

Performing the Mulatto Paradox in Arriví's *Vejigantes*

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The dramatic repertoire of Francisco Arriví (b. 1915) underscores the complexities of Puerto Rican racial identity. His masterpiece trilogy, *Máscara puertorriqueña* (1956-1959), at once exposes discord within Puerto Rico's mulatto identity and aspires to etch out a national appreciation of that heritage. In Medina's words, *Máscara* "expone la problemática de conciencia que engendra la mezcla de razas en Puerto Rico" (10). The three installments – *Bolero y plena* (1956), *Vejigantes* (1958) and *Sirena* (1959) – explore Puerto Rican ethnicity through the metaphor of the *máscara*, or mask, behind which mulattoes hide their racial humiliation. Arriví construed the trilogy as a mechanism for overcoming such racial shame, urging his people to "acknowledge, preserve, and celebrate the simultaneous diversity and unity of their cultural heritage" (Ortiz Griffin 57). Arriví's work underscores the stumbling blocks that impede this celebration through mulatto characters that only "celebrate" their race after they suffer because of it. If at the conclusion of *Vejigantes* (1958), for example, the *mulata* protagonists at last esteem their heritage, the preceding acts highlight the traumas inherent to the mulatto experience. Arriví's means for healing the mulatto's racial humiliation functions upon a system of binaries into which the dramatist interweaves identities of race, gender, class and nation. The dialectic of outsider (white, upper-class, male, Spaniard/North American) versus insider (mulatto, underprivileged, female, islander) is the vehicle through which Arriví presents a historical context of an exploitative racial relationship. It also highlights the violence and trauma of mixed-race Puerto Ricans and offers a therapeutic solution to racial shame. Arriví vilifies the mulatto obsession with racial differentiation by assigning it a monstrous form, the *vejigante*, the devilish mask that hides the racism of the outsider just as it masks the shame of the mulatto.¹ I propose that such a setup, though it makes use of a

stereotypical notion of racial difference and oversimplifies a deeply complex racial scenario, adopts a paradoxical view of race, gender and nationalism. I will offer a new reading of the drama's opening act to bring to light the means by which Arriví's *mulata* matriarch (Toña) employs a gamut of eroticizing tools in a dance performance for a host of onlookers, chief among them a Spaniard (Benedicto), in a paradoxical self-focalization that incites a violent sexual union. This study does not intend to justify Toña's rape or to undermine the stigma that event brands upon its mulatto protagonists; to be sure, Arriví plants the brutal rape as a catalyst for generations of racial shame and familial conflict in Toña's offspring. Rather, I will point to the language in the stage directions and dialogue that highlights the precision with which the matriarch calculates her erotic performance. In clarifying the events leading up to the forced sexual act, I hope to show how Toña's seemingly inconsistent conduct can be read as an exploration into Puerto Rico's deeply-rooted mulatto complex.

Vejigantes showcases one mulatto lineage over three generations. The three protagonists – Toña, Marta (Toña's daughter), and Clarita (Toña's granddaughter) – exemplify a successive *adelantamiento*, or whitening, that results in an eventual acceptance of that tradition. Although the progeny's assimilation attempts to promote a detachment indicative of both a physical and cultural whitening process, their eventual acknowledgement evokes a buried aspiration to come to grips with and celebrate their heritage. The genealogical model offers the dramatist a means to demonstrate the violent history of racial encounters between whites and blacks, all the while emphasizing that destroying the masks that hide that violent past is a painstaking, lengthy process. If the family's situation is construed as a microcosm of the national mulatto experience, the transformation highlights a multi-generational course of racial angst that resolves in a nation that is forced to continually revisit its cultural past. José Luis Martín stresses the importance of the multi-generational cast as a telling indicator of the racial scenario Arriví brings to his audience: "en *Vejigantes* se necesitaron tres generaciones de puertorriqueños para poder enorgullecerse de ser mestizo" (44). Indeed, *Vejigantes* presents various snapshots, over some fifty years, of a larger progression of racial reconciliation.

