Julia Alvarez was born in New York. Shortly afterward, her family returned to the Dominican Republic, where they lived under the infamous Trujillo dictatorship. Alvarez's father became involved with the underground resistance, and eventually the family was forced to flee the country and return to the United States, an experience that led Alvarez to write the 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*. She has written many other novels, including *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), as well as essays, poetry, and children's literature. She earned her B.A. from Middlebury College and an M.A. in creative writing from Syracuse University. Alvarez has received numerous awards and honors, including the Latina Leader Award in Literature from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute in 2007. Her nonfiction book *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA*, from which the following selection is taken, was a 2007 finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award.

In *Once Upon a Quinceañera*, Alvarez follows the female coming-of-age tradition known among Hispanic communities as quinceañera (or *quince*, for short). Throughout the book, Alvarez spends time with Monica, who is preparing for her quinceañera, as well as other teen girls and their families. Through her journey with these girls and their families, Alvarez is able to explore the history and evolution of the quince tradition in the context of immigration, culture, class, and gender. In addition, Alvarez looks to the influences of religion, cultural tradition, and American consumerism for reasons this ritual is able to thrive throughout generations. Overall, while the book closely examines the motions and traditions of quince, Alvarez pushes readers and herself to interrogate cultural perceptions of gender, as well as rituals and rites of passage, and examine how these perceptions might be influenced when crossing cultural boundaries.

In the following selections, Alvarez touches on various aspects of the quinceañera. While some view the quince as the initiation of a young girl into a community of womanhood and culture of responsibility, Alvarez wonders if such arguments merely provide an illusion of female power within a traditionally patriarchal system. Though Alvarez is continually skeptical of the quince craze, she often finds herself caught up in the excitement. Moments such as these lead Alvarez to a new stage of investigation in which she explores the social, familial, and economic implications of the quince tradition. Perhaps as Isabella, founder of bellaquinceanera.com, suggests, quinceañeras in the twenty-first century are an opportunity to offer young Latina women a sense of empowerment and individual importance. In order to do this, the tradition must be redefined in a way that reflects and embodies the values and desires of women today. Alvarez addresses the idea of whether and how this redefining might occur by leading readers and herself to consider the meaning of tradition and gender as they are practiced today. How can traditions be redefined in the spirit of these
changing values and desires? Is it possible to redefine traditions without losing the original ties to them? How is it possible for traditions to offer a means of crossing cultural and social boundaries? What role does gender play in the preservation of cultural traditions, and how might these traditions differ according to gender? In what ways has consumerism affected the importance of quinceañeras and other traditions?

TAGS: rites, culture, identity, tradition, race, gender

Questions for Critical Reading

1. In this text, Alvarez introduces the term retroculturation. Before reading the essay, what would you have thought this term might mean? Reread Alvarez’s text to locate passages that define the term. Can you think of additional examples? Do these examples support Alvarez’s argument?

2. What do you think is the importance (if any) of coming-of-age rituals like the quince? As you read Alvarez’s text, search for passages that reveal the author’s stance on this issue.

3. What is the value of tradition? Find quotations from Alvarez that support your position. Are the economic costs of traditions like quinces worth their cultural value?

Selections from
Once Upon a Quinceañera

Every Girl Should Have One

I wish I’d had Isabella Martinez Wall to call up and talk to back when I was a young teen in need of rescue and an infusion of self-esteem.

Based in Los Angeles, Isabella is the founder of a one-stop quinceañera Web site cum advice column, bellaquinceanera.com. She’s also an actress, a former Miss Dominican Republic, a successful fashion model, and founder of Someone Cares International, a nonprofit that is described on her Web site as “benefiting needy children” in her native country. Speaking by phone with this passionate and inspirational woman, I feel the same unsettling mixture of amazement, caution, and yearning that I feel toward televangelists. Can somebody really believe this? And if so, why can’t I?

I learned about Isabella from a Dominican contact at Disney World, whom I had called to find out more about the Disney quince package. She described Isabella as an “awesome, full-bodied Latina” who is doing amazing things for young Hispanic girls. According to my contact, Isabella had actually found that young girls who had quinceañeras didn’t drop out of school, didn’t get pregnant, didn’t get in trouble.

“Really? I mean, statistically?” I shot back. Here you go, I thought, peppering these kids with questions. But a quinceañera panacea seemed too good to be true. I’d just barely surmounted my skepticism, which was also retrocultural.

“I don’t know,” she said. Ah, my personal televangelist!

And what our hearts yearn for, these young women are being taught to be costly or they will be denied the benefits of being a quinceañera. A vigilante group of Isabella’s followers has started a campaign to prevent uneducated, unexposed, unaimed young women from missing the quinceañera ceremony.

When I read these statistics, I thought, you’re the beautiful one who actually turn girls’ lives around. And then I was thinking maybe if I’d asked about those statistics in the right way, they would have been more effective. In my case, I was too academic about my questions.

“What I mean is,” Isabella went on, “you can’t really believe these things unless you’ve done it yourself. And I offer free advice. I just want to make sure girls have the chance to have a quinceañera. And I want young girls to know that I’m not alone.”

They write me letters. They say, ‘Can I have a crown-can I have a dress-can I have a ring?’ I mean, no rules. The only rule is that there be something different. I try to educate girls about creating a ceremony that is their own.

It’s funny how I can get my inspiration from someone like Isabella. I had guessed that a fence sitting would require you to be a crown-carrier. I mean, what? Can I have a mini wedding myself?

“I have seen what the quinceañera has done. When I was 15, I was going up in the Dominican Republic. I had some issues and identity problems. When I turned 15, my Quinceañeras kept me on track. It tells you that you have a quinceañera. If you don’t want one, you might not be rich enough.”

* A study published in 2002 that documented the effects of quinceañeras by young Latinas.
just barely surfaced from *The State of Hispanic Girls* with a sense of dread in my heart, which was also making me want to grab for a cure.

“I don’t know,” my contact said. “Talk to Isabella, she’ll tell you.”

Ah, my people, I thought. Statistics are for the gringos. We trust testimonials, what our hearts and telenovelas tell us. I had just attended a lecture by Dr. James Martin titled “The Meaning of the 21st Century.” Solutions to world problems didn’t have to be costly or complex, the information technology guru explained. In Mexico, a vanguard group of TV producers who understood the dangers of population explosion had started a campaign to bring down the birthrate by introducing female leads who practiced birth control into popular telenovelas. Initial results showed the campaign was working. Better than pamphlets or science classes or lectures like Dr. Martin’s.

When I reached Isabella, after the initial honorifics, “So you’re the author!” “So you’re the beauty queen!” I asked her about this claim I’d heard that quinceañeras really turn girls around. Not that I wanted an analysis or anything academic, I added, thinking maybe I was sounding too much like a doubting-Thomas gringa. But with all those statistics still heavy in my heart, I wanted to hear why she thought quinceañeras were so effective. “Well, let me tell you.” Isabella laughed right out. “There’s nothing academic about a quinceañera!

“What I mean is there’s no textbook about how you have to do a quinceañera,” Isabella went on to explain. She hears from a lot of young ladies on her Web site, where she offers free advice, a kind of Ann Landers to Latina girls.

