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# Quince Años: The Transition to Womanhood in Puerto Rican Culture

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research ARTICLE

## Quince Años: The Transition to Womanhood in Puerto Rican Culture

—**Laura Louise Plummer** (Edited by Kristina Griffin)

*Photography by Scott P. Yates*

I was a freshman in high school when I turned fifteen, a skinny ninth-grader whose major concerns in life were boys, singing, and a close-knit group of girlfriends with whom I'd more or less grown up. When the ninth of December rolled around, as it did every year, I invited six or seven close friends to my house for a birthday get-together. Mom made lasagna and a chocolate cake with white Pillsbury frosting. My friends sang, I blew out the candles, and we listened to music while I opened gifts. Although a special occasion, it was no more memorable than the birthday that had come before it and the many that would come after. Turning fifteen-years-old, after all, marks just the passing of another year in North American culture.

However, this is not usually the case for young women in Latin America.



The author with Zuleyka Marie Lopez-Martinez on the day of her *Quinceañera*

In some Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas, a girl's fifteenth birthday, called the *Quinceañera*, is a sacred and time-honored rite of passage. The word "Quinceañera" is made up of the Spanish words for "fifteen" and "years" and can refer to both the celebration and the woman turning fifteen. The Quinceañera has roots in ancient indigenous ceremonies as well as the European debutante ball, which was introduced during the Spanish colonization of Latin America in the 1500s (Miranda). Every country (and indeed every individual girl) celebrates the Quinceañera uniquely. What remains constant across cultures, however, is that the Quinceañera is meant to represent a girl's transition to womanhood.

This past summer, I took my knowledge of the Quinceañera to Puerto Rico to investigate how the ceremony is played out on the island commonwealth. I selected Puerto Rico because a surprising number of Americans do not know that it is a commonwealth of the United States or that all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens. In addition, Puerto Ricans constitute the second largest Hispanic minority population in the mainland United States. Studying Puerto Rico and its people is to have a better understanding of our nation and of American culture. I chose to study the Quinceañera in Puerto Rico to prove that one does not have to travel far, or even leave one's own country, to discover a wealth of cultural diversity.

## Discovering the Puerto Rican Quinceañera

Aesthetically, the Quinceañera resembles a wedding. It is an extravagant event that encompasses many aspects of a marriage ceremony: the family, the dress, the cake, the gifts, and most significantly, the money. It is no secret that Quinceañeras are often as costly as a wedding. I spoke with one Quinceañera planner in the San Juan area who was once given a flexible budget of \$45,000 to plan a fifteenth birthday party (Rodriguez). She has also heard figures that are twice that amount; the sky is the limit.

For Puerto Ricans living in the United States, the Quinceañera can be a point of ethnic pride and an opportunity to distinguish themselves from neighbors of differing ethnic origins. More than a tradition of social expression and gender performance, the Quinceañera can also be used to flaunt a family's wealth and status and to see which family can outdo the other. Keeping with the spirit of consumerism, the American bridal industry has capitalized on this knowledge, creating a lucrative business that caters specifically to Quinceañeras (Miranda). "Girls [can] celebrate their Quinceañeras at Disneyland, where Prince Charming will greet them as they step out of Cinderella's coach. The parties have turned into extravaganzas, with price tags of \$80,000" (Alvarez).

Such figures lead one to believe that only the most affluent of Puerto Rican society are able to celebrate the Quinceañera. However, the tradition is celebrated by families of all socioeconomic classes and professions. My active research, which involved woman-on-street interviews, was conducted primarily in the metropolitan area of San Juan. My individual in-depth case studies spanned geographic regions as well as economic class divisions. They encompassed two upper-class families, one lower-middle class family, and one lower-class family (in Arecibo, San Juan, Bayamón, and Adjuntas, respectively).

