Territorio: The Ethics of the Untranslatable

As an English speaker navigating fieldwork in the Spanish-speaking ecobarrio of Triángulo and Manantial, I found myself continually engaged in acts of translation, not only of language, but of culture, knowledge and ways of belonging. Each conversation demanded a careful negotiation of the social and conceptual frameworks that shape how place, community, and sustainability are lived, understood, and experienced.

On our first transect walk through Triángulo and Manantial, guided by community leader Héctor Álvarez, one word kept surfacing in conversation: *territorio*. As the conversation was simultaneously translated, *territorio* became "territory", a term I had long associated with a spatial delineation of state power. Yet, listening to Héctor and the community, it quickly became clear that *territorio* resonated far beyond this narrow framing. For them, it was not a bounded space on a map, but a living relation woven through memory, struggle, care, and identity. This piece therefore reflects on the ethics of translation in practice and seeks to open up decolonial pathways for knowing and planning, anchored in an exploration of the multiple meanings embedded within the word *territorio*.

In our post-fieldwork discussions, we collectively identified *territorio* as one of eight key themes shaping our research and interview questions. Initially, we translated it simply as 'territory.' However, the Oxford English Dictionary's definition, "the land or district lying round a city or a town and under its jurisdiction", felt inadequate and misaligned with what we had encountered. What I witnessed in the field was something profoundly different: *territorio* as a relational, deeply felt, and remembered place. The dictionary's definition, by contrast, struck me as narrowly state-centric, reducing *territorio* to a matter of jurisdiction and physical boundaries, thereby erasing the lived experiences, histories, and voices of the community who inhabit and care for that space every day. It was at this moment that I confronted the non-neutrality of translation.

As a group, we found ourselves questioning: should *territorio* be translated at all? What might translation enable, and perhaps more importantly, what might it erase, flatten, or leave behind? I began to understand translation as a contested ethical and political act, echoing Niranjana's (1990, p.773) insight that it is a "practice shaped by the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism". Seen through this lens, translating *territorio* as 'territory' felt less like breaking down a communicative barrier and more like an act of imposing dominant ways of knowing at the cost of simplifying, appropriating and silencing the community's own meanings. Bhanot (2020) pushes this critique further, arguing that the impulse to translate is psychohistorically tied to a desire to dominate the Other. Within the context of our fieldwork, translating *territorio* into a state-centric, bounded concept strips it of its emotional depth, reflecting a colonial logic that prioritises control over land rather than the rights and well-being of the people who have inhabited it for generations.

Differing Visions of *Territorio*

In attempt to develop a deeper, more situated understanding of *territorio,* one that exists beyond Western conceptualisations, we asked those most entangled with the meaning, the community of Triángulo and Manantial, two questions: *What is your vision of this territorio?* And, *how do you think others perceive it?*

In response to our first question, none of the community members referred to borders or physical space. In fact, many had never even seen a map of Triángulo and Manantial. Their visions of the *territorio* therefore emerged not from cartographic representations, but from lived experience, expressed through stories of belonging, memory, nature, and *tranquilidad*—another term that, like *territorio*, loses much of its depth in its English translation of "tranquillity". No two responses were the same; for some, *territorio* evoked childhood memories, family connections, and the notion of legacy, whilst for others, it was about the beauty of the natural environment providing an escape from the pollution and chaos of Bogotá. These responses revealed *territorio* as deeply personal and multidimensional, experienced at both individual and collective levels. It is precisely this complexity and emotional resonance that resists translation. To define or interpret the *territorio*, especially prior to setting foot in the field, was futile without first listening to, witnessing, and perhaps even briefly experiencing the affective and relational world that the community lives each day. *Territorio* cannot be merely understood; it is felt.