“They write me, and they ask, can I wear a short dress? Does it have to be white? Can I have a court with only my best friend and my sister? I tell them, listen, there are no rules. The most important thing is to make this celebration yours, totally yours. I try to educate them, I talk to them, the site is highly interactive. Quinceañeras are about creating strong women. Our girls need all the help we can give them.”

It’s funny how you are sure you are going to end up on the other side of an opinion from someone, and it turns out you’re in each other’s court. Never would I have guessed that a former beauty queen promoting a princessy fantasy would turn out to be a crown-carrying feminist. But how on earth can this quasi beauty pageant cum mini wedding make an Amazon out of a Stardust girl?

“I have seen it happen!” In fact, it happened to Isabella herself. As a teenager growing up in the Dominican Republic, she hit a wall. “I was smoking, drinking, I had body issues and identity problems.” I’m dying to ask her to be specific, but she is on a roll. “When I turned fifteen, everybody started having quinceañeras. I mean everybody. Quinceañeras know no social or class boundaries. You might not have the money but you have a quinceañera for your daughter. The family is making that statement. We might not be rich but we value our daughter.”

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*A study published by the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations in 1999 that documented the high rates of teen pregnancy, substance abuse, school dropouts, and suicide attempts by young Latinas.*
Isabella's quinceañera turned her around. “It made me feel so special.” In fact, she credits it with leading her down the path to being crowned Miss Dominican Republic. “I’ve been there,” Isabella says. “I had that moment. But how many women in the world get to feel like a queen? How many?”

Not this skinny, undersized Latina for sure, I have to agree.

“Well, that’s the first reason to have a quinceañera,” Isabella says. “To have that experience and not because you’re marrying someone.”

The second reason comes from her own experience. “Being fifteen, let’s face it, it’s a tough age. Your body is all over the map. You wonder who you are. Who your friends are. Where you’re going. You can get lost for sure. What better time in your life to have your family, friends, community come together and create a support system for you for the rest of your life?”

Isn’t that asking an awful lot of a quinceañera?

But Isabella dismisses my skepticism. “About two years ago, I realized that I had a mission: to promote this important ritual. And yes, I’ve seen it turn girls around. I don’t have statistics, this is not academic, like I said, but girls who have quinces, think about it, they’re spending a lot of time with their moms, shopping, talking about life. Their friends are coming over to do rehearsals. I mean, a room full of fifteen-year-olds learning dance steps right under your nose. Parents are always complaining they don’t know what to do when their daughters hit puberty. Hello?! Here’s something to do. Give her a wishing well.

“Of course, we’ve got to take the quinceañera a step forward,” Isabella adds. Before, the whole quinceañera thing was about a girl being of marriageable age, goods to be displayed. But now we can invest this old tradition with new meaning.

“We can create a support platform for that young lady that she can have to look back upon for the rest of her life. That moment when she stands dressed like a queen with her mom beside her looking in the mirror, for that moment, if only that moment, she knows she is all right just as she is. She is the queen of her life if she can hold on to that feeling.”

In fact, Isabella thinks quinces are so special, the tradition should come out of its ethnic closet and become an American phenomenon. “I don’t care what class or group you come from,” Isabella claims. “Every girl should have one.”

When I hang up I feel that uplifted feeling that must be why folks pick up the phone after watching a TV evangelist and put a donation on their charge card.

One-(Very Small)-Size-Fits-All Script

My first year at Abbot* did for me what Isabella Martínez Wall’s year of going to quinceañeras and having her own quinceañera did for her. It gave me a new community to belong to, a narrative I could follow into adulthood. Instead of a family and community rallying around the quinceañera’s transformation into a woman, planning and preparing sometimes for a year for that symbolic pageant marking her passage, I had a community of classmates and female teachers and coaches and housemothers honing my skills, encouraging me to call what I would call “queen of” something.

Incidentally, I was one of the few at a school where we knew that someone’s whose parents lived in another country (my parents lived in Venezuela), I did not have a cake in the dorm, an under 21 birthday party, a zillion dollars. My older sister had made me shave my legs and we were wearing our hair short.

But although some of the things I did as a first Abbot year were non-traditional (to me), I found my way into womanhood—this woman who girls were encouraged to become (not our gender. In fact, the school prides itself in teaching girls that they can do anything). But it was assumed we were still trying to figure it out. Only one, my roommate and resident advisor (instead.) And since my parents lived in another country, the woman I found my way in the world, the woman I found my way to become, is independent women.

This new narrative of womanhood among my American classmates lends itself to the idea of our school songs being approved of young women discovering their own narratives.

In contrast, the tradition of what Isabella calls it, a one-(very small)-size-fits-all script, Latina is dressed up in a one-(very small)-size-fits-all dress, claiming that first womanhood—coming of age, finally she ends up in a rehearsal wedding dress and it sends a clear message: We expect you, our children, to there you, to be a woman. No wonder that girl soon after celebrating her quinceañera, Jaider Sánchez, a hair stylist, in a recent interview, said she already invited him to be her hair stylist at her own wedding.

And so, although this new narrative of the celebration of her young womanhood is breaking an old paradigm of the Latina woman as market. In a fascinating way, this new narrative of womanhood, amplifies Arlene Zehler’s Women’s Initiations, Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, and Nancy Foner’s One (Very Small)-Size-Fits-All letters to the editor.

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* Abbot Academy: A private boarding school for girls in Massachusetts. [Ed.]
my skills, encouraging my talents, preparing me for being what Isabella Martínez Wall would call "queen of my own life."

Incidentally, I was also turning from fourteen to fifteen, and, needless to say, away at a school where we were the only Latinas (the closest thing to us was a German girl whose parents lived in Guatemala and an American girl whose father was posted in Venezuela), I did not have a quinceañera. Nor was much made of my fifteenth birthday: a cake in the dorm, a phone call from my parents, a card with a check for twenty-five dollars. My older sister had already gotten my mother’s ring, and away at school I could shave my legs and wear makeup without asking anyone for permission.

But although some psychological elements of the American quinceañera and my first Abbot year were the same—a community grooming a young lady for her entry into womanhood—the content of that grooming was significantly different. We Abbot girls were encouraged to develop our minds, not leave our brains parked at the door of our gender. In fact, the plaque at the front gate encouraged us to enter into understanding, so you may go forth to nobler living. Nobler living! True, many of my Abbot classmates would eventually marry and have children (this was, after all, the mid-sixties), but it was assumed we would all go to college first. (Out of a class of seventy-eight girls, only one, my roommate, did not go to college, but married her longtime boyfriend instead.) And since many of our teachers were unmarried women, making their own way in the world, the subliminal message was clear: We were to be smart, resourceful, independent women.

This new narrative of female possibility was groundbreaking and bracing even for my American classmates. "Although Columbus and Cabot never heard of Abbot," one of our school songs began. A good thing, too. Those old-world explorers would not have approved of young women taking over the helm of their journey through life and discovering their own new worlds.

In contrast, the typical quinceañera enacts a traditional narrative that is, let's face it, a one-(very small)-size-fits-all script corseting a full-bodied female life. The young Latina is dressed up in finery not unlike a bride, her father is changing her shoes, claiming that first waltz, then passing her on to a brother or uncle or grandfather, until finally she ends up in the arms of her escort to a round of applause. The quinceañera is like a rehearsal wedding without a groom, and it sends a clear message to the Latina girl: We expect you to get married, have children, devote yourself to your family. It's no wonder that girls end up getting pregnant soon after celebrating their quinces.