The three acts reveal different moments of internalized racial dissension: the first (set in 1910) exhibits the underlying grounds for the drama's conflict in the festival at Loíza Aldea; the second (set in 1958) turns to the repercussions of racial mixing, which are settled for each character

at the conclusion of Act Three (also set in 1958). The drama's conclusion presents, for each of the characters, a resolution of the racial problematic when, as Neglia states, "las mujeres deciden abrir su alma; llegan así a la raíz de sus angustias y aceptan la realidad racial puertorriqueña" (160). Upon comprehending the Puerto Rican "racial reality," the mulatto women set aside racial dissention and embrace a message of national healing.

In an exhibition of rhythmic dance, the adolescent Toña opens *Vejigantes* with a sensual *bomba* that draws her white admirer, Benedicto, into an erotic exchange. Toña is the leading actor in the dance sequence and maintains control until the pursuer rapes her. Arriví's stage direction makes clear that, before the violation, Toña manipulates Benedicto in a playful cat and mouse game; it is only when she loses control over the scenario that the script and notes announce the encroaching incident. The course of events surrounding Toña's actions is paradoxical in that her celebratory song, chant and dance beget shame in her daughters and usher in a whitening that allots the mulatto progeny social, economic and geographic mobility. Though *adelantamiento* grants status in the Puerto Rican racial hierarchy, daughter and granddaughter are deeply ashamed of their heritage: Marta wears a turban to cover her African hair; Clarita hides her race from her racist lover (who believes she is white); the two hide Toña's race by keeping her locked in the house; the household does not play its music loudly; Marta even goes so far as to name her daughter into whiteness (Clarita).

The script specifies that Toña employs a gamut of self-focalizations that invites Benedicto into an erotic game. Toña goes to great length to convey eroticism before the scenario turns violent: as we will see, numerous scene notes and dialogues point to her enjoyment and laughter, to an eloquent manipulation of her white assailant, and even to blatant sexual desire for Benedicto. Aggor posits that the "single most catalytic force in the destruction of the black woman, what leads to the crisis in the mulatto, is her sexual exploitation by the white man; the rape of Toña is the strongest example" (504). This cannot be disputed. Toña's "sexual exploitation" unquestionably engenders *Vejigantes'* crises. In acknowledging "destruction" and its resultant effects on the characters, the critic posits an accurate conclusion. However, Aggor's interpretation of Toña's dancing, what he later deems merely a "set up" for Benedicto, sidesteps some of Arriví's clearest textual stipulations: "Toña herself would be the last to equate her dancing with an invitation to sex. Beyond all the gaiety generated by the music, dancing, for her, serves as an essentially therapeutic function; it represents an escape from distress"

(504-05). Medina follows the same logic: “En el primer acto, Benedicto, un español, seduce a la negrola Toña, la mejor bailadora de bomba en todo el palmar. La obsesión sexual del español por Mamá Toña, en esta parte de la obra, constituye el fondo del primer acto” (22). While the critics peg Benedicto as the seducer, I will demonstrate how the text spells out Toña’s active seductress role.

Toña takes center stage from *Vejigantes*’ onset and immediately asserts herself as ritual master. Arriví’s stage direction specifies that, in her first entrance, Toña bursts onto the stage exuding a festive spirit. The sexually-charged language is obvious: “Toña, mulata oscura de cuerpo tenso y frescote como una palmera moza, irrumpe en el centro de la escena y ríe excitadamente mientras escruta los alrededores. Su rostro chispea gracia y salud animal. Viste jubón de avispa y falda voladiza hasta el tobillo. Cubre su cabeza con un pañuelo de colores” (9). It is important first to acknowledge how such a preliminary characterization is fundamentally racial: she is introduced as a “dark” *mulata*. Following the rudimentary racial descriptor, the script not only establishes her stardom, it also points to her cheerful disposition in that the *mulata* laughs “excitedly” (which in Spanish, “exitadamente,” could assume a sexual connotation) and her face “sparks gracefulness.” Arriví issues another key clarification upon noting that she scrutinizes, “escruta,” her surroundings. Her gratification is coupled with an immediate grasp of the festival milieu. Taking such a visual inventory offers her a significant manipulative advantage over her dancing counterpart. Toña’s dancing and chanting success rests upon astute observation; in becoming aware of her surroundings she maneuvers the ritual setting and solidifies her control within the Loíza dance sequence. We also see in this description that the costume specifications do not exude an overwhelmingly erotic edge, though Arriví does use the conventional garb to highlight a key device in Toña’s erotic repertoire: movement. That the costume is plain and covers her “hasta el tobillo” does not hinder her efforts at offering rhythmically pulsed, erotic movement. Even an act such as covering her head with the handkerchief attracts attention.² Motion thereby assumes an eroticizing function, and Toña repeatedly uses movement in her self-focalization: “Toña, en un crescendo de compulsiones rítmicas, se acerca al Vejigante y le recorta frente a frente insinuantes figuras de bomba. El Vejigante, alucinado por las incitaciones, bailotea dislocadamente” (12). Both the “rhythmic convulsions” and the approach to the assailant cement Toña’s push for control so much so that, responding to the erotic spectacle, Benedicto submits to the dancer’s prowess and joins her.

