

# With the rainforest in one's head, and the hand in one's heart

(Con la selva en la cabeza y la mano en el corazón)

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## Abstract

In this essay, Josefina Klinger Zúñiga, Afro Colombian socio-environmental leader, shares the story of the Migration Festival in Nuquí, Colombian Pacific. It is a proposal on how to interrogate violence through the eyes of a non-violence project.

## Editors note

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Josefina Klinger in collaboration with Pedro Aparicio Llorente and Catalina Mejía Moreno

## Introduction

The story you are about to read is a proposition to look at violence through the eyes of a project of non-violence.

*Along the north of Colombia's Pacific coast, the Colombian Government is planning to construct a major port, together with train lines and oil pipelines that aim to expand the underused maritime infrastructure of the country, and to strengthen commercial links with Asia. It is a violent project that puts at risk and threatens the delicate balance of the environmental ecosystem and social ecologies*

*of one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. With dance, costumes, music, and children leading a festive parade and other events, the Festival de Migración Pacífica, first created by Josefina Klinger Zúñiga, Afro-Colombian socio-environmental leader in Nuquí, Chocó on the North Pacific coast of Colombia, celebrates, while teaching, biodiversity, environmental awareness, social cohesion and empowerment of indigenous and black youth living in this area. As a yearly celebration linked to the migration of species that occurs in this region between June and October, and with an environmental agenda in mind, this festival further aims to break with paradigms of exclusion, violence, poverty and victimisation that this territory has historically been subjected to. As a counter project, the festival is a sensitive, subtle and persistent form of activism that distinguishes itself from “loud” protests and forms of governance—which still today are usually silenced through violence.*

*This story was initially presented as a heartfelt narration by Josefina Klinger at the conference on Violence (part of the Environment panel) hosted by PARSE and the University of Gothenburg on 18 November 2021. It was not simply read, nor was it delivered as an academic paper. As you will be able to gather when reading this piece, it was an embodied speech, coming from Josefina’s heart, body and jungle. It has been transcribed and translated by Pedro Aparicio, a Colombian architect founder of the architecture and landscape practice APLO ([www.aplo.xyz](http://www.aplo.xyz)) and lecturer at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and Catalina Mejía Moreno, a Colombian spatial practitioner, researcher and educator, and Senior Lecturer in Climate Studies at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London.*

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Greetings from a seashore in this humid Pacific. My feminine and peaceful energy embraces and greets you from a distance that today is close. I am Josefina Klinger Zúñiga. I have had the enormous privilege of being born in a spectacular place in Colombia, on the Pacific Ocean, between the water and the jungle.

We are in the northern coastal strip of what is known as the Chocó biogeographical region. Even our map is beautiful. Several indigenous and black communities live in this place. In its centre sits the town of Nuquí, which provides the name to the entire municipality. Nuquí is like the capital of the Gulf of Tribugá, an area determined by ecosystems which are today subject of conservation, and that have a special fragility, including mangroves and coral reefs. These are places for the reproduction of hammerhead sharks, where humpback whales give birth and are born, and where many migratory species seek safety during the entire second half of the year due to the tranquility of its waters and the richness of its ecosystems. There is where we live, and where we also have the privilege of bathing, breathing and interacting. It is there where we have a collective property relationship that we are trying to reinforce every day: the importance of a common well-being—because happiness is a common, because territory is a common, because well-being is a common.

In this territory there are a series of special legislations—for instance, legislations that indigenous communities have traced through their own struggles and visions—and therefore several modes of governance. Indigenous communities have 81,000 hectares of collective land, and we, the black communities, have 31,000 hectares of collective land. Together, we are also a buffer zone for the Utría National Natural Park, which has four of the most threatened and fragile ecosystems in the world, and which is the birth room for humpback whales, among other species, such as turtles and birds that, as I mentioned before, migrate here to seek refuge.

This mosaic and vision of collective property that is being configured and reinforced, this mosaic of various governance authorities allows us to take on the challenge of planning our territory under the vision of common well-being with the aim of making it politically correct. And making it politically correct not only for us, but for the rest of the world, because these ecosystems—together with the management, labour and understanding that we, people of water and jungle, can provide—will make a permanent contribution to humanity at large and set an example.