Jaider Sánchez, a hairdresser and dance coach for quinceañeras in Denver, mentioned in a recent interview that out of seven quinceañeras he instructed in 2005, four have already invited him to their baby showers.

And so, although it gives her a momentary illusion of power (the princess rhetoric, the celebration of her sexual power, her youth, her beauty), in fact, the ritual enacts an old paradigm of the patriarchy increasingly (in the U.S.A.) pumped up by a greedy market. In a fascinating book titled Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiations, Bruce Lincoln, who teaches at the University of Chicago Divinity School, amplifies Arnold van Gennep's classic theory about rites of passage as they...
apply to females. According to van Gennep, who coined the term, rites of passage are ceremonies within cultures that enable an individual to pass from one well-defined role to another. Male initiation rites of passage involve the stripping, testing, and reintegration of the young man into the sociopolitical adult society.

But what Bruce Lincoln found was that female initiations follow a different pattern: The girl is decked in ceremonial finery, often layer on layer is piled on her, a magnification that confers on her cosmic status and participation in a mythic drama. “Rituals of women’s initiation claim to transform a girl into a woman, [they] claim to renew society by providing it with a new productive member.” During the ceremonies, the initiant is “regarded as having become a deity, a culture heroine, the link between past and future.” So far so good, but Bruce Lincoln goes on to suggest that this mythic power is a substitution for actual power, a pie in the sky versus options and opportunities in the here and now:

The strategy of women’s initiation is to lead a woman’s life . . . away from the sociopolitical arena, introducing her to the real or imagined splendors of the cosmos instead. To put it in different terms, women’s initiation offers a religious compensation for a sociopolitical deprivation. Or to put it differently still, it is an opiate for an oppressed class . . .

Cosmic claims notwithstanding, the desired result of the ritual is to make a girl ready and willing to assume the traditional place of a woman as defined within a given culture . . . . The strategy is that of placing women on a pedestal, carried to its outermost possibilities: speak of her as a goddess to make of her a drudge.

Although the young quinceañera is being crowned queen, the ritual doesn’t change anything. It merely casts its net of glittering meaning over what might be a dismal situation: “It is rare that a ritual can alter the basic ways in which a society is organized,” Bruce Lincoln concludes. “Nor do rituals shape the way in which people live as much as they shape the way people understand the lives they would lead in any event.”

Even if she is at the bottom of the American heap, if the young Latina girl can believe the fantasy — that her condition is temporary, that she is a Cinderella waiting for that fairy godmother or husband to endow her with their power — then she can bear the burden of her disadvantage. And as years go by, and the probability of her dream becoming true lessens, she can at least pass on the story to her daughter.

Maybe that is why I get tearful at quinceañeras. I’m watching the next generation be tamed into a narrative my generation fought so hard to change. Why I feel like a snake in the garden, because here I sit in their living rooms or in their rented halls, eating their catered food, celebrating with la familia, and I am thinking, Why spend all this money enacting a fantasy that the hard numbers out there say is not going to come true?

Quinceañera Expo

At the Quinceañera Expo in the Airport Convention Center in San Antonio, little girls are walking around with tiaras in their hair, oohing and ahhing at the fancy dresses, the pink balloons, the wedding-cake-size cakes, the last dolls encased in plastic, the fluffy pillows waiting to be taken to the altar to be kissed by a couple of local pop sensations. Stallholders jostle for free hand. “Cra-

At a cordoned-off booth, a local pop sensation, her arm around a crewed her stroller toward her mom. I feel as if I’ve been left out in the cold, the little toddler in my view, without shutting eyes of a quince,” she t in my view, without shutting eyes of a quince,” she t

There isn’t a booth or working person in sight.

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Selections from *Once Upon a Quinceanera*

iltuffy pillows with straps for securing the heels in case the page trips as he bears them to the altar to be blessed by the priest.

At a cordoned-off area at the rear of the hall, Victoria Acosta, a fourteen-year-old local pop sensation, is singing into a microphone as she dances and gestures with her free hand. “Crazy, crazy, crazy, I think the world’s gone crazy!” Her next song, “Once Upon a Time,” is dedicated to “all of you out there who have had your hearts broken.” “All of you out there” is a semicircle of pudgy preteens sitting on the floor, mesmerized by the slender, glamorous Victoria with her long mascara’d lashes, her glittery eye shadow, her slinky black outfit and sparkly silver tie. “You bet I’m going to have a quince,” she tells me during a break between songs, although I don’t see why. She seems to have already made her passage into womanhood quite successfully.

There isn’t a male shopper in sight. In fact, the only men around are manning booths or working the floor:

- A couple of boy models, one in a white tuxedo with a pale pink vest, the other in a white suit with a yellow vest;
- A grown man in a military uniform, a popular escort outfit with some girls, he tells me;
- A DJ in a cowboy hat who plays loud music while his sidekick, a skinny boy, hands out flyers;
- Seve, the clown (who come to think of it might be female under all that face paint and bulbous, attached nose);
- Dale of Awesome Ice Designs (for $350 you can have the “Fire & Ice Sculpture” with the quinceañera’s picture embedded in a central medallion of ice);
- Ronny of VIP Chocolate Fountains, whose wife, Joanne, does most of the talking. (Did you know that you can run chili con queso through the fountains for a Mexican theme at your daughter’s quinceañera? The young people still prefer chocolate, as you can imagine);
- And Tony Guerrero, the owner of Balloons Over San Antonio (“We Blow for u”).

Add the two photographers at Tilde (Photography, Invitations, Videography), Mr. Acosta (Victoria’s manager-dad), the guy with a Starbucks urn strapped to his back, and Manuel Villamil at the Primerica Financial Services booth—and that makes for just over a dozen men in a crowd of about three hundred women of all ages here to shop for some member of their family’s quinceañera. The hall is so girl-packed that the discreetly curtained BABY CHANGING/NURSING booth seems extraneous. You could breast-feed your baby out in the open and still be within the strict bounds of modesty, like peeing without shutting your stall door in the ladies’ room because everyone inside except the little toddler in Mommy’s arms is female.

I feel as if I’ve wandered into the back room where the femaleness of the next generation of Latinas is being manufactured, displayed, and sold. A throwback vision, to be sure. Lots of pink-lacey-princessy-glittery-glitzzy stuff. One little girl wheels a large última muñeca around while her mother follows, carting the baby sister, who has ceded her stroller to a doll bigger than she is. “How beautiful!” I bend down to admire the little girl’s proud cargo. “Is that for your quince?” The little girl looks pleadingly toward her mom. “It’s her cousin’s,” the mom says, gesturing with her head toward a chunky teenager carting a large shopping bag and lolling at Joanne and Ronny’s
booth, scooping her toothpick of cake into the chocolate fountain. The little girl looks forlorn. "I'm sure you'll have a last doll, too, when you have your quince," I console her. She gives me a weak smile in return. Why on earth am I encouraging her?

Crazy, crazy, crazy. I think the world's gone crazy.

It's not that. It's that after an hour roaming up and down the aisles, I fall in with the spirit of the expo. There is a contagious, evangelical air to the whole thing that sweeps you up and makes you want to be part of the almost religious fervor that surrounds this celebration. I half expect to find Isabella Martínez Wall here, addressing a crowd of wide-eyed teens.

