LA QUINCEAÑERA: MAKING ETHNIC AND GENDER IDENTITY
IN NORTHWEST FLORIDA

by

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It was raining on the day of my first meeting with Dr. Terry Prewitt. He was the undergraduate advisor and I an older student returning to finish her undergraduate degree. It is raining outside while I am writing this acknowledgment, and it seems only fitting that it should. Beginnings and endings should be marked by a meaningful event, if for no other reason than it marks a passage. I am grateful for his editorial eye and indebted to him for his generosity. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without him. I am also thankful for his “better half,” Karen, for her expertise in the writing process and her calming spirit.

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This thesis examines the importance of the *quinceañera* ritual in the Mexican immigrant community as an ethnic and gendering practice. Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) three phases of rites of passage are used to elaborate the ethnic and gender markers that transition a young Mexican girl into young womanhood. Additionally, the ritual is explored as a redressive mechanism to counter the feelings of fear and uncertainty that Mexican immigrants often experience upon arriving on American soil. Research for this thesis included questionnaires and interviews from participants in three separate Latino communities in Northwest Florida. Results show that the ritual is vital to the Latino community both as a marker for gender and ethnic construction and as a redressive act. Furthermore, the ritual unites families, builds communities, and provides a social field in which young girls can make their own identity.
CHAPTER I
BEGINNINGS

“And you, Gloria, tell us about your quinceañera. What was yours like?”

I looked at Magda and her daughter Maria, and I said, “I didn’t have one.”

A look of incredulity passed between them. I knew this look. I never had a quinceañera. How could I possibly comprehend its significance? I felt exposed. I was an interloper. Hoping to redeem myself, I hastened to explain that my parents could not afford a quinceañera for one daughter, let alone three. Magda and Maria simply looked at each other and picked up another stack of Maria’s quince1 photos.

My parents’ excuse was weak and unacceptable. I knew what they were thinking; all parents can put together a small quince with the help of their compadres, especially for such an important occasion. I regrouped and replied that they were saving their money for a down payment on a house that would take us out of the barrio and into a better school district. My words were rewarded with a passing look of understanding, but still it was not enough. I resigned myself to not being a member of their shared experience – la quinceañera.

Dejected, I continued and meekly told them about my fifteenth birthday and that my mother had made my favorite food, mole poblano, and baked me a chocolate cake. This answer was met with an air of interest. Magda seemed pleased that I ate mole, but she continued to shuffle through photos interjecting comments as she went. I continued, “My parents didn’t have much money, but they wanted something special for my gift, so they took me to a jewelry store in Westminster and selected a beautiful square-cut garnet ring for my birthday and...”

Magda became animated and interrupted me, “A ring?’ she exclaimed.

I nodded my head. “Ay sí! Yes! Yes, a ring! A ring, it is a symbol of the quinceañera!”

Magda and Maria looked at each other, their faces illuminated by excitement and joy over this bit of knowledge. This simple statement of fact brought about a change in their demeanor

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1. The quinceañera is often referred to by the shortened word quince, which means fifteen in Spanish.
towards me; they were both delighted and accepting of me. They were pleased that my quince años had not gone by unacknowledged. No longer the interloper – I was transformed into a quinceañera. (Field notes July, 2012)

This short excerpt is taken from an interview with two informants, Magda and Maria. Both had volunteered to be interviewed as part of my research on the quinceañera. As I sat in their kitchen sharing a meal of tacos al carbon and looking over Maria’s countless quince photos, I thought of my other informants and how welcomed and privileged I felt to hear women and young girls recount their special day.

My informants were quick to express their desire that I understand the significance of the ritual of the quinceañera. In turn, I expressed my equal willingness to comprehend this once-in-a-lifetime event. However, I knew there might be limitations in finding equal meaning. We came from vastly different backgrounds. They were Mexicanas from different socioeconomic backgrounds. I am a Chicana² born and raised in Southern California. Where was our common ground? We shared gender and a cultural heritage, but in terms of lived experience, we were worlds apart.

The long drive home allowed me the time to consider and analyze my interest in the ritual of the quinceañera. The celebration is an ethnic and gender marker for Mexican women. In performing the ritual, millions of Mexican girls adhere to a standard of emerging femininity that establishes a connection with family, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and by extension, the Catholic Church and comunidad. The ritual begins with a Catholic Mass and concludes with a celebration marking the initiate’s transformation from a girl into a woman.

The ritual has grown in popularity among Latinos in the United States. The habitualness of the rite of passage among Mexican immigrants represents a method by which groups identify in order to preserve an ethnic identity. Recent Mexican immigrants are not incorporated into the

². The term Chicana refers to a woman of Mexican-American descent. By choosing this term, we identify with our historical past, to the time of our mythical home in Aztlán prior to the Aztec migration into the valley of Mexico. It denotes the disconnectedness we feel from Spanish and English culture and underscores the borderlands experience – of being not American, but not quite Mexican either. It is a marker of ethnic pride and a political choice.
recognized practices of Anglo-American society. Instead they operate in a marginal space – a 
liminal frame. The quinceañera reinforces a collective identity and magnifies salient values, in 
particular, the gendering process for young girls. The ritual is a nexus for social processes that 
incorporates ethnicity, gender formation, and historicity. The celebration does not function as an 
isolated event, but can be likened to a busy intersection of various trajectories that foreground these processes (Rosaldo 1989, 17). Although it may appear that the ritual constitutes one 
“moment” in the life of the initiate, these trajectories intersect and complicate the meaning of the 
quinceañera and the lives of women who have entered into the ritual.

This thesis examines the importance of the ritual of the quinceañera in a Mexican 
immigrant community in Northwest Florida. Mexican immigrants straddle two different cultures: 
Mexico and the United States. Within this borderland region, they experience practices that are 
foreign and chaotic. The actualization of ritual provides a familiar and unifying experience for 
participants. I draw upon the theoretical concept of ritual as a cohesive element that acts as 
a positive force in constructing and reaffirming familiar cultural elements (Turner 1967, 20). 
For the newly arrived immigrant, familiarity helps to situate them on foreign soil. I borrow 
Turner’s use of the term liminal to describe the sensation of not quite belonging, a feeling Turner 
described as “betwixt and between,” and a valid view in assessing the immigrant experience in 
the borderlands.