Stemming from her penchant for getting a visual hold on the setting, Toña manipulates Benedicto from the moment he traverses the scene garbed as a *vejigante*. Just as confident in her skill as she is aware of his position, Toña employs her self-focalization technique and presents an erotic dance spectacle, a display that invites Benedicto into a lengthy sequence of back-and-forth dances, shouts, dialogues and chases. The protagonist is presented throughout as the initiator, the inviter and the pursuer, as emphasized by later scene notes: “[Toña] mantiene los ojos fijos en el Vejigante [Benedicto], quien la incita a acercarse con un movimiento simultáneo de ambas manos enguantadas” (11). The sensual dancer has Benedicto in her sights and manipulates the scenario by way of a mulatto exoticism that continually prompts him to dance. Even if the text divulges that Benedicto “incites” Toña into the dance sequence, I read his initiative as subordination to Toña’s regimen of erotic contrivances. It is along these lines that Arriví structures the note’s syntax, including the non-essential language following the relative pronoun “quien,” to emphasize Toña’s intense visual fixation. Despite his apparent incitation in the exchange, Benedicto’s offer to dance is a willing submission to Toña’s gaze, her erotic self-representation, her poignant motion and her ritual savvy. If she is the initiator, he is the puppet.

Toña finds one final eroticizing tool in rhythmic moves and shouts. In large part a function of the festival environment itself, these attention-getters, some of which we have already sampled, accompany each of the aforementioned tactics as a constantly revitalizing erotic force. Toña feeds off of the larger rhythmic context of the Loíza festival and evokes her rhythmic sense as she upholds the other focalization tools. “Toña ojea de medio perfil al Vejigante [Benedicto] y comienza a marcar los golpes de bomba con la cabeza” (11). The primary act, which precedes the eye-catching rhythmic head banging, is visual. Toña maintains visual control over her subject and discerns his location relative to her position to streamline the performance. Such visual effort works in tandem with the spectacle’s rhythmic charge and thus allows the dancer’s eroticism to garner maximum effect.

It is not by chance that Arriví amplifies Toña’s rhythmic prowess with both the larger festival context. The scene notes instruct for a constant rhythmic pulse during the first act: “El coro de timbaleros canta incesantemente la misma estrofa: ‘Joyalito, ay Joyalito, Joyalito ay, Joyalito,’” a stipulation which accentuates each of Toña’s pursuits with a pulsating rhythmic undertone (9). The Loíza festival is Toña’s domain and her performance aligns with and feeds off of the rhythmic frame. Arriví’s scene notes correspondingly reveal