In fact, my guide, Priscilla Mora, reminds me of Isabella. Both women share a crusading enthusiasm for a tradition they believe is one of the best things going for Latina womanhood. Plump and pretty with the sunny face of someone perennially in a good mood, Priscilla has organized six of these expos, and even though some have not been as well attended as she would have liked, her faith is undimmed. When not organizing these expos, she is a quinceañera planner, an author of the Quinceañera Guide and Handbook, and most of all a passionate promoter of the tradition. She actually thought up this business at a workshop where participants had to write down their dreams on little pieces of paper. Then they all put their pieces of paper in a fire and let their dreams go up to God. This isn't just a business, Priscilla explains, it's a calling, part of God's plan for her.

It's from Priscilla that I first hear that when the quinceañera makes her vow in the church, "it's about chastity. You're promising God that you're not going to have sex till you're back at the altar, getting married. That's why it's important that these girls learn all about the meaning," Priscilla insists. Otherwise, the quinceañera "is nothing but a party."

Priscilla's missionary zeal seems to be shared by many of the providers, who tell inspirational stories of why they got involved in quinces. Take Tony Guerrero of Balloons Over San Antonio. Tony grew up real poor in a family of four boys and four girls. ("Are you kidding?" he replies when I ask if the girls had quinceañeras.) A few years ago, Tony gave up his office job to do this because "I just wanted the opportunity to give back something to my community." He loves seeing people having fun, being happy, and hey, if nothing else, "I got myself another entry once I go over to the other side." "Another" because he already has a great-aunt over there. "She promised me she was going to have a spot waiting for me." Ruby of Great Expectations (a photography studio) thinks it's "a privilege" to share this special day with a girl. "I love the idea of dedicating your life to the Lord." (Echoes of Priscilla.) Curiously, the nuns' booth next to Ruby's is empty. "They told me they were coming." Priscilla looks momentarily nonplussed. But her sunny personality bounces back. "Maybe they'll be by later after Mass." This is Sunday, after all. The sisters, it turns out, are the Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence, the first and only religious order of Mexican American women founded in the United States. Their focus on the quinceañera is part of their larger mission as "evangelizadoras del barrio and transmitters of a rich Mexican American faith to the universal Church."

The only heavy hitter at the expo is Sunita Trevino, who was born in Bombay but is married to a Hispanic. At her seminar on financing a quinceañera, Sunita gives us the opposite of the financial advice that has me sitting on a raised platform:

Sunita works as a psychologist, which means, "I'll tell you," she says in the only area of her speech I catch, the high-stress time of Sunita's clients. They overspend, pay off second mortgages, get into bankruptcy.

"Nobody sits down and says, 'I want to have a party.' Nobody sits down and says, 'I want to see this in my life as a quinceañera.'"

Her recommendation: break down your costs. Take it one month at a time. If you spend the two thousands dollars that Sunita recommends for a quinceañera in one lump sum, you could end up paying twenty-five percent in interest on a second mortgage. Rainy day fund? It's for your car, not your quinceañera. For Sunita, the quinceañera is a business. For others, it's a calling. For Ruby, it's a privilege. For Tony, it's a way to give back. And for Priscilla, it's a calling. And for me, it's a trip.

The girl sits back. Her tiara glints as she laughs. Nobody laughs, Nobody laughs, Nobody laughs. Nobody laughs, Nobody laughs. The girl is now bagging a place in the church for the quinceañera. She sits back. She smiles. Her party mood, not to mention, is what she wants to see in her. If you end up wishing we hadn't come to the quinceañeras,
the opposite of the hard sell: the watch-your-financial-back-as-a-minority-woman talk that has me sitting at the edge of my chair. As she talks, Sunita paces up and down the raised platform stage like a lion trapped in a too-small cage.

Sunita works for Primerica Financial Services, but her training is in clinical psychology, which she ends up using a lot as she counsels families about their finances. "I'll tell you," she tells the audience of about a dozen, mostly grandmothers, as this is the only area of the whole hall where there are chairs to sit down, "quinceañeras are high-stress times." A lot of couples come to see her for extra sessions. But the majority of Sunita's clients are single women who are in financial trouble. They don't budget. They overspend. They get into debt. She knows women in their seventies still paying off second mortgages they took out for their daughter's quinceañera. She finds this devastating.

"Nobody sits down to talk to us women! We are playing a money game but no one taught us the rules!" Sunita's own mother came from Bombay to America, thinking her husband would always be there to take care of her, and then her parents separated, and her mother was lost. She had no idea how to take care of herself. Sunita doesn't want to see this happen to any woman. We women are sinking into a hole of debt and the quinceañera is often where we get in over our heads.

Her recommendation to all of us sitting in the audience: pay cash. "If you budget eighteen hundred dollars for flowers, and what you pick amounts to double that, don't do it. DON'T DO IT! Stay within your budget. A lot of women get in trouble at the last minute. They think, oh, I'll go ahead, just this once."

If you end up borrowing money, "please," Sunita pleads with us, "read the terms, read them carefully. What the big print giveth, the small print taketh away. Educate yourselves! Don't think banks and savings accounts are there to do you a favor. Okay, let's see, who can tell me what banks do with your money?" she asks.

None of us grown women in the audience would dare hazard a guess. But a young girl about eleven years old raises her hand and says proudly, "They save it for you." Sunita shakes her head fondly. "Out of the mouths of babes." She sighs. Nobody laughs. Nobody seems to get the biblical reference that Sunita is misusing anyway. Out of the mouths of babes usually the truth comes. But this young girl is headed for that sinkhole of debt unless Sunita can steer her away from the dangers of borrowing. "No, honey, that's not what they do. They use your money to make money."

The girl sits back in her chair, a chastened, embarrassed expression on her face. Her tiara glints as Sunita explains to her that what she just said is what most people think. But that's why Sunita is here today. To tell us the truth no one else is going to tell us. To get us thinking about these things. "Two hundred fifty families declare bankruptcy every hour of every day in the U.S.A. I know a seventy-nine-year-old retired guy who is now bagging groceries. People don't plan to fail," Sunita explains. "They fail to plan. So, get mad. Get mad and learn the rules."

The girl squirms in her chair, as do the rest of us. After all, we came here in a party mood, not to feel that at the end of our adult lives we will end up as bag ladies, wishing we hadn't started down the road of debt with our own or our daughters' quinceañeras.
Throwing the House Out the Window

So, how much does a quinceañera cost? You ask any of the party planners and they’ll tell you the same thing— anywhere from a hundred bucks for a cookout in the backyard and a stereo booming music for the young lady and her friends to fifty grand and up in a hall with a party planner, a limo, dinner for a hundred or more.

Everyone talks about this range, but after interviewing dozens of quinceañeras and talking to as many party planners, events providers, choreographers, caterers, I have to conclude that the cookout quinceañeras are becoming the exception. In the past, perhaps they were the rule. In the old countries, of course. In small homogenous pockets—a border town in Texas, a barrio composed solely of Central Americans; in other words, a group still largely out of the mainstream loop, perhaps. But now, as one quinceañera remarked. “If I had to be that cheap I just wouldn’t have one. What for?” It is in the nature of the beast to be a splurge, an extravaganza. More than one person describing a recent quinceañera used the Spanish expression for an over-the-top expense: throwing the house out the window. They threw the house out the window for that girl’s quinceañera.