I have always been interested in the power of ritual to inform, educate, and transform not 
just initiates, but other participants as well. My own childhood was ordered by a yearly cycle of 
rituals and traditions – birthdays, christenings, marriages, El Dia de Los Muertos, Las Posadas – 
which were pleasant occasions spent with extended family, friends, and the Mexican community in my hometown. As Chicanas, we shared a common culture in these precious and familiar 
moments, and the gatherings provided a brief respite from an unfamiliar dominant culture. The 
observance of the quinceañera is even more important to Mexicanos. It exemplifies tradition, 
community, rite of passage, the extension of a Catholic sacrament, ethnicity, and gendering. 
These elements fuse to symbolize the ideal for becoming a mujercita – a little woman, a Mexican
woman. It renders the most salient values of the Mexican immigrant community. The women I interviewed in the course of my research stated that the ritual is a way of “holding on to roots” in an Anglo-American world. With pride, many of my informants described the ritual as a tradition, with its origins in the syncretism of Aztec, Spanish, and Catholic rites of passage.

Identity is a strong cultural trait, one that incorporates many influences – gender, social status, sexuality, and religion. In the performance of the quinceañera, we see the realization of an “unchanging” and traditional view of what it means to be a Mexicana. However, by exploring Turner’s (1969) ritual process and its “betwixt and between” metaphor, we can further explicate the quinceañera as social process. Mexican immigrant women in the borderlands share experiences that traverse historical perspective, human agency, and identity contestation and formation – all found within the ritual of the quinceañera. Whereas the “traditional” role of the Mexicana is as a wife and mother, a social role that is given tacit approval in the ritual of the quinceañera, the celebration provides a social field for intersecting identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class.

The quinceañera is of great importance to recent Mexican immigrants for many reasons. First, it offers a redress against the social and economic dilemmas. Second, it defines gender and ethnic identity. Third, it fulfills a tradition that embodies accepted and understood beliefs of ethnicity and gender. Fourth, it unites families and builds a sense of community. Finally, it provides a social field where intersecting identities can be contested and negotiated.

While describing the various elements that complicate the ethnic and gender markers found in the quinceañera, I employ personal experiences in this thesis because to a certain extent, the events of my life have mirrored those of some of my informants. Therefore, my approach foregrounds a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of research undertaken in a social group by a member of that social group. The classical anthropological method of “participant-observation” in research has settled on detachment almost to the point of indifference in an effort to avoid its opposite: going “native.” Being a Chicana has been both strength and a weakness in this research. It has allowed me entry into a community that was experiencing fear
of deportation, but by the same token I was reminded more than once, that I was not a Mexicana like them. Reliance on autobiographical data can lead the “self-absorbed Self to disengage from the self-absorbed Other” (Rosaldo 1989, 7). The greatest strength in relying on personal experience is that it requires the researcher to question her positions. I entered my research with preset notions of the quinceañera, and during the course of my research, I was forced to “reposition” my questions, conditioning my analysis in turn. It was surprising to me and yet not unexpected. The interpretive process is recursive and must follow social discourse (Geertz 1973, 20).

**Fifteen**

I never had a quince. On my fifteenth birthday, my parents took me to a jeweler in Westminster and selected a lovely garnet ring as my birthday gift. My mother made mole poblano because it was, and still is, my favorite traditional Mexican food. And in an attempt to keep with the solemnity of the occasion, my father tried to impart words of wisdom.

At fifteen, I was exploring my personal identity as an emerging Chicana. On the outside, I was a dutiful and for the most part, obedient daughter, but inwardly, I was questioning my place in an Anglo world. My politicization had begun a year earlier when I first heard about the Chicano student walkouts in East Los Angeles. Chicano recruiters from California State University at Long Beach had begun to visit high schools in Orange County, actively engaging in conversations with students, informing and educating them regarding the need for the pursuit of a higher education. These recruiters helped us to form a branch of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and prepared us for taking college-level courses, with the intention of applying and being accepted to the university. The recruiters were college students, and they referred to themselves as Chicanos. I had never heard the term before, but as they explained its meaning, it began to resonate with my sensibilities.

It was the late sixties, and every day we were hearing of Chicano students demanding a school curriculum that included the contribution of Mexicans in the history of California. It was a revelation for many of us to learn that we were not a people without history. These and
other political and social events of the sixties had awakened a new consciousness in me. As I began to understand the critical importance of ethnic identity, I became a Chicana. I identified with the feeling of separatism from the Mexican and Anglo culture. One foot in both but never wholly belonging to either, I rejected the “Mexican-American” label because to accept it meant to embrace assimilation. I, like thousands of other Chicanos, accepted and adopted the highly politicized term Chicano. The term designated our acceptance and knowledge of our pre-Columbian heritage and pride in our racial and cultural mestizaje. It also highlighted the disassociation with the racism of Anglo-American society toward people of Mexican descent and the claim to self-determinism and control over our communities.

Chicanos were never fully accepted by Mexicanos, nor were we totally accepting of Anglo-American culture; therefore, we were often thought of as a people without history. Chicano nationalism gave us back our culture and home – Aztlán. Aztlán embodies the heart of Chicano nationalism and the “quest for Aztlán,” a rallying cry among Chicanos. Accepting the myth of Aztlán signifies a “taking back” of history, culture, and ethnic identity. Doing so implies acknowledgement of a separatist ideal, the rejection of Anglo culture, and acceptance of the place Chicanos occupy – the place “betwixt and between” two cultures and two worldviews. However crucial Chicano nationalism was to ethnic identity, however, it tended to acknowledge and reify one traditional role for women, that of “wife and mother.” For many women, their emerging identity as Chicana was subsumed under this singular identity. Chicana feminists found themselves “betwixt and between” the expected gendering experience of being a Mexicana and the everyday experience Chicanas faced as they negotiated their identity through intersecting planes of gender, race, sexuality, and class in the borderlands.