that while Benedicto flubs around, Toña handles the ritual with ease: “Toña se mueve con suprema gracia y agilidad entre las máscaras. El Vejigante la persigue tozudamente, a puro traspies, choque tras choques contra las ‘Locas,’ quienes simulan gestos de enojo y apoyan la actitud con rápidas conversaciones en falsete” (13). He does not belong, nor does he possess the skill exhibited by the dancing mulattoes. For Toña, on the other hand, Loíza is, quite literally, home territory. She moves around with “grace” and “agility” while Benedicto “stubbornly” pursues her and bumps into other dancers along the way. Toña’s mastery and conscious pursuit of Benedicto cast her as the active agent in the erotic exchange, and Arriví’s insistence on portraying Benedicto as the ethnic ‘unnatural’ corroborates the notion that what Toña demonstrates in mulatto prowess, Benedicto lacks in awareness. It is thus my estimation that Toña’s control as expressed through her active domination, when considered in a larger cultural context, speaks to Arriví’s clamor for mulattoes to actively confront Puerto Rican racial injustice. Projecting the black and white dynamic of the *Vejigantes* sequence onto national struggles likens Toña’s prideful evocation of her heritage to an expression of nation. Though the expression is met and toppled by a racially dissimilar oppressor, the union does not replace the African in Puerto Rico, it merely displaces, for a time, celebrations of Africanness while *adelantamiento* reigns. To Aggor’s mind, the rhythmic context that Toña dominates serves only to focus the audience on her, whose moves brand her as a “superstitious, hip-swaying high priestess of sensuality” (504). The critic posits that this “stereotypical image” eventually marks Toña as “a sexual object who is ever ready to satisfy her desires with the white man. Arriví employs that image, therefore, to ‘set up’ Benedicto in order to allow the plot to advance as designed, that is, to effect the rape incident, which in turn will lead to further complications” (504-05). That the dancing is “sexual” is undeniable. But where the critic justifies Toña’s behavior as an essential flaw of the dancer and as part of a larger, “stereotypical,” focalization of mulattoes, I believe the script unequivocally points to Toña’s explicit, conscious, and delivered maneuvering of her assailant. Even if the rape does allow the plot to “advance as designed,” I propose that the character’s seemingly incongruous comportment exemplifies the Puerto Rican mulatto’s plight. In its insular racial crisis, Puerto Rico, like Toña, actively pursues the non-African outsider even though such pursuits are met with destruction, the likes of which persist for generations.

One particularly contradictory moment of the first act exemplifies the paradox facing Toña and Puerto Rican *mulatas* as a whole. What seems

at first to be an ancillary dialogue among two characters who observe Toña's exchange with Benedicto becomes a revealing exploration into the racial quandaries at work.

LOCA 1. No la alcanza.

LOCA 2. La alcanza.

LOCA 1. Se le pierde en el matorral.

LOCA 2. La alcanza.

LOCA 1. ¿Por qué tú crees que la alcanza?

LOCA 2. Porque Toña se dejará alcanzar.

LOCA 1. ¿Y por qué Toña se dejará alcanzar?

LOCA 2. Porque le gusta el gallego.

LOCA 1. ¡No me digas! Ha dicho que no le hace caso.

LOCA 2. Haciéndose y gustándole. ¿Me entiendes?

LOCA 1. Pues claro que te entiendo, mascarita. Haciéndose y gustándole.

LOCA 2. Van días que ese gallego arde por Toña....

LOCA 2. Estos españoles siempre nos llevan las prietas más guapas....

LOCA 1. ¿Y te apuras? Ya sabemos que las mulatas se desvelan por los blancos. (14-16)

It is not surprising that the bystanders' dialogue complies with the rhythmic requisites of the festival atmosphere. What is surprising, however, is the dialogue's revelation of some unanswerable questions (thus the paradox). The dialogue provides a fundamental background to the Toña-Benedicto exchange: the *locas* reveal that Benedicto has been interested in winning Toña's affection "for days," just as they reiterate Toña's physical attractiveness. More importantly, however, the witnesses of the erotic pursuit declare that, although Benedicto is clearly the active pursuer, Toña will "allow herself to be caught," a claim which the *locas* associate with the Spaniard's motivations of dominance. In a statement that exemplifies the very racial and/or cultural paradox to which Toña falls victim, the dialogue concludes with a telling signal of the mulatto paradox: "Ya sabemos que las mulatas se desvelan por los blancos" (16). The observers are precise in their blame of mulatto women in general, not just Toña, that "stay up all night" for their white pursuers. It goes without saying that the implications of such a statement are undeniably complex. The dialogued caption to the dance spectacle highlights Benedicto as Toña's active assailant, while the intercalated pieces of cultural commentary cast Toña as the agent of her own demise. Moreover, upon using the plural

subject (“las mulatas”) and verb (“se desvelan”) the *locas*’ dialogue points to a trend among mulatto women, who continually invite pursuit of the racially dissimilar cultural outsider, a move which engenders both a biological and cultural whitening in the next generation. That Toña does not respond to Benedicto’s advances prior to the festival scenario (“[Toña] Ha dicho que no le hace caso”) only obscures the intentions behind the active taunting of her pursuer; Arriví encapsulates the contradiction inherent to the Puerto Rican race question within his self-focalizing, self-accentuating, protagonist. The particulars of such contradictoriness are only heightened as the rape draws nearer.