They threw the house out the window. In a country where the rate of poverty is growing (12.7 percent of U.S. citizens were living below the poverty line in 2004, up from 11.3 percent in 2000), with Latinos forming a sizeable portion of those impoverished numbers (21.9 percent of the Hispanic population was living below the poverty line in 2004 according to a U.S. census survey). Sunita, it turns out, was not exaggerating.

They threw the house they probably didn’t own out the window.

Monica’s quinceañera was actually quite modest if her estimate of “maybe three thousand dollars” is correct. Why don’t I have an exact number? Let me just come right out and say that talking to my people about money is not easy. Maybe if I were an Americana reporter with a stenographic notebook and only a sprinkling of classroom Spanish, I could get away with asking the parents how much they paid for the party. But I’m a Latina. I know the rules. They know I know the rules. To ask my host for the price tag of the fiesta would be una falta de vergüenza. And so, I learned any number of discreet ways to approach the topic. Aproximadamente, how much does a quinceañera cost in your experience? If someone were to throw a party not unlike this one, how much would that quinceañera cost them?

The one person I could openly ask this question turned out to be the quinceañera herself. But though fifteen-year-old girls are really good at knowing how much their dress or makeup session cost, they’re not so good at knowing the charges for halls, or what it costs to have beef Wellington instead of Swedish meatballs for a hundred people, or what additional charge was made for the linen napkins and tablecloths or the chairs draped in white covers and tied with satin bows, which seem to be de rigueur for anything but the cheapest quinceañera. Fifteen-year-old girls like to throw out huge numbers to impress their friends, but they are not so good at addition—that is, if they paid $250 for a dress, and $250 for the limo, and the hall with a catered meal was $2,500 for one hundred people, not counting the cake made up of four cakes, which was no less than $250 for the beauty parlor, and a travel cost, another figure of $3,000 that had to be calculated.

And her father was not one to live it up, give your little girl a good time. He simply live it up, give your little girl whatever she had, tonight’s good time.

When Abuelita Left

Will Cain is president of the national quinceañeras, which cost her a lot more than four hundred thousand dollars, every year. Early in 2004, they had spent or were going to spend more than $5,000.

I confess to Will that having quinceañeras and their parties is a huge delight. But there is also a list of more than five hundred families who don’t have a vehicle to transport the quinceañera (twenty-eight couples (and cousins) with special dates were driven to their fiestas in a limousine designed by Leonel Liria). What is Will’s reaction? “We know that’s the top end of the market,” he says. “But I’ve personally confessed that having a quinceañera is not for everyone. It’s not for all the food and goodies, or the additional charge for the linen napkins. It’s not for the deliciousness that is the top end of the market. It’s not for everything. It’s not for the travel costs, another figure of $3,000 that had to be calculated.

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was no less than $300, and let's throw in another $100 to $200 for sessions at the beauty parlor, and at least $300 for the photographer and pictures, and because things always come up at the last minute and Mami definitely needs a new dress herself and Papi will probably have to rent a tux and some family members will need help with travel costs, another $500 to $1,000 more—anyway, I've gone way over the low-end figure of $3,000 that Monica Ramos with uncharacteristic teenage understatement calculated.

And her father was not working.

They threw the rented apartment out the window. Why not? It's not theirs to keep anyhow, just as this American dream isn't as easy to achieve as it seems, so why not live it up, give your little girl a party she won't forget, enjoy the only thing you really have, tonight's good time, before the bills start rolling in.

When Abuelita Is No Longer a Resource

Will Cain is president and founder of Quince Girl, a new national magazine targeting the more than four hundred thousand Latinas in the United States who turn fifteen every year. Early in 2006, the magazine sent out a survey asking its readers how much they had spent or were planning to spend on their quinces. The resulting average was $5,000.

I confess to Will that I find that average low given the figures events planners and quinceañeras and their families have been quoting me. I'm thinking of Idalia's quinceañera, which cost her affluent Dominican family $80,000, not surprising given a guest list of more than five hundred and a fully choreographed performance by her court of twenty-eight couples (double the usual number so as not to leave out any friends or cousins) with special effects to rival a Broadway show and mermaid dresses for the girls designed by Leonel Lirio, renowned for Miss Universe Amelia Vega's gown. Granted that's the top end of the Q-scale, but the low end is rising. In Miami, Sofia's dad apologetically confessed that he was "only" spending about $12,000 on his daughter's quince, though his wife corrected him by appending, "Twelve thousand dollars not counting all the food and goodies we fed twenty-eight kids for three months of rehearsals."

"You have to remember that $5,000 takes into account the full spectrum," Will Cain reminds me about the Quince Girl average. "It includes the girl who is spending $25,000 with the one who might spend $1,000. The point is that even working-class folks who don't have a whole lot of purchasing power are going to devote a significant portion of their resources to this one tradition. It cuts across a wide range of strata."

Will himself did the numbers before he decided to launch his magazine. The Latino population is exploding, and it is mostly a young population. "I don't have to tell you about the demographics," Will tells me. "One out of every five teens is Hispanic. And that population is growing at the rate of 30 percent, while the non-Hispanic population rate is just 8 percent."

I'm trying to follow what Will is saying, but the question that keeps tugging at my curiosity is not about Hispanic demographics but about Will himself. Will Cain does not sound even close to a Hispanic name. How did "your run-of-the-mill white boy," as he describes himself when I ask him about his background, end up founding a magazine for young Latinas celebrating their quinceañeras?
Will, who is all of thirty-one—just over twice a quinceañera’s age—grew up in Texas surrounded by Mexican Americans and has always been interested in the Hispanic culture. He was also interested in media. So, he decided to put the two things together and came up with the idea of *Quince Girl*. Though it’s a shrewd economic decision, Will believes he’s also providing an important service for Hispanics in this country.

“The Hispanic community is this very fractured community,” he explains. “You have your Mexican Americans and your Puerto Ricans and your Cuban Americans. And the only thing that ties all these separate nationalities together—no, it’s not Spanish,” he says, anticipating what I might think, “in fact, many in the second and third generation don’t even speak Spanish. What ties them together, the one single tie that binds all these cultures . . .”

As he drumrolls toward his conclusion, I’m thinking that Will Cain learned something from growing up surrounded by a Hispanic community: a sense of drama.

“. . . is this tradition celebrated across the whole diverse group: the quinceañera. I mean, it is big! And the rest of America is starting to pay attention to it.”


As if he can hear my mind thinking, Will adds, “We would not be having this conversation right now if this were not so.”

What Will realized was that there was no magazine out there that these girls could consult about the tradition and trends and fashions. “Girls were in chat rooms asking each other about the ceremony, what to do. It used to be you could learn these things from your grandmother . . .” But with immigration and the amount of mobility in this country, la abuelita is not always a resource. Plus it’s a different world from the one she grew up in. A different budget. Five thousand dollars is probably more than the grandparents earned in a year back in their home countries.

Does he think the tradition is becoming more popular here?

“Well,” Will hesitates. He is rightly cautious about delivering opinions beyond what the numbers can tell him. “The quince tradition has always been important, but there’s this retroculturation going on right now —”

“Retroculturation?” This is the first I’ve heard of the term.