During a walk through Triángulo Alto, the community leader guided us through his barrio, pointing out native and non-native trees, naming fruits, and generously sharing them with us. At the time, I was struck by the depth of his knowledge, however, upon reflection, it was more than just knowledge; it was an expression of his relationship with the *territorio.* In identifying the non-native species, he showed a deep awareness of the ecological pressures they impose and how their water absorption patterns disrupt the delicate balance of the land and, by extension, the community. Native species, in contrast, help retain water and support the stable foundations upon which life in the barrio depends. Similarly, his act of sharing fruits illustrated how the *territorio* is cultivated through care; a symbiotic relationship between land and people whereby the community doesn't simply occupy space, they both sustain and are sustained by it. This is why the notion of *defending the territorio* recurred throughout our conversations. The community were not just talking about resisting displacement; they were speaking of protecting the dense web of emotional, ecological, and social ties embedded in the soil itself.

In contrast, many residents responded to the second question by describing how external actors, namely the state and private institutions, perceive the *territorio* through a much narrower lens, shaped by Western, technocratic rationalities. A woman from Triángulo Alto noted that private developers see the land as property to be acquired and transformed, further legitimised by state-led zoning and risk mapping practices, which impose legal boundaries that erase community attachments and facilitate evictions. These institutional framings actively depersonalise the *territorio*, reducing it to a governable, commodified object. In this process, *territorio* is stripped of its emotional, social and cultural dimensions, flattened into a concrete noun that, both materially and morally, becomes easier to exploit, develop and sell.

(Un)translating as a Decolonial Practice

As established, translation, and the interpretations it produces, is never neutral and often privileges English as the "language of power", marginalising other ways of knowing and being (Bhanot, 2020). Therefore, to ensure the voices of community members in Triángulo and Manantial are listened to, we must embrace a plurality of languages that coexist without hierarchy (Chambers & Demir, 2024). The concept of *territorio* aligns with what Emily Apter describes as an "untranslatable": a word not simply

difficult to translate, but essential to understanding the original or deeper truth of an indigenous worldview (Bhattacharaya, 2024). These words must remain untranslated precisely because they are often misunderstood when forced into external linguistic frameworks. Therefore, in the context of Ecobarrio Triángulo and Manantial, leaving *territorio* untranslated becomes a deliberate act which preserves local knowledge and affirms the community's authority over their own narratives. Their understanding and relationship with their *territorio* is something more than a mode of resistance, it is an agent of individual and collective identity (re)production shaped through the retracing and sharing of experience, memory and deep-rooted sense of place. In remaining untranslated, it refuses the violence of simplification and becomes a powerful tool through which the community can assert their right to remain, resist displacement, and reimagine urban futures on their own terms.

Witnessing the plurality of meanings held within the *territorio* has profoundly shifted my understanding of language's role in shaping how space is lived, governed, and imagined. From a personally reflective position, I have come to learn that translation is an ethical choice, one that can either reduce or enhance the complexity of place. Choosing not to translate the untranslatable is not a refusal of communication, but a refusal of erasure. It can be a radical gesture of respect, aligned with a broader commitment to decolonising planning through unsettling dominant languages and knowledge systems, and embracing an ethic of listening to those most deeply connected to Triángulo and Manantial. In doing so, space is created for genuine community-led planning to emerge and succeed.

By the end of our fieldwork, I began to grasp a fragment of what *territorio* means to those who inhabit it and how such a profound sense of attachment takes shape. This understanding was facilitated by the generosity of those who shared stories, emotions, and practices of care with me, insights that could never have been gained through a desk-based study of maps alone. As we left the field, my emotional response stemmed not from leaving the barrio itself, but from parting with the people: their histories, their connection to nature, the peace they cultivate, and the subtle, everyday ways they shape and reshape meaning within their *territorio*.

Looking ahead, untranslatables should be mobilised in planning practice, alongside a return to indigenous and community-rooted languages. Language itself becomes a site of resistance and reparative justice, reminding us that to decolonise planning is not only to reform the practice itself, but to rethink the very words through which we understand and relate to place.

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