I would like to explain how Colombia is like any of the other countries in South America by addressing the issue of violence, from the perspective of shared responsibility. I resist assuming that violence is an issue of *others* against *us*, as I would therefore be vibrating in the role of victim, which is part of what we have been addressing and helping to resolve over the last years. Violence is a strategy that originates in the deepest fears of any human being. No matter what body they are incarnated in, it is an emotion that doesn't want anything other than to exert control over others. Internal forms of violence begin within our own selves. This internalised violence can sometimes manifest itself when I relate to others. Sometimes it manifests so subtly that it becomes systemic, even validated. What I want to say here is that in order to do this work of transformation towards the commons, what I want to bring to you today, is no longer a diagnosis of what is incorrect in the relationship of humans with nature and the environment, with personal and community living. Rather, I want to tell you how the subtle and validated systemic violence we have experienced, conditioned us to normalise and believe that we live in a territory far from the famous "development" and with a lack of resources and opportunities. These beliefs are anchored in our hearts, as majority black and indigenous communities, two ethnic groups that in Colombia have had to take on all kinds of violence. And this is a form of violence. But there is also the violence when the State does not invest in you, when education becomes for "fifth-class citizens", when opportunities are determined through classism and structural racism, cultivating an understanding that money and acquisitive power define your life and hence the community within a territory.

These first two kinds of violence overlap with a third type of violence cultivated within public schools, where children's rights are systematically infringed. For instance, when school teachers, in complicity with parents or carers, halt their right to express their discontent on how badly they are being treated or stop them from expressing any disagreement—as if expressing their discontent is something not allowed. We have continuously seen how children are repressed in this educational scenario, which is also a condition that converges with how families relate to their women. What is more, the ways in which we, and those who are constantly arriving to our region, produce the territory, are loaded with violence: *the use of the territory overpowers the possession of the territory*. What this means is that the way in which economies are secured within the territory are not always aligned with our own cosmovisions. Here we can again see forms of naturalised violence. All these multiple forms of naturalised violence, which I insist are systemic and highly validated, generate a breeding ground and an environment conducive to other types of external violence.

Twenty years ago, I used to say that the only thing that was reaching us from the rest of the country were bullets. There were no basic public services, nor basic needs. In our territory, a war and a conflict were instigated; a war and a conflict that we did not generate, but whose full impact has touched us deeply. The guerrillas were present first. Then the paramilitaries, who are still present today, and have been present in different moments in time. Today the paramilitaries work together (or against) new guerilla groups that emerged after the lack of implementation of the peace treaty with the FARC guerrilla group in 2016, setting up or designing other protocols to intervene in the territory because of our strategic and equidistant location between Buenaventura, the main port on Colombia's Pacific coast, and Panama, which is practically a border and route to Mexico and the US. That lack of a shared vision regarding models of sustainable development, characteristic of

poor state intervention (no access roads, no clean energy systems, no public infrastructure) is also a type of violence that has developed by taking advantage of the benefits and opportunities of our territory. It is exemplary, because today, our social and environmental leaders are threatened, and the deaths of our leaders are showing us that our resources are needed by others. We are being disempowered by design, we are kept scared through all these various manifestations of violence. This is a reality.

Now I'd like to continue by telling you how we have transformed it and developed a model that originates from healing those fears; a model of boldness and bravery characterised by thinking about the future of a place where we were taught that there was no future. So now I am going to tell you this love story.

We decided to develop a strategy to change our already conditioned imaginaries, by insisting on shared responsibility. We are recognised inside and outside of Colombia as a territory of poverty that contrasts with the environmental richness and with its cultural strength. Within Colombian imaginaries, we were already at a disadvantage here in Nuquí. What we decided to do was to change this imaginary by flipping the narrative. To move away from the narrative of being a periphery, and embark instead on a narrative of love, of love for life and love for the commons that would allow us to lead a peaceful revolution. A narrative that would allow us to pacify our souls, but also conquer and seduce the rest of the country and the world using powerful tools such as joy and talent. We decided to use skills that we as human beings all have: that special imprint to move, to see life, to value life, to work in community, to have that look anchored in and connected with nature and our environment. This strategy should also allow us to make a profit while at the same time paying attention to specific situations, for instance, one in which the older local population was defining certain planning processes, such as how to obtain the titles of collective land. And it should also allow us to converge in that shared use and management between the National Parks unit, the indigenous communities, the black communities and a handful of people who have come from other regions of the country and even from outside.