“It’s a pattern that’s been happening with the Hispanic community.” Will goes on to explain. “First generation comes to the United States, and they push to assimilate. They adopt the American culture and norms. Second generation, they want to be all-American. Many don’t even speak Spanish. They aren’t that familiar with the culture. By the third generation, they’re born and bred here, but they have this special something that makes them unique, their Hispanic culture. They want to learn Spanish — many, in fact, speak more Spanish than the second generation. They make a concerted effort to hold on to their traditions, to establish cultural ties with their past.”

Will quotes a study on Hispanic teens “just released today” by the Cheskin Group, an international consulting and marketing firm that has done a great deal of research on Hispanics. The study confirms Will’s point that the up-and-coming generation of Hispanic teens is “predominantly bilingual and bicultural,” celebrating its ethnic identity and combining it with mainstream teen culture. “They live on MySpace.com and shop at Abercrombie, but they listen to Spanish radio and embrace diversity,” a summary of the study reads. Most important for businesses that are considering purchasing the full quinceañera — is that Hispanic

a bellwether for

the United States—is theirs and they paid for.

The Difference

How did the quinceañera become so big? One thousand dollars is a fortune.

Kern’s Nectar, a guava, papaya, mango juice and sweepstakes: “Fifteen kids take home $15,000.”

Why didn’t Kern’s Nectar’s quinceañera take home $15,000? The announcement reads, “Amen.”

I decide to ask the principal of the high school.

A century and a half after Emily could never have spent on a girl’s coming-of-age ceremony, the empty-handed girl; after paging through a dozen girls’ introductions and photos in the yearbook, at first Aristotle or Plato, but now clutching a book, telling the truth, the whole truth, I find out that the principal of the high school.

A century and a half after Emily could never have had a family of Ecuadorian parents, or will be having quinceañeras as important, we were reminded to bring such a heavy weight and and Puerto Rican descent in a sweatshirt whom it’s such a heavy weight and

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A century and a half after Emily could never have had a family of Ecuadorian parents, or will be having quinceañeras as important, we were reminded to bring such a heavy weight and
purchasing the full report with its $5,850 price tag—the cost of your average quinceañera—is that Hispanic teens are

a bellwether for one of the most important trends shaping the future of the United States—the growth of the U.S. Hispanic population. Clearly, the future is theirs and they know it.

The future is ours and we know it. Meanwhile the present needs to be lived through and paid for.

The Difference between Boys and Girls

How did the quinceañera get to be so expensive? Even the Quince Girl average of five thousand dollars is a lot of money to blow on a birthday party.

Kern's Nectar, which has developed a niche market of "untraditional" juices (guava, papaya, mango) popular among Latinos, sponsors a yearly Dulce Quinceañera Sweepstakes: "Fifteen lucky Quinceañeras will be awarded $1,000 each plus a year's supply of Kern's Nectars; the grand prize winner selected at random from this group takes home $15,000."

Why did Kern's Nectar single out this one tradition? "Next to marriage, a quinceañera is perhaps the most meaningful moment in a young woman's life," the press announcement reads. Given such claims, perhaps five thousand dollars is not a lot to spend on a girl's coming-of-age.

I decide to ask the girls themselves about such claims.

In the wood-paneled faculty lounge at Lawrence High School I speak with a gathering of a dozen girls who have volunteered to be interviewed about the tradition. Light streams down from a magnificent stained-glass window, giving the room the hallowed feel of a chapel. At first glance, the robed scholar portrayed in the window could be Aristotle or Plato, but on closer inspection it turns out to be a woman. With one hand clutching a book, the other lifted, palm out, she seems to be setting the example of telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but, which is precisely what I am after. Later I find out that this testifying woman is Emily Greene Weatherbee, the first female principal of the high school, in the 1880s.

A century and a quarter later, the room fills with the likes of students that Miss Emily could never have imagined. The young Latinas present are mostly of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent, though one junior varsity softball player in sweatpants and sweatshirt whom it's a stretch to imagine in the girly-girl getup of a quinceañera is of Ecuadorian parentage. Except for one girl who feels "really gypped" that she didn't have one (her mother said the expense was too high), the other eleven girls have all had or will be having quinceañeras before the year is out. A few days before my visit they were reminded to bring their albums along to school. They file in, lugging large pink or white wedding-type albums of what amounts to extensive photo shoots. A few of the empty-handed girls confess they left their albums at home so as not to have to haul such a heavy weight around all day.

After paging through several of these albums, I ask the girls if they consider their quinceañeras as important as their eventual marriages. "I mean if you get married," I add. I do not want to be pushing any assumptions on their life stories.
"That's the thing," Soraya pipes up. Hers is among the largest albums, borne in by her brother, who has carted it around all day for her. "You don't ever know if you're going to get married. I mean you hope you will, but that's not for sure. But you are going to turn fifteen no matter what." The other girls agree.

But if it's just about turning fifteen, boys turn fifteen, too. Why not give them a quinceañera?

"Boys don't need a quinceañera," Madeline, who left her heavy album at home, explains. "Boys are born men but girls turn into women.

I have pondered that statement many times in the last year. The comment highlights that very deep, heavily guarded (at least traditionally) divide in a young Latina's life when she goes from nina to señorita and becomes sexualized. In her memoir, Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood, Judith Ortiz Cofer describes how when she became una señorita, she was watched closely as if she "carried some kind of time-bomb in [my] body that might go off any minute... Somehow my body with its new contours and new biological powers had changed everything: Half the world had now become a threat, or felt threatened by its potential for disaster."

"We never touch the girls," more than one male photographer told me when I interviewed them about the very popular photo shoots in Miami. The full package features young quinceañeras in a variety of provocative poses and outfits, including teensy bikinis. "We tell the mothers, 'Mami, there's a little masita that needs tucking in.' We let the mothers do it." Why was I being assured of this sexual delicacy over and over? Girls hitherto blithely living inside children's bodies turn into women with sexy, enticing cuerpos, and suddenly, it's open season. Meanwhile, boys, born men, who have been taught since day one to prove themselves as healthy machos, are going to prey on them.

When I make these observations to the Lawrence group, the roomful of young girls erupts into excited giggles. Obviously, I'm onto something.

All the girls admit that once they started developing, their parents, especially their papis, were like, Who are you going out with? Who was that that just called? Whose parents will be there?

These girls are on the receiving end of the ill effects of machismo, no arguing with that. But what of those poor boys having to perform from day one, if Madeline is to be believed? Often at quinceañeras, I'd spot some little tyke in a teensy tuxedo pushed and prodded to pick up some girl at a dance or given a shot of rum and encouraged to strut around. Contrary to how it's often described, machismo oppresses not just the girls but also the boys. And yet, understandably, would you want your pubescent daughter to be in the company of this little macho, unsupervised?

"The quinceañera is the sanctioned way that a nice family says, okay, now my daughter may receive male attention," Gloria González, a Spanish professor at Middlebury College, explains to me about her experience growing up in Guadalajara, Mexico. "We are permitting this and we are monitoring it." That's a big moment. In fact, in his song "De Niña a Mujer," which is arguably the quinceañera anthem of all time, Julio Iglesias bewails how as a father he has been anticipating this moment when his little girl disappears forever inside a woman. The lament goes on for six pained stanzas. The song makes a daughter's growing up sound like something that's going to break her father's heart.

Remote Control

Another factor that has upp

Más católico que el Papa.

Our exported tradiciones may be more traditional than they ever were in the States is to have adopted every single one of them.