My personal history was no different from that of thousands of Chicanas who had begun to question the institution of male traditions inherent in Chicano ideology. While I fervently embraced my ethnic identity, I had begun and nurtured friendships with a small number of emerging feminists much to the displeasure of male leaders who felt that feminism was a “white woman’s thing.” Most male members and many females in MEChA agreed that “freedom
and liberation” had to come first to men who in turn would “pass it on” to women. It was not until I entered the public university setting that I was able to form friendships with other like-minded Chicanas who also felt disassociated from the inherent patriarchy in Chicano politics and culture, and by extension in the institutions of la familia y comunidad. My burgeoning sensibilities spilled over into questioning Mexican traditions, and I began to view the ritual of the quinceañera as an affirmation of a system of oppression against women. The ritual affirmed the expected gendering of young women conscripted into service to the family, the community, the Church, and eventually to men. In my view, the ritual shackled young women to one identity – wife/mother. Within traditional Mexican families, this identity is subservient to and reliant upon a man. As displayed in the ritual of the quinceañera, a young girl’s change from childhood to womanhood is sanctified by the church and legitimized by her father.

**Ritual**

In an immigrant community, the force of ritual imparts knowledge and provides a cohesive basis of community within an alien culture; ritual offers a view into how the world is constructed. The rituals of a culture are the expressions of its values and traditions, and their performance becomes a form of social construction in an imagined social space. Ask a Mexicana to name the most significant traditions of her culture, and she will say: el Dia de los Muertos, Las Posadas, Semana Santa, and the quinceañera. All of these celebrations are expressions of a worldview or disposition that is heavily steeped in Catholic custom, community, and social process. For Mexican immigrant women in the borderlands – where place, ethnicity, and gender become confused – their lives center on a matrix of ritual, religious symbolism, and narratives that intersect to form many levels of identity within the community.

My own experience was ordered by the observance of these rituals by a vigilant Virgen. For example, on my fifteenth birthday my father explained that I was no longer a child but a young woman – una joven. I had responsibilities to my mother, to him, to my family, and to the Church, as embodied by the symbol of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Throughout my life, he said, there would be difficult times, but I would find comfort in her example of quiet and submissive
strength. La Virgen would be the model that would inure my life as a Mexican in an Anglo-American world. My ethnographic work in Northwest Florida reinforced the idea that the same kinds of value hold for many of my informants.

The Virgen was as visible in the homes I visited as she was in the hallway leading to my parents’ bedroom. Various milagros, Santos, votive candles, fresh flowers, and a crucifix of Jesus Christ surround the statue, but the Virgen has central importance. The Virgen hears every request, supplication, and expression of gratitude made before her, and she responds. Today I realize that the life experiences, cycles of ritual, and social relationships that have intersected my life have been instrumental in shaping my social identity and have even foregrounded this thesis. Throughout the years, the significance of ritual, in particular the quinceañera, has remained in my sentiments. Its popularity within the Mexican community in the United States has not diminished. On both sides of the border, the quince is the single most important event of every young Mexican woman’s life, surpassing even her wedding day.

Quinceañera as a Rite of Passage

The study of ritual has long been a central focus in anthropology and religious studies. Scholars in these fields have provided detailed analyses of the role rituals play in social settings and broader social organization and operation (Geertz 1973, Turner 1969). Ritual refers to a predictable and repeated observance of some act or performance which has a symbolic component resulting in the reinforcement of shared values and beliefs. In his article, “Symbols in African Ritual,” Victor Turner (1973) offers a cogent definition: “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (1100). Turner’s fieldwork in rural Zambia afforded him a privileged view into a variety of rituals. He observed that they varied in form and complexity, were conducted at formal intervals decided by those involved, and could be seasonal or symbolic of a passage from one status or social identity to another. The reasons for rituals varied and included, but were not limited to, worship, celebration, birth, healing, protection, death, harvest, and initiation.
The *quinceañera* ritual is a life-cycle change. This initiation clearly marks a girl’s transformation in her perception of self and identity, but equally important, the rite of passage confirms her new identity and status to others. The *quinceañera* involves days and months of preparation; it is performed in a special space; it imparts sacred teachings and moments; and it involves gestures and employs symbols that reify and mark a profound change. As a rite of passage, the *quinceañera* can be mined for significance through a careful study of its two components: the Mass of Thanksgiving and the fiesta. This thesis uses Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) *Rites of Passage* and Victor Turner’s (1973) study of liminality and ritual symbolism to provide a multilayered view of the *quinceañera*.

Originally published in 1908, *The Rites of Passage* first posited the life of an individual in “any society as a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another” (van Gennep 1960, 2). In van Gennep’s view, the initiate transitions from one social status to the next, a move that implies a social re-positioning marked as a “territorial passage” (192). At every social stage of the initiate’s life, events or passages are marked by celebrations and ceremonies that denote the transitions and changes in her status. We recognize many of these transitions as birth, baptism, marriage, and death. They also include social identifiers such as initiations, job promotions, and graduation. It is in this transitioning that the initiate is transformed, occupying various statuses throughout her lifetime, symbolizing movement, a passing through stages that reinforce existing social structuring and cohere the initiate with the society. Van Gennep (1960) postulated a three-part structure to rites of passage signifying an underlying process: separation, margin or limen, and incorporation or reaggregation (10; Turner 1967, 94). This thesis will show how van Gennep’s stages apply in the process of the *quinceañera*.