Amarilis Cintrón celebrated her Quinceañera in her hometown of Adjuntas, a small municipality in the island's mountainous interior. Amarilis, who now resides in Cayey, recalls that her parents made significant sacrifices in order to throw her a fifteenth birthday party that totaled \$4,000 in 1996. "I remember we did not have the means to rent a hall, so we had a party at my home with family and close friends," says Amarilis.



Zuleyka Marie Lopez-Martinez has her flat-soled slippers changed to heeled shoes by her stepfather.

The Quinceañera celebration has earned international attention due to its obvious extravagance and its similarity to a wedding, even among families of modest incomes. The ceremony has also turned many heads in the world of contemporary women's issues and gender studies as it is unique to women. Every ritual performed within the Quinceañera ceremony is meant to bring the young woman closer to her family, enforce preexisting gender expectations, and symbolize a transition in her life.

One such transition is that from girl to mature woman. The traditional changing of the shoes from flat-soled slippers to high heels is meant to symbolize the "first steps" the Quinceañera will take as a woman. During the ceremony, the Quinceañera will sometimes give a doll to a younger sister or female cousin, symbolically relinquishing her girl-child persona. There is a crown bearer, usually a younger sister or younger female

relative, who is usually dressed and made up to emulate the Quinceañera. Her role in the ceremony is to symbolize the Quinceañera in child form, to serve as a replica of the girl the Quinceañera once was.

Clearly, family does not play a small part in the Quinceañera ceremony. Without the economic support of the family, the ceremony would not be possible at all. Family members routinely pool resources and spend extraordinary amounts of money on party expenses, often making large monetary sacrifices. Zuleyka Marie López Martínez celebrated her fifteenth birthday in her hometown of Bayamón in July 2006. Her Quinceañera, costing close to \$9,000, was a gift from Zuleyka's maternal grandfather. "Without me, this celebration would not have been financially possible," he admitted. "But I would pay any price to see my granddaughter happy."

Gifts from family members also abound. "Godmother gave me many pretty things, like a shawl to leave dance halls with on chilly nights, a lovely wallet, and a gorgeous bracelet. They also gave me some very cute brooches," recalls María de Fátima Barceló Miller, who celebrated her Quinceañera in Arecibo in 1969.

Family members, who are announced and welcomed upon arrival, also provide emotional support and fulfill important symbolic roles during the Quinceañera celebration. Aunts, uncles, and grandparents give long speeches, sharing memories and anecdotes, and also give a toast to the Quinceañera's health and future happiness. The ritual changing of the shoes is performed by the father or closest paternal figure, and the mother will often exchange her daughter's crown of flowers for a jeweled tiara. As Barceló-Miller told me,

"[My parents] were very emotional. When Daddy danced the traditional waltz with me, his eyes filled with tears and he told me that I had stopped being a girl and had become a young woman of which he was extremely proud. My mother gave me a bracelet (which I still wear) and told me that I was her pride."

This emphasis on family involvement is meant to affirm and encourage the Quinceañera's place and participation within the family sphere. Upon completing fifteen years, she will be able to accept more responsibilities within the family, such as caring for younger siblings and sharing in the financial decisions of the household. Being recognized in the formal Quinceañera ceremony, she is also taking after the women in her family who have done the same, becoming a treasured link in a chain of womanhood that spans several generations. At the same time, the Quinceañera is also serving as a moral example to her younger female relatives.

Expectations of sex and gender are symbolically manifested during this valued rite of passage in a young Latina's life. The Quinceañera ceremony is meant to be a dress rehearsal for how the young woman will act as a female in Puerto Rican society. Certain virtues that are honored during the Quinceañera are virginity, grace, beauty, availability to marry, and motherhood through heterosexual marriage.

Close female relatives coach the Quinceañera on how to walk, talk, sit, eat, approach guests, dance, and be photographed during her ceremony, all the while demonstrating her feminine grace, modesty, and reserve. Because the Quinceañera is expected to embody outward beauty on her big day, large amounts of time and money are spent on gowns, jewelry, accessories, elaborate make-up and hairstyles.