So that now, Cuban quinceañeras sing the traditional "Las Mananitas," the couple representing a year of age representing a year of age. As is the case with the Mexican girls, some say from the Mexicans our exported tradiciones. A couple representing a year of age. As is the case with the Mexican girls, some say from the Mexicans our exported tradiciones.
If so, then why celebrate this loss?

Enter the mothers.

If the father is losing his little girl, the mother is gaining a potential girlfriend. More than one girl in the Lawrence group mentions—and when she does the others agree—that planning their quinceañeras really brought them and their moms close together. “We were deciding about what dress and what decorations and addressing all the invitations. I’d say that I was spending most of my time when I wasn’t in school with my mom,” Soraya recalls about the months of preparations. “We were already close, but we got even closer.”

Even if the ceremony itself focuses on the father-daughter transaction (he changes her flat shoes to heels, he dances her first grown-up dance in public with her), the months of preparations are intense mother-daughter time. Inevitably, this causes fights and disagreements, but even those moments offer opportunities for negotiation and bonding. And it’s not just mothers and daughters, but the extended familia of tías, abuelitas, primas who often get involved. Sofia’s mom in Miami, Consuelo, explained how in deciding each detail of her daughter’s quinceañera her mother, her sisters, and Sofia’s girl cousins would all vote. “We’d go into a store and try on dresses or pick out decorations and the whole gang would be giving their opinions.” As her mom recounted how special it had been for her to share this experience with her only daughter, Sofia, who had been sitting quietly beside her, began to cry.

“Are you okay?” her father, who had come along for the interview, asked from the other end of the couch. “What’s wrong?”

Consuelo, who had been distracted talking to me, turned to her daughter. In profile they were time-lapsed copies of each other. Consuelo understood. Tears filled her own eyes as she reached over and the two women joined hands like little girls who were going to be best friends for life.

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Remote Control

Another factor that has upped the price tag of this traditional celebration is that tricky word “traditional.”

_Más católico que el Papa_, goes a Dominican saying, more Catholic than the pope. Our exported tradiciones mix and combine with those of other Latin American and Caribbean countries stateside and become more elaborate, more expensive, more traditional than they ever were back home.

In fact, to have a full-blown traditional quinceañera in our Pan-Hispanic United States is to have adopted every other Latino group’s little traditions and then some. So that now, Cuban quinceañeras in Miami are hiring Mexican mariachis to sing the traditional “Las Mananitas.” The full court of fourteen damas and chambelanes, “each couple representing a year of the quinceañera’s life,” a mostly Mexican practice, is now a traditional must. As is the changing of the shoes to heels. Which seems to originally have been a Puerto Rican embellishment. From the Puerto Ricans as well, though some say from the Mexicans, came the tradition of la ultima muñeca, a “last doll” dressed exactly like the quinceañera, which the girl cradles to symbolize the “end of her childhood” or “the child that she herself will be having in the not-too-distant future” (both explanations given to me by different events planners). The quinceañera might
keep this last doll as a keepsake or give it away to a younger member of the family. In one celebration, perhaps inspired by the wedding bouquet, the quinceañera throw her last doll over her shoulder to be caught by a screaming group of little girls, anticipating their own future quinceañeras.

This symbol of bygone childhood is also mirrored in a Central American or Puerto Rican custom (I’ve heard both) of having a very little girl dress up in a minuscule version of the quinceañera’s dress and be “the symbol of innocence.” Sometimes she is accompanied by a little escort, though the tradition has now been further elaborated so that “the symbol of innocence” as well as a little prince and princess (slightly older) are part of a full traditional court.

There is also always some sort of photo session to commemorate the event. This is not a custom exclusive to quinceañeras. In our old countries every important life event is marked by a photograph. Your First Communion photo, your quince photo, your graduation photo, your wedding photo. Even in my husband’s old German-Nebraskan family, there were the formal portraits shot in a studio, the principals in dress clothes, hair combed and tamped down: a wedding, a christening, a son shipping off to war. Of course, now there are whole albums of the young lady in different outfits. In different locations, a practice that seems to have started with the Cuban community in Miami, where girls sometimes just have the photo shoot and forego the party. Many girls also have videos made, recounting their lives since birth, with still shots and footage of themselves at different ages and credits rolling as if this were a real movie with the quinceañera playing the lead and her parents starring as “padre” and “madre” and Julio Iglesias’s “De Niña a Mujer” as the score, of course. Clearly, the old-country portrait tradition has arrived stateside and, as one Cuban friend put it, “taken steroids.”

The tradition of crowning the young girl is often ascribed to the Mexicans, who seem to be the group that has most ritualized the ceremony. But here in America, every quinceañera gets her tiara. The bouquet the quinceañera carries to put at the Virgin Mary’s statue at the Mass is also part of the Mexican and Central American tradition, as is the Mass, which our more hedonistic Caribbean party-cultures dispensed with back home. But now the Mass and the Virgin’s bouquet have become part of our Dominican and Puerto Rican and Cuban “tradition” in the United States.

One economically sensible and emotionally gratifying tradition that has not been picked up by other Hispanic groups is the Mexican custom of sponsorships by madrinas and padrinos. In a Mexican quince, every aspect of the fiesta from the cake to the dj has a sponsor, which spreads the cost of the celebration around. It is also a touching symbol of the emotional, spiritual, as well as financial investment of a whole community in this young person. Why aren’t others adopting this custom?

“It’s a point of pride not to go begging for your party,” my Cuban friend Carmel confided. But in fact, a lot of informal sponsorships are going on. The grandmother who buys the quinceañera’s earrings and necklace, the brother who gives her the birthday gift of paying for the limo, the sister who contributes to the dress. Still, when the twenty or more names of sponsors are read out in a Mexican-American quinceañera, there is a sense of public participation that is not lost on the young lady. “Everybody I knew contributed something,” Verónica Fajardo remembers about her quinceañera fifteen years ago. “I felt like I received so many bendiciones, my whole community made it happen!” In actual fact, Verónica’s family is from Nicaragua, but she grew up in a Mexican-American neighborhood, and the custom back home, by tradition.

Sometimes these traditions are not the same route as the Jewish community, where families throw their girls’ quinceañeras every year about the, the ones that are often undocumented people, a migrant worker with several thousand for a employment benefits and care.

“Today, it’s all about Sweet 16,” told U.S. News in one of the episodes where Web for Q-lore — just Guest shared with me Sweden where France — throw their girls’ quinceañeras every year about, the ones that are often undocumented people, a migrant worker with several thousand for a employment benefits and care.

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American neighborhood in Los Angeles, so though sponsorships were not part of the custom back home, by the time her quince came around, her family had adopted that tradition.

Sometimes these cultural borrowings are not even coming from fellow Latinos. The tradition of lighting and dedicating candles, for example, seems to have been lifted from the Bar and Bat Mitzvah. In fact many critics see the quinceañera as going the same route as the Jewish celebration. Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, author of Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah, compares this moment in time for the Hispanic community to the early 1960s for the Jewish community, when the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies became increasingly secular and extravagant. “These rites of passage are a way for a minority group to demonstrate that they have succeeded in America.”

