Resignificar (re-signify) Bogotá Alliance: Ethics and the reproduction of inequalities
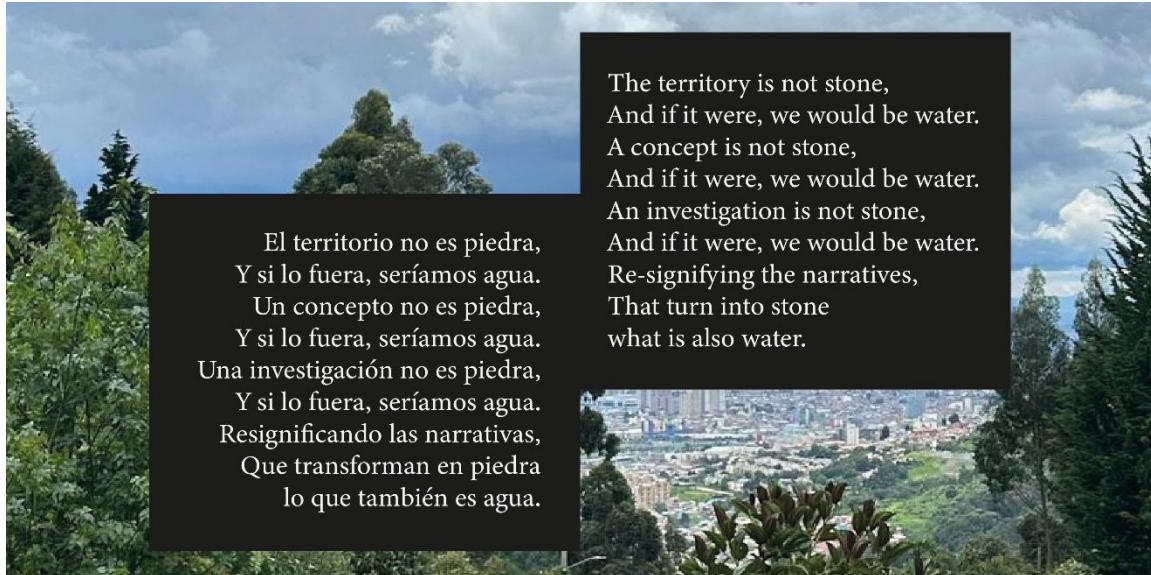

Figure 1.1. Susurros del Agua/Whispers of Water. Source: (Chaves, 2025)

Resignificar (re-signify), a word that resonated throughout my collaboration with the Bogotá Alliance as it led me to a fundamental ethical question: What are the action theory gaps that reproduce inequalities in our research, and how can we flip the script? In fact, this was brought to light on our first encounter with our partners, when our approach on bio-urban health was rejected because it posed an unfamiliar concept to both universities and community members. Although discouraged, I felt this realization marked the true beginning of our learning process: "Resignificar" was not just essential for our research groups, however also for the DPU and our partners. Nonetheless, the term "re-signify" is somewhat unconventional in English. In fact, the closest academic definition can be found in Oxford University Press (2023) under "re-sing", which denotes the act of renewing or re-engaging in a contractual agreement. In contrast, "Resignificar" as a popular process, according to Arias Cardona et al (2020), is to give a new meaning to the present after a different interpretation of the past and vice versa. Therefore, by linking both definitions, research can be understood as a contract and a narrative, hence the creation of feasible pathways that encompass specific aims, responsibilities, and outcomes. It is key, then, to open a dialogue on the areas in which re-signification is necessary for research to embody a state of continuous flux, akin to water. In doing so, we can "start asking the right questions that can lead to collective action, rather than mere community comprehension and description" (Álvarez, 2025).

Re-signifying concepts

As a starting point, throughout the Bogota case studies, preestablished concepts confined identities (personal, collective, or cultural) through external definitions given by institutions and academia. In fact, Martinez (2025) explained how communities experienced a constant necessity or urge to name or assign a concept to their reality to be understood, heard, and resist against socio-institutional pressure. Therefore, epistemic justice became a focal point of our collective discussion, as research can sometimes serve as a tool for tokenism which leads to extraction and domination rather than

devolution. According to Fricker (2013), this epistemic violence may occur when information is not widely disseminated, when there is deficient credibility, or when inadequate intelligibility results in the loss of the intended message. However, Educación Popular, which is rooted in participatory practice-based learning, brings forward "Resignificar" as "akin to relating and contextualizing experiences, knowledge, and understanding, as well as the discourses we construct around them" (Ghiso, 2015, p.33).