The virtue of chastity is upheld in the traditional wearing of the white gown, white to symbolize purity and virginity. A cross necklace is often given to the Quinceañera, a symbol of her vow to God to remain abstinent

until marriage, in accordance with Catholic doctrine. Due to the predominantly Catholic influence on the island, most Quinceañeras in Puerto Rico include a member of the clergy performing a religious service to bless the Quinceañera on her special day, sanctifying her in the eyes of God. In the 1970s, Puerto Rican Quinceañeras received little prayer books bearing the words: "Today you devote yourself to the Virgin [Mary], ask that Her Life act as a model for your existence. May this beautiful and pious act be a sweet reminder that will last forever" (Sosa de Remy).

In the long-venerated tradition of the European debutante ball, the Quinceañera was presented to her society in order to advertise her family's wealth and social status, and to publicize her availability for marriage (Sosa de Remy). Modern Quinceañeras are not outright declarations of a girl's availability for marriage, but they nevertheless seek to embed in her a reverence for and expectation of heterosexual marriage. The expectation of reproduction within that marriage is also conveyed in the increased emphasis on childcare responsibilities that often accompany this turning point in a girl's life.

## **Evolution of the Quinceañera**

My investigation of the Quinceañera this past summer revealed the ever-changing trends of the Quinceañera in modern Puerto Rico. The celebration, which I studied first hand, has been redefined by the passage of time and by constantly evolving social norms and attitudes.

Traditionally, religion was closely associated with a young girl's symbolic coming of age, and a church ceremony performed by the family's priest would take place before the celebration. The religious portion of the ceremony, once a must, is now sometimes omitted entirely. In the past the Quinceañera gown was always white to symbolize purity. While talking to shopkeepers and party planners, however, I discovered that recent generations of females have been opting for dresses in other colors. "This season, the popular colors are the pastels. You see a lot of blue, pink, lavender, lilac," said Milagros Sánchez, a dressmaker in Bayamón. Mothers will even advise their daughters to "save white" for their weddings. She expressed that, in her opinion, the Quinceañera is currently a social tradition rather than a religious ceremony, a testament to changing social attitudes in a predominantly Catholic population.

Up to the mid-1980s, it was the tradition in Puerto Rico that each Quinceañera have a gown handmade for her, either by a family member or a seamstress. While a girl can still have her Quinceañera gown made from scratch, Sánchez says it is much less common than in previous times:

"In the past, when we had little grandmothers who would stitch and sew a lot, the grandmother would make the dress for her granddaughter. Or the mother for her daughter. But nowadays it's more accessible to just send her out to look for a gown that's already made. It's easier that way" (Sánchez).

Today's custom is for the Quinceañera to select a number of styles and colors from a catalogue. An order is placed by the shop owner, and when the dress arrives, it is fitted to the Quinceañera and any necessary alterations are made. As such, the dress component is much less personal and individualized now than in the past.



Zuleyka's Quinceañera planner contracted cadets from the neighboring municipality of Carolina.

In past decades, the Quinceañera would arrange an entourage of her fourteen closest friends, who would gather several months ahead of the event to choreograph and rehearse the traditional ceremonial waltz. In recent years, however, the waltz has been fading from the Quinceañera scene, being replaced by highly stylistic dances to modern hip-hop and the popular *reggaetón* music.

In place of her closest friends, Zuleyka Marie of Bayamón contracted fourteen junior cadets to perform several choreographed marches and an elaborate rose ceremony. The presence of cadets at Quinceañeras is a fairly recent trend, increasing in popularity in the area of Bayamón and surrounding towns (Rodríguez).

In today's society, Puerto Rican parents are known to offer their daughters alternatives to a large, elaborate party, such as a weeklong cruise with friends, a trip to Europe, money, or a car. On the more extravagant end of choices, it is increasingly popular to send the Quinceañera on a birthday cruise. "There are a lot of Quinceañeras who say, 'No, Mom, Dad, instead of giving me a party, give me a trip.' And they send her on a cruise which lasts seven whole days, seven days of partying."