Victor Turner (1974) uses the phrase *social drama* to describe the process of social change within a society through the resolution of a social dilemma. The process entails four stages: a breach, amplification of the breach, redressive action, and resolution. Resolution of the social dilemma comes either through reintegration of the injured group or the legitimization of the change brought about by the process (39). Redressive actions can take the form of advice,
mediation or arbitration, or the performance of public ritual (39). In the borderlands, the *quinceañera* is a type of redressive action employed by the Mexican immigrant community that focuses on the entry of a girl into womanhood in an alien culture. The social dilemma in question is the construction of identity for Mexican immigrant women in the borderlands. For Mexican immigrant women, it is their beliefs, values, and identities that are considered different and alien by an Anglo world that demands nothing short of complete assimilation. The ritual fuses redressive action and accepted cultural norms into an understood cultural identity: becoming a *mujercita*. This thesis uses Turner’s categories to help us understand the dual nature of the *quinceañera* for Mexican immigrant communities.

**Chapter Overview**

Chapter two offers a discussion on existing literature on the *quinceañera* and how the themes of family, ethnicity, gendering, community, economics, and tradition speak to the importance of the ritual performance. Chapter three describes the methods used for gathering the data for this thesis and is divided into two sections: my approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal (Appendix A) and the actual methodology used to gather the data. I offer both versions because they provide valuable information regarding the Mexicano population in Northwest Florida at the time of my research, information which affected my design. My revised methodology also addresses researcher bias when the research undertaken is within the same social group as the researcher. Since even the best-devised designs can go awry because of external situations, institutions, or time pressures, what remains is the ability to learn from the experience. The process of work joins the body of data and ultimately informs the research.

Chapter four is an overview of my findings derived from fifteen interviews and six questionnaires. The interviews and questionnaires offer entrée into the thoughts of the participants regarding their remembrances of their *quinceañera*. By answering the simple question “What do you remember about your *quinceañera,*” the participants offered a multifocal view of the ritual. Finally, in Chapter five, I provide a summary of this study, draw conclusions about the importance of the *quinceañera* in Mexican immigrant communities, and suggest further avenues for study.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

High heels and lipstick. A beautiful ball gown. The dreamy rhythm of a waltz. A bejeweled crown sparkles in the spotlight as a proud father whirls his fifteen-year-old daughter out of childhood and into adolescence. Her family and friends applaud; her mother dabs a handkerchief to her eye. Life that night is a fairy tale, with ladies and chamberlains in attendance. She is a real-life princess – *la quinceañera*.

– Michelle Salcedo (1997, xi)

Current literature on the *quinceañera* consists of “how-to” guides and essential planners for organizing the “most significant event” in a Latina’s rite of passage into young womanhood, as well as books that offer more complex analysis (Hoyt-Goldsmith 2002, King 1998, Salcedo 1997). The guides, together with the abundance of Internet sites for all things pertaining to the *quinceañera*, provide a popular source for mothers and daughters dreaming and planning of their *quinceañera*. Mining these sources reveals prevailing themes pertaining to ethnicity and gendering.

The planning guides advance a commercial aspect to the ritual by emphasizing the dresses and attire, photographers, videographers, invitations, announcements, flowers, favors, and decorations. The guides also offer practical advice for financial planning and available resources for organizing a *quinceañera*. Many of my informants sought the guidance of these texts and viewed them as their “dream books.” These guides offer more than a way to exploit consumers; they also provide valuable insight into themes that speak to ethnicity, gendering, family, and community.

In Michele Salcedo’s (1997) *Quinceañera! The Essential Guide to Planning the Perfect Sweet Fifteen Celebration*, the author presents the *quinceañera* as a rite of passage and cultural identifier: “*quinceañeras* celebrate a passage from one stage of life to the next in a strict sense, but they are so much more. At their best, they celebrate and renew family, strengthen community, and instill pride in our respective cultures” (ix). Elizabeth King (1998) writes, “Coming-of-age ceremonies serve an important purpose for a society, because they strengthen the bond between a person and her community. Like a wedding, this is a time when promises are made” (7). Both
authors refer to a strength of ritual by addressing ritual’s reintegrative phase – renewal of family and strengthening community. These guides provide models for how family and community expect a young woman to behave. Their chapters not only speak to the many concerns that a young woman and her family encounter in planning the event but also reinstate ethnic and gender models commonly expected in Latino families.

One manner in which ethnicity is promoted is by linking the *quinceañera* to the ancient traditions in Mexico and Latin America. By promoting the ritual as having origins in Aztec, Mayan, Toltec, Taino, and Quechua cultures (Salcedo 1997, xi) the *quinceañera* is elevated to a standard of ethnic pride and tradition, one with longstanding roots and tradition for not just Mexicanos, but all Latinos. During my research, many informants reminded me of the ritual’s historical significance and its link to the Aztecs and Maya peoples. Reference to these ancient roots is found in all of the Internet sites about the *quinceañera* and in the guide books for planning the perfect *quince* (Hoyt-Goldsmith 2002, King 1998, Salcedo 1997). I could not find a primary source connecting the origin of the *quinceañera* to Aztec traditions, but some authors suggest that the Aztecs did have coming-of-age ceremonies. In *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, David Carrasco (1998) writes:

> When Aztec children reached the age of fifteen, they embarked on an important period of transition in their lives: a transition of space, activity, and religious and social responsibility. Instruction began an hour before sunset, when the boys and girls, under the guidance of the instructors, were taught to sing the sacred songs of the people and to dance the various ritual dances long into the night. These songs contained the most important mythological and historical information about the culture and its world view. (109)