In this regard, it was evident that our community partners had implemented strategies to counter epistemic injustice, including reconnecting individuals with natural cycles and promoting play as a form of sensitization, which warrant further exploration in understanding how people process experiences beyond rigid academic concepts. For instance, Charette (2024) discusses how playfulness can mitigate pathocentric epistemic injustice, particularly about the ways individuals process and experience pain differently. Hence, as researchers, community, professors, and partners in the Alliance, we needed to understand "concepts" not in isolation but as living processes, in our bodies and the territories, constantly changing in impact and meaning by our dialogues. Therefore, re-signifying concepts would entail renewing our collective narratives, that is, our "dominant unchangeable academic problematization", through a coproduction of "a broader common truth". For example, in our case study, bio-urban health was the academically imposed emphasis, however, Ecobarrios Triangulo Manantial urged us to change it for memory, territory, dreams, and other lived experiences rooted in resistance and flourishment. While there are no specific steps to re-signify concepts, the Alliance and I, as practitioners, should remain intellectually curious, actively challenging our preconceptions to recognize and address patterns of epistemic violence embedded within our processes.

Re-signifying Academia

For instance, the re-signification of concepts raises a broader ethical question about the extent to which research, framed through theoretical contributions as outcomes, can be impactful, particularly when the primary goal was to generate actionable knowledge for ecological justice. Similarly, Bogota's research outcomes highlighted institutional stagnation as a driver of injustice, causing communities to perceive themselves as "lab rats," leading to a deterioration of trust in possible actionable pathways. However, can this idea, institutional stagnation, be applied to our research, given that our parameters do not address implementation? While theoretical strategies are developed within the Alliance, I wonder if academia can adopt a more proactive approach to diminish the extractive perception that Bogotá communities have from these approaches? In this regard, Marotti de Mello and Wood (2019) differentiate between applicable and applied research. The former, which focuses on developing new models to understand a phenomenon, is not inherently flawed, however, it creates an uneven distribution in the theory-action-reflection framework that community-based research aims for. In contrast, applied research induces innovation through the implementation of some effective solutions, which are subsequently evaluated by groups composed of both researchers and community members. Hence, although research has limited scope, re-signifying academia would entail questioning the parameters of practice that perpetuate inequalities, such as a reinforced perception of neglect in the communities.

Consistently, throughout our Bogotá experience, I explored alternatives to development as mechanisms for re-signifying trauma and recognizing the capacity to reclaim and reshape historical and cultural understandings of 'the right to the city.' Thus, I open the dialogue on the idea that re-signifying academia entails seeking "alternatives to research" that bridge the gap in developing actionable knowledge. Arquitectura Expandida, for instance, is not limited to reading, interviewing, or media production; rather, it actively transforms the social context through "tactic provocations", ranging from spatial interventions to the development of communities of practice that can guide local groups. Similarly, Páez-Calvo et al. (2020) propose concrete intervention alternatives for Bogotá's fringe urban areas, presenting a toolbox for action based on participatory design. In alignment with this perspective, Kimberly et al. (2016) advocate for research that translates analysis into tangible change. To re-signify academia, they propose that research should: (a) produce dual products, (b) discuss challenges and possible solutions through dialogic processes, (c) incorporate a community advisory committee to evaluate findings and outcomes, (d) address the expectations of all partners, and (e) prioritize unambiguous conversations. Thus, such an approach is similar to Bogota´s circle of words, as a local horizontal dialogue, which could be a viable pathway for shifting the position of "rearguard researchers", as co-creating could imply implementing together and critically reflecting on our biases regarding research passiveness, rigor, and recognition.

Re-signifying the Territory

Lastly, my perspective on "Resignificar" as an ethical process evolved through my practice with the Bogotá Alliance, leading me to a broader realization: perhaps urban problems in Latin American urban centres, such as Bogotá, need a process of resignification. As the issue at hand for the Triángulo Manantial case study was not merely the restriction of habitability within ecological structures and their subsequent restoration, but rather, it was about redefining how territories in the city are occupied or restricted in favour of maintaining the status quo. Consequently, problematization can be understood as the deliberate limitation of certain protected areas to sustain a deteriorating model of urban development and consumption. To expand on this perspective, Merchant (1989) illustrates how mechanization led to the conceptual incorporation of a control paradigm in which both human bodies and ecological systems, understood here as territory, were constrained in their capacity to grow and flourish, driven by mercantilist and class imperatives. This notion remains pervasive in Latin American urban centres, where urban planning does not incorporate its alternative vision of development but instead reinforces mechanisms of spatial control, preserving existing or anticipated Western urban models.