How could we have a conversation in a peaceful way, but above all, how to build collectively from our own population's predominant and determining place? Those were some of our initial questions. As mentioned above, we rejoiced in joy as a tool, but also clung unto wise philosophical ancestral practices such as the *Minga*, where everyone works for a common good without money being the mediator; the *Trueque* (barter) where we all exchange tangible products without money being the only intermediary; and the *Mano Cambiada*, from which my organisation takes its name, which is an economy that moves through the intangible exchange of skills. These practices not only had to be turned into a manifesto, but actually recovered, as they had been discarded when people started wanting to resemble the city. That is when we understood this peculiarity: the apparent disadvantage of being in the middle of the jungle, where we were taught that poverty, exclusion and violence had condemned us.

Therefore, our strategy is to *place the jungle on our heads and the water in our hearts*. By incorporating the jungle we are indeed not referring to that jungle of which we were taught to think as a lost corner, or to be intimidated by, because in that jungle violence and insecurity prompted our people to stop cultivating due to fears of guerrillas taking over. We are not referring to the jungle that *others configured to their own advantage and taught us to be frightened of*. We decided to put *our jungle onto our heads* to send a message to the new generations within the territory, to the rest of the country and to the rest of the world. But this process needs determination.

We understood the potential of those collective territories that were being planned through *Mingas*, where the only intermediary was not money, as it is precisely money that we have needed, and lack of it became the

disadvantage that condemned us. In order to change this, we were very clear that our model should make a profit. Because maintaining biodiversity, maintaining and fulfilling dreams in this territory needs investment. But we had to generate it from within. We started by generating it with our adults, using an economy against individual and fast capitalisation, one that is collective through a value chain. This is why we use eco-tourism as the strategy to advance what we call the Minga Economy. We had to be outspoken about this. We also had to manage natural resources intelligently, as they are the main asset that allowed us to have an economic option. And we did this intelligently. We also had to work towards clever cultural management to add value to this staging of tourism, and use of tourism as a tool. We also had to do something very important: involve our next generations so that they would grow up with a different imagination, and for them to assume the process in a sustainable way. For instance, improving leadership to make it more ethical —because the lack of ethics is also the cause for other manifestations of violence to be anchored in the territory—and how to manage shared benefit to teach the State that we are its best allies.

I want to thank you, and to close this part, I will dwell on a strategy that for us is more important. I told you that we learn and that we have the power of joy, and of talents, of this special imprint that we have and have inherited from this mixture of so many ethnic groups in privileged and sonorous territories where the sea and nature determine our lives. There, in that space, we decided to have the Festival of Pacific Migration as a strategy for social cohesion. <sup>[1]</sup> This inspired us to recognise that during the second half of the year, three relevant species visit us: turtles, birds and whales. Whales travel 8,000 km to seek calm, warm waters and safe and special conditions to give birth to their whale calves. With this symbology, together with the cultural magic and imprint I am telling you about, we decided to create the festival as a strategy to allow children to grow up without our adult fears, and instead help in their formation through alternative spaces that bring us closer to their reality. Not a reality seen from a position of poverty and disadvantage, but from a reality of great opportunities. The trajectory of a species that migrates and that reaches a territory stigmatised by human logic through death, tragedy, corruption is very symbolic. This species travels 8,000 km to find just the opposite: a place of profound care. Children had to know that. That is why if you hear a child, they will openly say that the whales are *Nuquiceñas*, they are *Chocoanas*, they are *Colombianas*. Children change their imaginaries and grow up with a fresh idea of their home, which is a pretext to make this new generation grow up without fears, generate all the love and sense of belonging and identity to maintain those resources, and maintain sustainable processes and practices, where adults today are fighting for all their wisdom and experience.

Through the festival we also connect children with practices such as agriculture and fishing, so that these skills are not seen as being done only by those who did not get a college degree, but rather ensure that children are inspired by models of what their adults do, so that they can see a science, a privilege and a cultural heritage they can relate to in gastronomy, for example.