Writing on Aztec religion and cosmology, Carrasco (1998) expounds the very tenets of ritual action by expressing the importance of the same kind of world view that finds expression in the performance of the *quinceañera*. More importantly, the extension of this world view in the present is not lost on the Mexicanos I spoke with; it is a matter of ethnic pride. As I shared these findings with Mexicano subjects their response was always the same – a nod of the head, eyes narrowing, a brief smile, a signalling of the reaffirmation of their beliefs and ethnic pride.
Just as girls in Aztec society were expected to embark on religious and social change, these same expectations are mirrored in these “how to” planners and guides. Expected behavior includes acknowledgement of the initiate’s new status, responsibilities, and expected roles: “the quinceañera is the way many Latino families acknowledge that a girl has grown up” (King 1998, 7); “one kind of school prepared them to lead a religious life, while the other led to a future as a wife and mother. Both schools stressed chastity, truthfulness, and obedience” (Hoyt-Goldsmith 2002, 5), and “a young woman today uses this opportunity to reflect upon the blessings of her childhood and the challenges that lie before her as a grown-up” (7). These images advance the quinceañera’s new sense of responsibility while reinforcing expected gender roles: wife and mother. Salcedo (1997) does, however, underscore the variability of a young woman’s options outside society’s expectation of wife and mother by allowing that, “Today, biology is no longer destiny. The options for young women are almost limitless” (5). Salcedo’s book reinforces many Mexicano themes: familia, comunidad, wife, and mother. Although the quinceañera is presented to her family and friends as “a young woman with responsibilities ahead of her,” she is still expected to be under family supervision until she crosses over into her next status: wife and eventually mother.

Strong sense of family has always been a feature among Latino culture; for Mexicano immigrants, familia is the backbone of their survival and integration into the wider culture. The quinceañera promotes strong families and amplifies the parental role; both Hoyt-Goldsmith and Salcedo (1997) refer to the roles families and parents play in organizing a quinceañera. The strong familial unity among Mexicano immigrants is built on a system of reciprocity or compadrazgo. These ties give aid in times of stress or need and are formed during rites that celebrate life cycle changes such as baptism, confirmation, and marriage, or during status changes such as school graduations or job promotions. These ties bind families across time and space. Mexicano immigrants use compadrazgo during the quinceañera to absorb the expenses involved in the ritual. In the process these ties are strengthened: “In Mexico, a quinceañera involves the entire extended family and community, the event is very expensive, and most
families cannot afford to put on such a large party by themselves. So everyone in the community pitches in to help in some way” (Hoyt-Goldsmith 2002, 9).

Salcedo (1997) quotes the words of Sister Rosa Maria Icazas of the Mexican-American Cultural Center in San Antonio to emphasize the importance of parental roles: “at least for that day, she is very special to everybody. For the parents and particularly the father, it is an affirmation of their identity, and an affirmation of himself that he can give something very special to his daughter” (6). Salcedo reinforces the father’s role further when she asserts that although fathers are usually responsible for the financial aspects of the ritual, when fathers choose to be actively involved in every phase of the planning, “the family becomes closer, communication among everyone improves, and everyone in the immediate family is pleased with the celebration” (33). Juxtaposed to this image of the father as benevolent benefactor, the mother is relegated to an antagonist and must be reminded who the quinceañera is for: “take time to think about why giving your daughter a quinceañera celebration is important to you. Be honest with yourself. Are you making the quinceañera you wanted for yourself? . . . When the mother and daughter unconsciously compete to be la quinceañera and the mother pulls rank to have things done her way, it can be hurtful to their relationship” (30). These images are supported during the performance of the ritual. It is the father who proclaims his daughter’s womanhood by removing her flat shoes, which are exchanged for high heels, a symbol of her social life as a young woman.

The texts cited above all suggest that ethnicity and gendering take place through the process of organizing, planning, and experiencing the quinceañera. The texts cite examples of how the quinceañera should behave in her new role as a young woman: her responsibilities to her family and community, to God and the teachings of the Church, and to herself through her purity.

Filipino sociologist Evelyn Ibatan Rodriguez (2013) informs this thesis by offering more complex analysis. As a teen, Rodriguez attended debuts, the Filipino version of the Mexican quinceañera, but she never considered the social significance of debuts until much later. Her book, Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras: Coming of Age in American Ethnic
Communities, presents data compiled from more than 900 debuts and quinceañeras and fieldwork conducted over a period of three years in Southern and Northern California, Mexico, and the Philippines. Looking beyond the glitz and glamour of “white dresses and dance floor promenades” (2), Rodriguez examines the rituals in both ethnic communities for similarities and differences. In the process, she sheds additional light on ethnicity, gender, familial, and community expectations. Her methodology consisted of primary interviews of present and former quinceañeras and debuts; observations of the various meetings in the planning and organizing process; facilitation of group discussions involving teens; and informal interviews with secondary participants including caterers, court members, clergy, and decorators.

Rodriguez’ book is for academics and interested laypeople alike, offering more than a banal viewing of these lavish events and helping to unpack the varied meanings behind these rituals. For Rodriguez, key in her research was answering the question of why these events continue, with all the criticism leveled by the Church and others regarding the expense of the celebration, its overt sexualization of the girls, the obvious patriarchal undertones of these celebrations, and accusations of the “hijacking of a Latino tradition” (4).

Rodriguez (2013) centers her research in the community of Las Querubes, a “sprawling urban metropolis . . . home to one of the largest and most multiethnic immigrant populations in the nation” (17). The debut is a glamorous affair meticulously planned and orchestrated to mark a girl’s formal entry into Filipino society. The debuts are yearly cotillions organized by various Filipino ethnic associations for which membership of Filipino families is required. Membership dues are applied to the cost of staging these cotillions, including booking the venue. Throughout the year, the association holds fundraising events to offset the cost of the cotillions. The script for the debut follows the same pattern: “a promenade of the debutantes with their families, the introduction of each deb before her grand curtsy, a group cotillion to ‘The Blue Danube,’ a group serenade to the parents, dinner, a formal cake cutting, and then the father-daughter dance, before open dancing for everyone” (36). The various associations dictate style of dress. Men are required to wear black tie; all young women wear floor-length white gowns; and for the Leonor
Rivera Pilipina Society in particular, traditional Maria Clara gowns are required (36). Rodriguez points out that not all debuts follow this script but tend to be “blended” events which adhere to some but not all of the formal cotillion details. Because of the large number of Filipino families involved in the cotillions, news coverage of these events is extensive, including articles and photographs of the debutantes, and their families take center stage in ethnic Filipino newspapers.

