted space by Bogota citizens, transforming them into ones of symbolic value and a way of asserting their 'right to the city' (Díaz Cruz, 2021). They also emphasise the conflicts between actors, like territorialization practices by street vendors which I observed impacting pedestrian mobility causing tensions regarding the vendors' "constitutional right to work" and protection of all's right to use the public space (Díaz Cruz, 2021; Olarte and Wall, 2012). The use of moto-taxis as an alternative mode of transport for 'underserved' areas like Santa Rita and lower-income citizens was also observed (World Economic Forum, 2015). I saw first-hand the dangers they and motorbikes posed while using the same pedestrian streets and I found myself agreeing with many residents' views of it being a key issue and perhaps even an *invasion* infringing on mine and many others' mobility (Figure 1). I was quick to attribute this negative connotation to the practice, but with a lecturer's feedback, I was made aware of moto-taxis as a form of territorialization by lower-income citizens who lack access to formal public transport, and a key source of income in the informal sector (World Economic Forum, 2015). These conflicts and contradictions relating to the usage and interpretation of *invasion* were becoming increasingly present during the OPE and I would soon find out just how important meaning was as I changed from observer to participant.

Figure 1: Moto-taxi on a pedestrian street in Santa Rita, Bogota (Source: ESD, 2025)

2. The Participant

The insecurity of the embankment was a constant theme, with the area being a hotspot for criminal activity, gender-based violence, and waste dumping or picking. Interviews with

residents of the embankment highlighted tensions between neighbours over issues around waste management culminating in violent clashes. I noticed the 'othering' occurring of those engaging in these '*invasive*' activities and reinforcement of the 'us vs them' narrative as one resident referred to drug consumers as 'vicious people' (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003). Here, it is evident that neighbour relationships around the embankment are heavily impacted by a lack of respect and maintenance of the "spatial order of relations" shown through transgressions (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003). Recently, however, transformative efforts initiated by the resident's and JAC's advocacy has led to the paving of a road and the reclamation of a former parking lot to a thriving garden with vegetable growth. Residents have expressed the importance of fencing as a physical barrier, both to protect spaces like the garden and keep 'interlopers' out (Olarte and Wall, 2012). I found myself feeling conflicted about this solution as a mitigation for *invasion,* as surely fences are a physical manifestation of "private spatial control" limiting who can access a public or collective space (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003). In sharing this view to academic experts, I was challenged and confronted with their necessity not just as a physical barrier for protection but a 'social symbol' reducing the need to actively defend the space (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003). I realised that my viewpoint of public spaces for all to access was idealistic and in reality measures do need to be taken to reduce the risk of transgressions on the spaces. I wondered how my positionality influenced this viewpoint as of course many public, open spaces in my own city of London are fenced. Was I unconsciously ignorant of that fact and did I choose to adopt a utopian, romantic approach to policy recommendations?