Returning to the scene notes, we see that Toña’s later stage entrances also demonstrate enjoyment. After she reenters the stage pursued by Benedicto in the *vejigante* costume, “[Toña] Ríe con gusto y complacencia” (10). And again, “Toña se vuelve y su vista choca con el monstruo carnudo, quien ríe estentóreamente. La muchacha termina por reír también con toda su lozanía y joven animalidad” (11). At this point, Toña compounds her erotic game by making aggressive sexual advances toward Benedicto even as she continues her expressions of laughter, enjoyment and her visual fixation. Such actions become increasingly intriguing as we draw nearer to the rape scene, especially as they uphold the idea of the mulatto paradox that the rape engenders in Toña’s progeny. Benedicto’s inability to meld with the ritual persists, and begins to be understood as a growing source of frustration for the *gallego*. “El Vejigante intenta agarrar a la mulata en varias ocasiones sin conseguirlo. Opta por bailar en el centro de los danzantes y hacerse el desentendido. Toña se le acerca peligrosamente y lo banderillea” (14). Though Benedicto becomes more assertive in his snatching attempts, Toña still feels confident enough in her prowess to taunt him, a demeanor which the notes deem “dangerous.” Arriví has now set the stage for the inversion of Toña’s controlling edge. The character’s confidence and low estimation of Benedicto’s steeping violence eventually incites the overturn: “En un descuido de la mulata, quien se confía demasiado, febril ya por el empujo del ritmo y la incontenible penetración de la noche, el Vejigante logra agarrarla. Forcejan. Toña se libra con un empujón que vuelca al Vejigante boca abajo” (14). Her own submission to the unstoppable rhythms and the “penetration of the night” has cost Toña the upper hand as she comes to understand the severity of and the possible consequences to Benedicto’s frustrated persistence. Again, it is hard to ignore the sexually-charged rhetoric – Toña is “feverish” in her pursuit; the night “penetrates” the scene; the rhythm “pulses.” Arriví inverts the dynamic after this exchange

and includes a crucial postscript to the violent encounter: even though Toña took the *vejigante* down, he vies for, and attains, visual dominance when he finally eyes Toña, who in turn flees: “[e]n una de las vueltas, [Benedicto] alcanza a ver a Toña, quien se aleja rápidamente” (14). Now, Benedicto sees while Toña flees – an inversion which thereby fates the rape.

After a rhythmic crescendo that mirrors sexual climax,³ the rape is revealed: “Toña aparece sentada en las arenas. Se apoya en su brazo izquierdo con dejadez. El pañuelo con que cubría sus duros moños, desgreñados ahora, se descuelga de un matojo. Su jubón y su falda revelan estrujamientos y violencias. Fija la vista en las arenas frente a sí” (17). As would be expected, the script reveals substantial changes after the rape. The rhythmic pulses that accompanied the opening scene have disappeared, and the stage is no longer a domain for Toña’s dancing. Rather, we see a ravaged, “expressionless” (19), and “hopeless” (20) victim silenced by her white violator who mechanically envisages the future and excuses his behavior: “He dicho que estas cosas tienen arreglo. Mañana hablaré con tu padre” (17); “Medio barrio ha nacido de amores como éste” (18). Toña’s marginalization is not vanquished until *Vejigantes*’ conclusion, when the protagonists can finally articulate their racial shame, formulate dynamic efforts to correct it and be proud of their heritage. The concluding scene notes reveal that the contemporary (1958) backdrop of the family house in their middle-class neighborhood dissipates and returns the characters to the beach in the festival sequence (the locus of the rape). Marta, arguably the most racially-obsessed character in the work, sheds the turban she used to cover her African-looking hair and cleans the whitening makeup from her body as she begins to dance to the same *bomba* which Toña danced in the first act. (During the second and third acts, Marta prohibited Toña from dancing because she did not want the neighbors to hear music typically associated with mulattoes.) A troupe of *vejigantes* enters. As Marta removes her whitening tools, the *vejigantes* die. Marta’s embrace of her mulatto heritage slays the monstrous mask of racial shame: “A medida que Marta se desabrocha el turbante y lo desenrolla, los caballeros hunden las espadas en los vejigantes. Marta arroja el turbante en el suelo. Libre de negaciones, sacude su pelo crespo de mulata. Saca un pañuelo y comienza a limpiarse el blanquete de la cara. En ese instante, precisamente, muere el último vejigante” (126). Upon the culmination of a fifty-year process, conquering anti-mulatto sentiment that fomented in later generations, the three *mulatas* at last take action to embrace their racial makeup. Marta and Clarita are no longer branded by the stigmas of their ancestral past. They