While it is generally recognized as a socially symbolic year, some opt for a more economic gift. "I asked my parents for a car, because I can use it for many years," said Theresa Muñoz. "If they were going to spend a fortune, it might as well have been on something that would last me longer than one day." But Sánchez insists, "Even if [the Quinceañera] is not having a large party, she will always have a small get-together at her home with her family where she will put on her dress and tiara and have her photos taken, and she couldn't be happier."

While the tradition of the Quinceañera in Puerto Rican society is certainly evolving, a girl's fifteenth birthday continues to warrant celebration. Neither on the island nor in Puerto Rican communities in the United States is the Quinceañera disappearing. On the contrary, a sort of Quinceañera craze is sweeping the nation. A popular MTV series, "My Super Sweet 16", profiles (generally very wealthy) young women planning their "Sweet 16" parties and often girls of Hispanic descent planning their Quinceañeras. Just this year, Sony Pictures Classics released "Quinceañera," a full-length motion picture. The film, winner of the 2006 Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award, features a Mexican-American girl about to celebrate her fifteenth birthday, and has thrust the tradition of the Quinceañera into the national spotlight (Internet Movie Database).

With the recent media attention and glamorization of the Quinceañera, it is no surprise that Quinceañera planners in the U.S. report increasing numbers of ethnic groups outside of the Catholic Hispanic communities requesting Quinceañera parties for their daughters (Miranda). This phenomenon speaks to the melting-pot tendencies so often found in the United States.



Two young Puerto Rican girls and the author met at a park. Both were about to turn 15. Photo by Laura Plummer

As we are a nation of immigrants, our customs, traditions, and rituals have been shaped and reshaped by the diverse ethnic and religious groups who have settled here. With the Hispanic immigrant population now outnumbering the Black population in the U.S., I would not be surprised if the Quinceañera were to increase in popularity in American events halls. In addition, the celebration has the potential to reshape our North American concept of the "Sweet 16" party, placing more value on traditional womanhood than in decades past.

For several years I have been exceedingly curious about the female experience in all parts of the world. My academic studies have encompassed women's roles, women's liberation, feminist literature, and female rites of passage as they occur around the globe. Researching the Puerto Rican Quinceañera, however, has affirmed my passion for knowledge that cannot be found in books or articles. The kind of knowledge that I crave is the kind that one can only discover first-hand, through observation, interaction, and participation. As one sociologist of my acquaintance put it, I have been bitten by the research bug. I am eager to get back into the field and investigate other intriguing elements of the human experience.

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## Author Bio

*Laura Louise Plummer is a native of Derry, NH, who will graduate in May 2007 with a dual major in Spanish and international affairs. During the summer of 2006, Laura traveled to Puerto Rico with a grant from the University of New Hampshire's International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) to study the tradition of the Quinceañero. She became interested in the topic and in global women's issues after taking a class with Dr. Julia Rodriguez. Laura credits the IROP grant for putting her on the fast track to a career in research and feeding her passion for learning about other cultures. The summer's experience taught her that spontaneity and risk can lead to great opportunities, and that persistence pays off. In her professional future, Laura aspires to write for a public outreach or advocacy magazine with a focus on women's rights and eating disorders; travel the world; and live in Scandinavia because of the respect she has for their social politics.*

## ***Mentor Bio***

*A member of the University of New Hampshire's history faculty for seven years, Dr. **Julia Rodriguez** is an associate professor specializing in Latin American history, women's history, and the history of science and medicine. In addition to mentoring Laura Plummer, she has previously mentored several other students, including a McNair scholar. Dr. Rodriguez greatly enjoyed the experience of working with such a smart, motivated student, as well as watching Laura grow as both a student and researcher. She was most inspired by Laura's commitment to learning more about the world and making it a better place.*