Continuing my observations on the manifestation of *invasions,* I witnessed a few informal settlements located just a few metres away from the river (Figure 2).
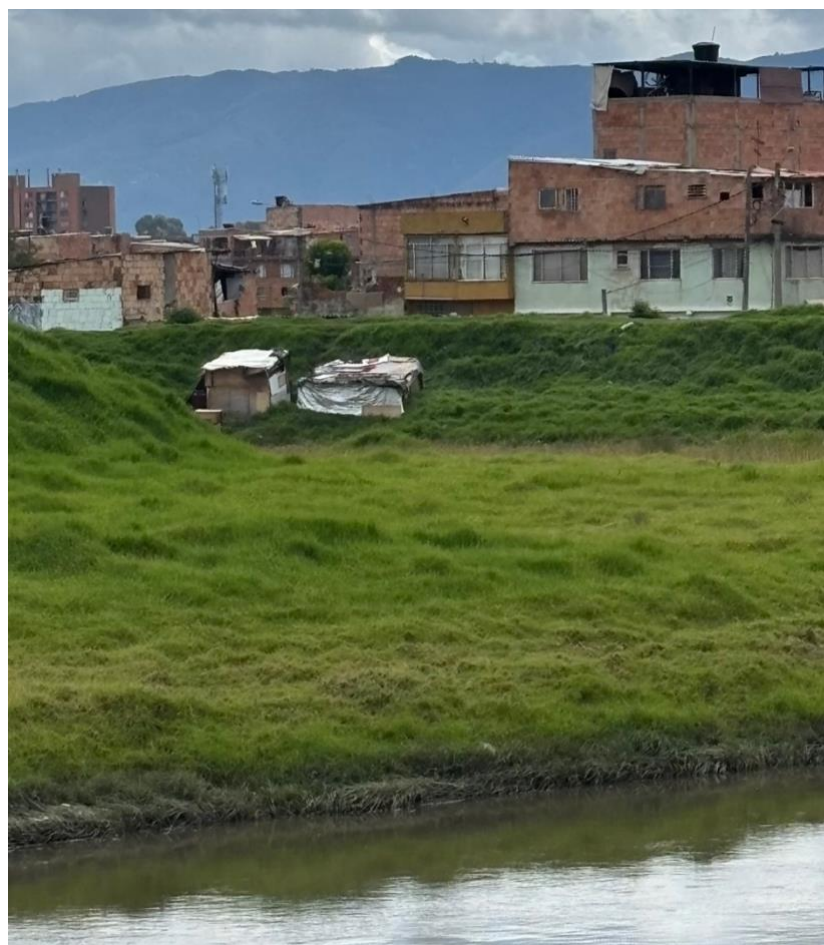

Figure 2: Two informal settlements based on the riparian corridor of the Bogota River near the embankment (Source: ESD, 2025)

I viewed them initially as a form of encroachment, noting their extreme proximity to the river and the high flood risk implementations, especially due to the projected increase in precipitation levels for Bogota in the coming years (Sarmiento, 2018). Settlements that close to the river were undoubtedly illegal yet I was curious as to their motivations for settling in this area, as we were unable to interview the inhabitants due to logistics and hesitancy from the partner who was escorting us on our transect walk. A chance to interview a representative from the Secretaría del Hábitat, who works on urban land management policies, presented an opportunity to better understand policies on this. However, I was quickly met with an ethical dilemma, spiralling into multiple internal conflicts. I grappled with questions such as: Was it ethical to raise awareness of these settlements given their illegality? Would I be contributing to forced displacement? Was I reinforcing the negative discourse around informal settlements as *invasions*, thereby denying their "right to inhabit the city" (Díaz Cruz, 2021)? I moved away from simply observing to becoming an active participant, knowing I had to tread carefully on a reality as sensitive and precarious as this was. I sought the advice of our local collaborator who previously worked in that same government department and would be participating in the interview, sharing my ethical concerns and whether the inquiry could potentially result in harm towards these displaced people. I was assured that this wouldn't be the case, but I remained sensitive and shaped the interview questions to broadly encompass the policy landscape around settlements along the embankment, possibilities of river restoration, and urban agriculture. Post-interview, I reflected both on the potential risks of my inquiry and the ethical dilemma I faced, as well as the inhabitants' occupancy of such a high-risk region, which one scholar describes as "one of the most vigorous counter practices of territorialization in residual spaces" (Díaz Cruz, 2021).

3. *The Reflective Practitioner*

My numerous encounters with the word *invasion* made me reflect on how a single word can have multiple meanings or 'semantic ambiguity' (Eddington and Tokowicz, 2015). One's perspectives and opinions are shaped by their social identities and intersections- their positionalities influence how they interpret the meaning and usage of terms. I was confronted with how my own positionality affects my interpretation of a term like *invasion,* and how as a participant and practitioner, I could possibly cause harm in acting on my personal interpretations. Going forward, my biggest reflection as a practitioner is in how I will now approach the importance and sensitivity of meaning, its nuances, complexity, and potential to shape narratives and decision-making, especially towards marginalised, invisibilised or displaced people.

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