The planning and organizing for both the debut and quinceañera require a social network of family and peers to assist in the celebration. Mexicanos have had a history of reliance upon existing compadrazgo networks for assistance and support. However, in studying how these networks operate, Rodriguez (2013) observes that networks are formed based on closeness with the immediate family. For families that employ the use of sponsors, or padrinos, for large individual quinces and debuts, strong ties exist and are reinforced by individuals who are regarded as key members in the network or family. Among this group are the padrinos de Baptismo (baptismal godparents), or “our best friends.” These individuals are expected to furnish the girl with the most expensive and intimate momentos of the quinceañera: the ring, the medallion, the bible, and the cushion. The padrinos’ names are engraved on the announcements. Lower on the tier are “sponsors,” or individuals who might be asked to furnish the cake, decorations, or floral arrangements. In cotillions in which many girls are presented at once, strong ties are maintained between families and weak ties formed with members outside the immediate family. Lastly, for smaller intimate quinces and debuts, exisiting ties are strengthened and reinforced and “set firm boundsaries around ‘strong ties’ to close friends and family in already existing networks of support” (39). Rodriguez’ analysis offers a more in-depth inspection of the formation of social networks by looking beyond the formation of individual networks at ones where strong familial networks are maintained and weak ties formed.

Rodriguez (2013) argues that both gender and ethnicity are key to immigrant identity. Both the cotillion and the quinceañera showcase the “chasteness and virtue” of the girls, which Rodriguez argues is an opportunity for both ethnic groups to claim moral superiority to existing Anglo-American culture, a point reiterated by many of my research participants. Furthermore,
Rodriguez argues that it is this moral superiority that helps immigrant families counter existing derogatory images by instilling strong awareness of ethnic pride in culture. In this process, however, exists an equally strong construct of what a “proper” Mexicana or Filipina “should be.” Explicit in this process is the understanding that the girl is under social control by her parents and family, for it is they who impart ethnic and gender knowledge to their daughters.

Rodriguez’ (2013) polysemic approach is derived from Turner’s works and from the importance of symbols and reliance on participants to decode their meanings. Clifford Geertz’s (1973) use of thick description describes and offers a more careful “read” of both the quinceañera and cotillion, and Stuart Hall (Clark et al. 1976) looks at positioning and power as viewed in social networks. Both the cotillion and the quinceañera are celebrations and rituals that go beyond platitude and can be mined for political content in the method that social networks are formed and maintained. Additionally, Rodrigquez hopes to “decenter dominant discourses” by giving ample validity to the experiences and “voice” of her participants. And by offering a “thicker” description of both these rituals, she asserts that the production of “ethnicized feminities” can be unstable and given to argument and renegotiation as both Mexicana and Filipinas grapple with self-identity, assertiveness, and their sexuality.

Ruth Horowitz’s (2010) The Power of Ritual in a Chicano Community: A Young Woman’s Status and Expanding Family Ties analyzes the ritual as a form of economic exchange and reciprocity in which tradition along with familial and communal ties are key constructs in the ritual. Horowitz addresses the study of ritual in community life and its shift to the urban setting. With this shift, emphasis is now on renewed interest in ritual as a persistent adaptation to “economic and social marginality in a U.S. city” (31). Horowitz conducted her research in the Chicano community around 32nd Street in Chicago, where she lived for three years. During this time, she attended numerous quinceañeras, participated as a madrina (godmother), and engaged in conversations with quince girls, their mothers, and with students at various venues. Horowitz describes the area as being ambiguous and marginal both socioeconomically and culturally (33). Although 32nd Street is ordinarily described by outsiders as a slum area, the residents do not see
themselves as slum dwellers, but rather as hard-working people taking pride in renovating their homes as best they can. Nonetheless, the city has left many buildings to decay, and although 32nd Street offers much in terms of cultural venues, only its residents visit its storefronts and restaurants (33). Caught between being neither Mexican enough nor American, the younger population clearly identify as being Chicano, an emblem of their ambiguous status. For young women in this ambiguous state, Horowitz views the *quinceañera* as (1) an adaptive feature to this ambiguity and marginality, (2) a performance of “Mexicanness,” and (3) a cultural response to its past enacted in an urban setting (31).

Horowitz’s (2010) work is helpful to examine the notion of ambiguity of place, as it contributes to the sense of anxiety many Mexicanos feel living in a dominant culture far removed from their previous experiences. Horowitz offers another explication for the popularity and necessity of the *quinceañera*: economic exchange and reciprocity as a means to strengthen important social ties. Horowitz argues that while it may be the girl’s purity, attractiveness, and marriageability that is implied by the *quinceañera*, what is really at stake is her family’s ability to pay for a lavish public demonstration that cements their status within the community. Horowitz points out that there may be “less expensive” means for a family to display their wealth and status than relying on the riskiness of their daughter’s virtue.

*Compadrazgo* is a system of exchange in which social ties are made and broken. Horowitz (2010) analyzes these ties through symbolic action and the knowledge that all rituals are a means of communication (33). In the performance of ritual, key symbols and elements are communicated to the participants. On their own, these symbols may invoke contradictions; however, used in the performance of a ritual, they dramatize a world view and provide a sense of how “things should be,” a view which is understood by the participants. In *compadrazgo*, incurring a debt to help another family in need is a tradition as much as a financial necessity. *Compadrazgo* may appear foolish to outsiders, but played out during a public ritual such as the *quinceañera*, it dramatizes the trust or *confianza* between families. It reaffirms “Mexicanness” and foregrounds continuity with the past as it unfolds in the present urban setting.
Agreeing with sociologist Orrin Edgar Klapp (1969), Horowitz (2010) contends that the *quinceañera* “is not a ritual empty of meaning like so many found in modern America” (43), and that the symbols employed in the ritual have shared meanings for participants. However, a more powerful statement of the ritual’s efficacy can be made by the multivocality and ambiguity of the symbols for the participants. Fathers view the *quinceañera* as a statement of their daughter’s innocence and their control over her sexuality; women and mothers view the *quinceañera* through a filter of power that stems from the girl’s successful conveyance of purity regardless of her actual circumstances. Finally, the *quinceañera* is a lesson to the younger generation: “a statement of how things are supposed to happen – daughters are supposed to listen to their fathers, and sons are not to seduce their daughters so that one cannot tell a virgin from her opposite” (44). With emphasis on the girl’s purity and her parent’s obsession to maintain her virginity or at least provide its illusion, Horowitz does not inform on how gender is made through the ritual, nor does she explore the intersection between ethnicity and gender. Horowitz does not give amplitude to the “voice” of her informants; rather she informs based upon her own observations. She does, however, speak to one strength of the ritual: multivocality of ritual symbols and symbolic action as a means to communicate values and preferences.