celebrate just as Toña did, the shame having run its course. To drive this point home, Arriví concludes *Vejigantes* as it began, with dancing, and Toña rekindling mulatto pride by engaging in the very endeavor that heralded her rape. After the mulatto paradox has run its course, however, the characters are not bound by the constraints of the imposing ethnic stigma that thwarted mulatto expression and encumbered Puerto Rico from coming to grips with its racial past.

Arriví's recipe for racial healing is a stereotypical force that makes use of repeated, over emphasized, binary oppositions. Each of the women has a white, foreign love interest: Toña's rape results in Marta; Marta marries a nameless man who is only referred to as *el asturiano*; Clarita's love interest is Bill, a white supremacist from Alabama. The latter male is the most overtly racist. The confluence of identity constructs of race, gender, nation and class results in an essentialist treatment of Puerto Rican identity. That the only mulatto characters are female is in and of itself problematic. As Montes-Huidobro notes, Arriví's solution to Puerto Rican racial shame lies with the women: "In Puerto Rican drama, man is reduced to a passive role in history. Yet woman[...] plays an active role[...]. [In] *Vejigantes*, the solution to the racial problem is brought about by women" (110). The critic stresses the "active" role of women in this course of action, but the exclusion of men from this equation is equally notable. The only non-mulatto characters in the work are national outsiders and are thereby doubly demonized because of their race and their imperial interests in Puerto Rico. Arriví's overarching tactic for connecting race with nationalism is his selection of a festival backdrop: the Loíza festival during which the dance sequence takes place honors *Santiago Apóstol*. In his study of the Loíza festival, Harris states that Santiago is presented as "the supernatural leader of Christian troops against Moors and other dark-skinned enemies" (360). The critic also notes that Santiago is "the hero of White Spanish triumphalism" (360). To further the idea of racial and national outsider, Toña's pursuer is Galician. As if the Santiago/Galicia references were not clear enough, the script's continual reference to Marta's husband as a nameless *asturiano* is significant for many of the same reasons (Asturias was the birthplace of the Spanish re-conquest against the Moors, what Harris coins a "dark-skinned" enemy). To complete the over-emphasized scheme of contrast, Clarita's love interest (Bill) hails from a racist family in Alabama, which an elderly Toña notes is where they "lynch people of color" (41). Race in *Vejigantes* is therefore not only gendered, it is also projected onto a complex history of imperialist intervention in Puerto Rico. The

mulatto-native-female is idealized while the white-foreign-male is vilified. Such an artificial polarization of racial differentiation sidesteps the complex Puerto Rican racial reality. It seems that Arriví cannot resist incorporating questions of nation and gender into his model for racial healing. Although the resulting social message in his work leaves us with a work that wants for subtlety, *Vejigantes*, at the very least, voices a history of racial shame and posits a direct confrontation with those who are ashamed of the mulatto.

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Notes

¹ In his study on the Loiza festival, Ricardo E. Alegría describes the “devil effect” of the *vejigante*: “The traditional costume of the *vejigante* is a kind of jumper, the broad sleeves of which are connected with the body of the garment in such a way that when the wearer raises his arms a bat or devil effect is produced. The costume is made of a showy, brilliantly colored but cheap fabric which in some cases bears printed patterns. The characteristic feature of a *vejigante* is his mask, which is a grotesque horned face made of pasteboard, coconut, gourd, or tine plate. The coconut masks are the most popular” (130). Harris adds that the coconut suggests an “ethnic caricature, exaggerating and thereby mocking the traditional white colonist’s association of dark skin and the demonic” (362). He concludes that “the costumes, in one way or another, represented non-European or demonic beings” (363).

² This action is an immediate racial ‘marker’ for the audience, who observes that the *timbaleros* who drum throughout the entire first act, before performing, tie colorful handkerchiefs over their hair (11).

³ “El canto y los golpes de bomba aumentan desde fuentes invisibles. Se sostienen unos segundos y, luego, receden a un término lejano” (17).

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