Consistently, Díaz Cruz et al. (2021) explain that in Bogotá exchange value for private investors is prioritized, disrupting psychological and social fabric at the neighbourhood level. In fact, urban planning seems to overlook or erase social functions that foster communal resilience and self-sufficiency. For instance, the proposed relocation of residents from Ecobarrios Triángulo Manantial to Ciudad Verde raises ethical concerns, as the new settlement is significantly distant from the Eastern Hills and lacks adequate green spaces. This spatial disconnect risks the erosion of vital biocultural practices, particularly those related to food security, as residents engage in localized food cultivation and animal breeding as part of their biocultural traditions. Hence, forced displacement of these communities not only disrupts their ecological relationship with the land but also reinforces

exclusionary urban models, despite (POT) Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial's advocacy for systemic change. Hence, as a practitioner within the Alliance and beyond, I recognize the ethical imperative of establishing a bridge between theoretical discourse and the material consequences of planning. Thus, the process of re-signification must not be a theoretical abstraction but rather grounded in the lived experiences, hence re-signify "does not mean emptying the word of its semantic content or the feeling of its affective contentedness...It implies recognizing that social suffering must be socially and politically assisted and repaired." (Sacipa-Rodriguez & Montero, 2014, p.68). This shift in approach as a practitioner emphasize "Resignificar" as a critical framework for territorial engagement, aligning with the ethical imperatives of reparative justice. By acknowledging the historical trauma embedded in bodies, ecological structures, and land, reparative justice in planning can facilitate healing processes that enable to critically reflect on and generate alternatives to development from within, rather than relying on imposed models.

In conclusion, on the final day, while waiting for the bus, figure 1.2 emerged as a catalyst for re-signifying my role as a researcher and practitioner about action and ethical accountability, as this quote implies action (dancing) rather than just observation (survival), especially when faced with a problematic journey such as an ethical approach to research. Hence, "Resignificar" is not passive and implies shifting internal dynamics and how they are constructed to avoid reproducing inequalities through research. Hence, the presented analysis explores how re-signifying concepts entails ethically recentring the commons, understanding that knowledge and words are also commons, therefore moving from an individualized academic analysis to shared frameworks that respect collective histories and narratives. In addition, re-signifying academia means pushing research institutions toward accountability, ensuring that studies contribute to structural justice rather than just documentation, and questioning what is needed to achieve this, maybe "alternatives to research". Therefore, re-signifying the territory through research aligns with the principles of reparative justice, serving as a conduit for bridging ethical discourses that foster meaningful dialogues on rethinking territorial occupation, memory and aspirations. This underscores the notion that resignification is a continuous process, one that does not provide absolute answers but rather necessitates the formulation of critical questions within the Bogotá Alliance.
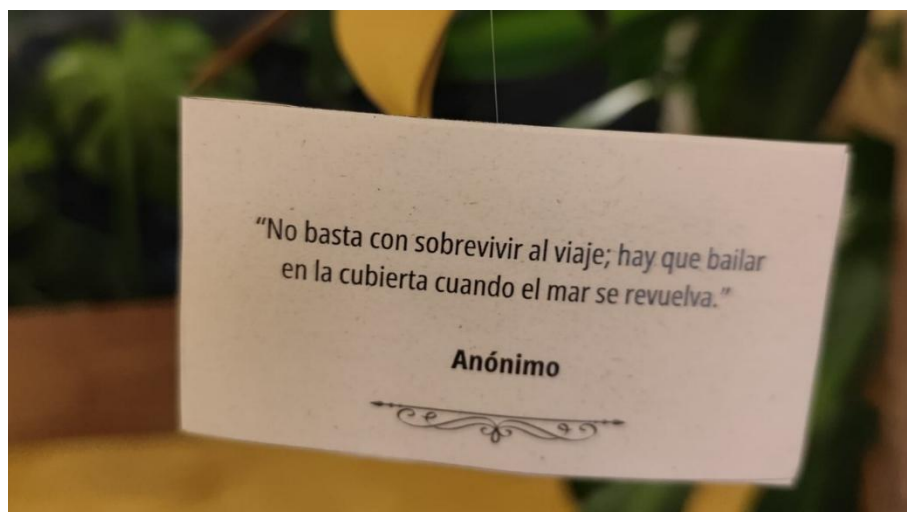

Figure 1.2. Picture with quote, translation: "It's not enough to survive the journey; you have to dance on the deck when the sea gets rough. -Uknown." Source: (Chaves, 2025).

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