Karen Mary Dávalos’ (2010) “La Quinceañera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities” informed my thesis in three ways: first, by foregrounding her “insider” status, Dávalos allowed me to view my “insider” status as both a strength and weakness and helped me recognize the difference between the two during my research. Mirroring this discussion is inclusion of ethnographic methods and how they are remade through process. Her reference to the Renato Rosaldo’s (1989) work allowed me to understand and accept the changes in my original design and confirmed that my assumptions of the *quinceañera* could never be a “unified master summation” and that “analyses always are incomplete” (8). Lastly, again borrowing from Rosaldo’s work, Dávalos (2010) centers the *quinceañera* as an intersection in which “particular explanations, descriptions, and forms . . . are embedded within people’s ideas about appropriate
gender roles, ethnic identity, traditional culture, sexuality, class postions, and anticipated results of culture contact” (10).

By shifting between outsider and insider status, Dávalos (2010) allowed her informants to endow the public discourse on the meaning of the *quinceañera* with a multivocal view and to discuss aspects about the ritual not normally found in the public discourse. In this process, Dávalos frames the *quinceañera* more as a product of human agency rather than unwavering, blind tradition. As points of reference she centers her discussion between two parts: Catholic priests and journalists and discussion between Mexicanas and their families. Dávalos carefully conveys the variability in responses and the views expressed that “this is as it should be.” With many of her informants moving fluidly between Mexico and the United States, her informants’ views were as variable as their life experiences. Self-described Mexicanas born in the United States and their daughters fought over every aspect of the *quinceañera*, including the color of the dress, types of food served, music played, venues, and implementation of the ritual; as Catholics, her informants disagreed over the form of the ritual (10).

Church clergy were equally varied in their views of the *quinceañera*, for as Dávalos (2010) explains, although the Chicago Archdiocese required those priests ministering in the Mexicano neighborhoods to be fluent in Spanish, it did not require them to have “multicultural sensibilities” (11). At the time Dávalos conducted her research, both the Catholic Church and journalists described the *quinceañera* in the same manner: “as an extension of Catholic sacraments, as rite of passage, and a practice that has historical continuity or ‘tradition’”(13). Disagreement among Church officials over the importance of the ritual pivoted among three main points: the tremendous financial burden on families, sending the wrong message regarding the girl’s sexuality, and acceptance of the quinceanera as a “teachable moment” to evangelize and encourage church attendance.

The Catholic Church has appropriated the ritual as a rite of passage and made it its own by claiming that the ritual does not signify a life cycle change so much as it positions the young woman squarely within the reach and expectations of the Church. The Church has gone so far
as to claim that the quinceañera owes its ancient roots to the synchronization between Maya traditions and Spain’s evangelization of the Americas (Dávalos 2010, 17). Dávalos points out that in the process of synchronization, the Church uses the permeability of culture to make its point, but fails or refuses to allow this same permeability in its present view (17).

Dávalos’ (2010) article reveals the variability in the meaning of the quinceañera for her informants. This variability is suffused by life experiences as they intersect with ideas of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Her article proffers a more textured view of the quinceañera by allowing her informants to disagree and render a view of the quinceañera that is changeable and porous. It offers a view of ritual that is more complex than that of the Church, one that takes into account the process of the quinceañera as a becoming, and one that “reclaims” and situates Mexicana experiences amid the contradictions of life in El Norte.

Lastly, Julia Alvarez’s (2007) Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA provides an intimate view of the quinceañera. Framed by the author’s personal recollections of her youth in Queens and her own coming-of-age experiences, Alvarez’s analysis explores the meaning of the ritual for Latinas in the United States by interviewing five girls and focusing on one, Monica. Alvarez infuses her text with interviews, tales of mishaps on the way to the quinceañera, Monica’s “almost” Disneyesque-themed quince, and succinct social commentary. In reading this book, I found myself drawn into the “drama” of Monica’s quinceañera angst. Waiting to find its resolution in the story’s end, I realized that ritual itself is a resolution to a social drama: In the face of rising pregnancy rates, high school drop outs, and Latina suicide, what does the quinceañera offer?

Alvarez’s (2007) book brings to light her own ambivalence toward the quinceañera. She notes that having a quinceañera often entails adopting “every other Latino group’s little traditions and then some” (75). In Alvarez’s view, borrowing from other cultures detracts from localizing the tradition of the quince; she goes as far as to imply that the tradition is inauthentic and “remade in the USA” (116). Alvarez looks to the work of Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in drawing out the Latino quinceañera as an “invented tradition” whose sole
purpose is to unite a community through a fictitious past. However, this observation by Alvarez may not be a bad thing. A feature of ritual is that it unifies communities by offering a redress to social ills. In making a community, there must be some semblance of “us,” a belief in imagined homelands that anchor the individual into that place. The symbols used in the performance of ritual validate the community’s sense of place and its ethos and transforms a disjointed community into a unified whole.
CHAPTER III
METHODS

Background

My research approach is qualitative in nature, with procedures and techniques stemming from two investigative orientations: formal ethnography and participant observation. I prepared an IRB proposal (Appendix A) prior to beginning my project, in keeping with requirements for research involving human subjects. The central aim of this research was to discover the importance of the *quinceañera* among Mexican immigrant women for gender and ethnicity identification. Here, I first provide a description of why the IRB proposal for my original plan of research did not succeed. Then I offer a section covering adjustments in the research design, my summer internship at a community center, and the way that my involvement in a *quinceañera* giveaway essay contest enabled me to complete my study. Here, I also include a section on expectations and subjectivities throughout my efforts. Although I had entered into my research with the feeling that as a Chicana I would have “insider status,” I came to recognize that my “outsider” sensibilities as a Chicana alienated me from my participants.