There is one very important aim in our strategy: we want to reduce the very high levels of corruption. For me, corruption is the real cause of the problem that humanity has. It is a problem not limited to us as a country or to us in this local scenario of Nuqui. What we did notice was that when a child eventually leaves the territory because it was said that there are no opportunities within the territory, and goes away to university to complete their studies, they are exposed to corruption and ill behaviours characteristic of reigns of abuse of resources and power. We believe that this encounter originates from leaving the territory and being disconnected from it. When we revisit the existing educational model, it does not open opportunities for the child to develop and spread all their talent and connect with their territory. So starting from all these tools and tactics that are small, with happiness at the centre, the purpose of the Migration Festival is to provide children and young people with “new baggage” so that when they migrate to study elsewhere, they continue to be connected with their identity

and remember that the best place in the world is their territory, while being mindful that going back to it allows the understanding that you have a role to play in helping to transform it in a positive way, without perpetuating corruption and violence. Because the solution is not in the hands of others, but in ours.

So, to finish, the Festival of Migration and the Mano Cambiada Foundation are strategies of human transformation determined by unconditional love and by the vision of the collective good, by the vision of our common home, which is the planet, and knowing that this transcends academic and technical logics. Because academic and technical logics as tools are not working. It is necessary to value social and ancestral wisdom as an asset, because pure reason does not work for us. We must feel cohesion with the heart, and the best medium to connect with the human heart is through care. Care for natural resources as a way to strengthen our culture of ancestral wisdom.

## Footnotes

1. The Migration Festival was born as a conservation strategy led by Josefina Klinger. It is a strategy that seeks to guarantee the preservation of the ecosystems that the communities inhabiting this region have inherited from their ancestors. The Migration Festival has as its initial focus the information carried out by scientific investigations around three main species that migrate in the second half of the year. These are: turtles, whales and birds. By proposing migration as a pretext to broaden environmental thought and action through an annual celebration that is linked to the migration of species that occurs every year between June and October, the Festival aims to reintegrate their presence in the communities of the *Nuquiceño* territory, as of today it has been lost. Every year Nuquí rejoices with the annual migration of these three species through dances, children's parades, celebrations of oral histories of grandfathers and grandmothers, and activities that bring different generations together. This is how the Festival focuses on the education and empowerment of the younger generations, indigenous youth and Afro-diasporic communities living in the area. This strategy has unleashed a change in the cultural dynamics of this Pacific territory and has strengthened its cultural heritage. With an environmental agenda in mind, the Festival seeks to break with the paradigms of exclusion, violence, poverty and victimization to which this territory has historically been subjected. In this way, the Festival is created as a space for reflection and community action that sits in-between the environmental, the productive and the educational. Within this empowerment dynamic, *Corporación Mano Cambiada* was born as a legal association to promote a self-managed model of local development through, mainly, tourism as its main tool. After twelve years of the Pacific Migration Festival, the pending challenge is to give continuity to these processes of creative and environmental training of children and young people, with a focus on a level of professionalization and entrepreneurship within everyone's reach. It is of utmost urgency to provide Nuquí's forthcoming generations with empowering mechanisms around the biodiversity of their ecosystems and resources.

## References

*endnote: One of Josefina Klinger's aims is to present the Festival de la Migración Pacífica to Colombia's Ministry of Culture or to the UN, aiming to register it as cultural heritage. Pedro has been working with Josefina and Mano Cambiada for the last three years, supporting spatial configurations and approaches to their social and environmental agenda, while working in collaboration with Nuquiceños in different projects and spatial and material collaborations. Catalina joined this conversation later, in solidarity with the processes of Mano Cambiada, the Migration Festival and Josefina, by supporting the Festival's proposition to the Colombia's Ministry of Culture or to the UN, aiming to register it as a cultural heritage. This paper is an opportunity to address our process working on this potential nomination as an act of solidarity, care and non-violent practice that counters the various violent practices still tied to environmental and social activism in Colombia, and other parts of the world. If you would like to join us in supporting Josefina's cause, which is now materialising in the design and construction of VEANVÉ, an Artistic Environmental Center in Nuqui for the formation of socio-environmental leaders through multicultural, pluriethnic and transgenerational knowledge transfer, please contact us via email at [p.aparicio22@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:p.aparicio22@uniandes.edu.co) and [c.mejiamoreno@csm.arts.ac.uk](mailto:c.mejiamoreno@csm.arts.ac.uk).*