But given the statistics, our Hispanic community cannot yet lay claim to such wholesale success. For many, the quinceañera becomes an extravaganza that, as Sunita warned, puts the family further into the hole. Marie Arana of the Washington Post shared with me stories of visiting migrant camps in the Maryland and Virginia countryside where families with almost nothing would put out hundreds of dollars to throw their girls’ quinceañeras. Perhaps these are the cookout parties everybody talks about, the ones that are under the radar because they are taking place in segregated, often undocumented populations? If you do the numbers, several hundred dollars for a migrant worker with no citizenship or papers or cushion of savings might as well be several thousand for a working-class family that owns a car and has access to unemployment benefits and credit cards.

“Today, it’s all about supersizing,” Nina Diaz, the executive producer of My Super Sweet 16, told U.S. News & World Report. (The price tag for a recent quince party featured in one of the episodes was $180,000.) One quince site I happened upon in cruising the Web for Q-lore—just Google “quinceañera” and you will get 8,230,000 hits (if you put the tilde over the “n”) or 4,220,000 hits (if you dispense with the tilde)—urged providers to register with their site. “The Hispanic population’s buying power is expected to reach $300 billion by 2006. Timing is prime to begin your Sweet 16 and Quinceañera advertising campaign. The demand for more vendors that cater to Latinos is of epic proportions.”

Epic proportions; the house out the window: 8,230,000 hits and rising.

“Upholding this coming of age celebration is definitely expensive,” Kimberly Garcia concluded in her 1999 article: “Sweet 15: A Financial Affair.” In the seven years since her article was published in Hispanic Magazine, the trend is growing. Her shocking high-end figure of $15,000 for a celebration would not raise an eyebrow now. More likely, it would elicit an apology, as with Sofia’s dad. “Hispanics are likely to make a big spending decision no matter their income level,” Lisa Holton reported in an article about quinceañeras for the Chicago Sun-Times.

At Disneyland, Denny Nicholas, manager of corporate and wedding sales, says he has seen anything from a modest $5,000 to $50,000 for a quinceañera, the average nowadays being about $12,000 to $15,000. When I ask Denny if he doesn’t find this average shocking given that the poverty threshold for a family of three is $15,277, he laughs. “By the time families come to me, they’ve already made the decision that this is what they want. All I do is provide the elements they need to make their dreams come
to life.” It’s just a different world, Denny reminds me. “Kids are growing up expecting so much more.” He chuckles, sounding a lot more cheerful about this than I obviously feel. “I joke with my two boys that when I was growing up, the remote control was me standing by the TV and my dad saying, ‘Change it to such and such a channel!’”

**Dinero vs. Money**

The supersizing of the tradition might well be blamed on U.S. consumerism, but the spending of money now instead of mañana seems to be our very own bagaje.

“Hispanics tend to make immediate use of their money,” writes Rose Carbonell in her article “Dinero vs. Money.” As part of her graduate research in Hispanic Marketing Communication at Florida State University, Carbonell studied the different attitudes of Hispanics toward money. She found that “capital accumulation is not a characteristic of Hispanics, especially because being wealthy has a negative connotation . . . as the masses of Hispanics have endured slavery and endemic poverty over the past 500 years, the meaning of wealth has been associated with the experience of others, not oneself.”

Initially, I dismissed this as a kind of cultural profiling we do to ourselves as it hath been done unto us, until I found this point curiously echoed by none other than Octavio Paz, the seminal writer on Mexican identity and thought and the 1990 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. “Our poverty can be measured by the frequency and luxuriousness of our holidays. Fiestas are our only luxury,” Paz writes in _The Labyrinth of Solitude_. “Wasting money and expending energy affirms the community’s wealth in both. When life is thrown away it increases. What is sought is potency, life, health. In this sense the fiesta . . . is one of the most ancient economic forms.”

Another way of understanding this phenomenon is an interesting term I found bandied about in academic articles: “cultural capital.” The term, originally coined by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, describes other kinds of assets, not monetary, that are important for status in a community. A family’s throwing its daughter a lavish quinceañera represents a kind of cultural statement that counts for a lot more than the dollar cost. Thinking only of “how much it cost” in dollar amount is to simplify a much more complex and layered transaction. Patricia Saldarriaga, a professor of Spanish at Middlebury College, turned fifteen in 1975 in the port city of Talara, Peru, where her father was mayor. Although she did not want one, she was obligated to have a big quinceañera because of her father’s position.

“Somos decentes is a very important concept in our communities,” Eduardo Béjar, also a Spanish professor at Middlebury, explains. Eduardo, who grew up in Cuba in the forties and fifties, recalls how fiestas de quince años were a family’s way of maintaining status. “Ser una familia decente. You work hard, you do things for the welfare of your family. La quinceañera reflects that: a way of saying we are decentes.”

But why not have both? After all, being Latina/o is about being a hybrid, a made-in-the-U.S.A. sancocho of all our different cultures and races and histories and nationalities. Why not be una familia decente that celebrates a daughter’s quinceañera without going into debt? Throw a fiesta, not the house, out the window? Our cultural habits and traditions can be revised to work better for us in the new realities we are facing right now.
But whenever I’ve suggested restraint to quinceañera parents and event providers, the refrain I often hear is, “We love to party!” That’s the way we are.

This ethnic profiling persists both internally within our communities and without. It’s a reductionist either/or way of thinking about ourselves that ill prepares us for this new millennium in which the world is shrinking and we are all becoming ever more permeable mixtures of traditions and cultures.

Mami, too, always maintained we couldn’t have it both ways. We couldn’t be both girls from una familia decente and little Americanitas with minds (and bodies) of our own.

“Why not?” I would challenge. “I resist anything better than my own diversity.”

“Don’t you answer me back!” she’d scold. “Don’t you be fresh with me!”

“But that’s Walt Whitman. We’re reading him in English class.”

That always made her stop.

“You live in this house, you respect our rules!” she’d grumble, more quietly now.

What monster had she created by sending her daughter to Abbot? “Who do you think you are?”

“I am large, I contain multitudes.’’ I was finding a new way to defend myself. Technically, it was not “answering back” if I was reciting poetry.

Exploring Context

1. My Super Sweet 16 is a television show chronicling a coming-of-age ritual similar to the quinceañera. Explore the website for the series at mtv.com/shows/sweet_16/series .html and connect what you find there to Alvarez’s text. In what ways does the series reflect the issues and concerns about quinces that Alvarez explores? You might want to use your work on Alvarez’s feelings about quinces from Question 2 of Questions for Critical Reading in making your response.

2. This selection opens with Alvarez’s visit to Isabella Martinez Wall, who has her own website (isabellawall.com). How does the website, in its design and advertising, reflect the points that Alvarez wants to make about quinces and the kinds of women they produce? Does the website reflect Alvarez’s arguments about quinces? How does the website support or complicate your response to Question 3 of Questions for Critical Reading about the value of tradition?

3. What coming-of-age rituals exist in other cultures? Use the Web to search for information on another ritual, perhaps one from your own cultural, national, ethnic, or religious background. How is it preserved today? Does it have the same economic implications as the quince? In what ways is it connected to quinceañeras?

Questions for Connecting

1. Daniel Gilbert’s essay “Reporting Live from Tomorrow” (p. 211) is about predicting our future happiness. How can his ideas help explain the features of quinces that Alvarez explores? Is the quinceañera a super-replicator? Does it function as a kind of cultural surrogate for womanhood? Is it possible to synthesize Gilbert’s concepts with Alvarez’s examples?