In early 2004, I lived in one of the beach communities along the Gulf Coast in South Walton County, Florida. The coastal area was experiencing a housing boom. Sales of existing and newly constructed homes accelerated as homeowners invested in communities along the coast. This increase in housing brought a surge in immigration as laborers and service industry workers sought to fill employment needs that follow a high productivity area. The influx of “cheap” labor in the form of skilled and unskilled Mexican laborers brought about changes to this area. Several Mexican-owned restaurants opened; grocery chains featured a wider selection of Latino products; the school district incorporated bilingual programs into the curriculum, and businesses actively sought bilingual employees in the hopes of engaging an expanding Latino clientele (personal communication with Grace Resendez McCaffery, May 2011). In this atmosphere, small Mexican food stores – *tiendas* – sprouted overnight. These *tiendas* provided a venue
where Latinos could purchase food items and merchandise, send a remittance to family back home through Western Union, listen to and purchase music and magazines, or simply gather, share news, and establish social networks. Mexican immigrants who worked in the coastal communities tended to reside across the bay, where affordable rentals were readily available. I became a casualty of the coastal community housing market boom when my once-affordable lake rental skyrocketed overnight, and I relocated to the northern section of the county. By 2008, over-development and rising interest rates contributed to the housing market implosion, and while many local businesses felt the sting of a deteriorating economy forcing their closure, the tienditas and Mexican restaurants were sustained by the patronage of the Mexican community that relied on the social networking and familiarity these tiendas provided (Cadava 2011, Barreto 2013).

The northern part of the county was predominately rural and remains so. In the 2010 census, the community I settled in reported a total population of 5,177, of which 7.5% of the population (roughly 388 individuals) claimed a Hispanic/Latino designation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). As I settled into my new home and ventured into the small tiendas in my community, I quickly became interested in the women of this population – more specifically, in Mexican women and their adaptation to Anglo-American life.

The Catholic Church in Walton County had witnessed an influx of Mexican immigrants to the area during the housing boom and actively sought to reach out to the community by offering weekly Mass in Spanish. The coastal Catholic Church incorporated a biweekly Spanish Mass, and a weekly Spanish Mass was held in North Walton county on Sunday evenings. Two priests (members of the Trinitarian Order in Tallahassee) alternated conducting Mass on Sunday evenings in my community, while a priest from Pensacola conducted services in the South Walton location. During the height of the housing boom, more than one hundred individuals attended Mass regularly in my community. As construction of new homes dwindled, however, many Mexican families left for other parts of the country. This exodus was reflected in a decrease in church attendance, which now consisted of only a few long-standing members
of the community. When I began my preliminary research on my community, attendance at Sunday evening Mass fluctuated between 50 and 100 individuals (Field notes, May 2011). When my thesis research began in 2011, attendance remained between 45 to 90 individuals. In my community, two tiendas and two restaurants employed Mexicans. In addition to the Catholic Church, a Pentecostal Church had recently been established and was actively recruiting from the local Latino population with relative success (personal communication with Eva Peña, June 2011).

The ritual of the quinceañera incorporates a strong religious association, and given the close relationship between Mexican immigrants and the Catholic Church, I felt the best place to begin recruitment for my research would be from within the Church congregation in my community. My thesis topic was to explore the importance of the quinceañera ritual as gender and ethnic markers among Mexican immigrant women as they acculturated into American soil. My goal was to recruit twenty women of varying age as volunteers. As I awaited IRB approval, I began attending the Church in my community regularly. My objective was to establish familiarity among the community members because I believed this strategy would be the best method for active recruitment of participants once I received IRB approval.

I received IRB approval for my research proposal in July 2011 (Appendix B) and began my project in earnest by formally contacting the pastor of my Catholic church community. I called the rectory, introduced myself to the church secretary, and gave a brief reason for my request to meet with the pastor personally. In the meantime, I continued to attend Mass and actively pursue friendships among the Mexicanas in the church. I frequented the small tienda in my neighborhood and introduced myself as a graduate student with an interest in the quinceañera. I left several phone messages and one written note at the rectory in person with the church secretary, all without a reply. Indeed, my actions in the pursuit of my object proved to alarm prospective volunteers and ultimately hindered my research in my community. The Mexicanas working in the tienda refused to engage in conversation. I began to question my research design.
Worse, I began to doubt myself. It appeared as if women were avoiding me. It was not long before I understood why my actions were futile.

In my attempts to forge new friendships with the Mexicanas in my community, I never questioned how my attempts for friendship appeared to them. In my mind, I was operating under an established method of “making friends” by making myself “friendly.” However, my efforts to appear “approachable” were being construed as “too” friendly and pushy by individuals whose immigration status was in question. In 2010, Arizona passed one of the most restrictive anti-immigrant laws in the nation, SB 1070 (ACLU 2017). Its passage spawned copycat laws in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah (ACLU 2017). In the Florida Panhandle, a miasma of fear settled, and a general sense of distrust pervaded daily life for Mexicanos. My efforts at friendship became a casualty of this atmosphere.

My project was stymied to the extent that I was not able to complete my objectives according to my original IRB design. During the summer of 2011, however, I began an internship at La Costa Latina newspaper and the Hispanic Resource Center in Pensacola. This internship proved to be a source of information that allowed me to complete my research objectives, and has remained so.

**Summer Internship – Quinceañera Giveaway Essay Contest**

I began my internship today. I am excited about working with Grace and learning about the Latino community in Pensacola. Grace is the editor and founder of La Costa Latina newspaper and director of the Hispanic Resource Center. She has met with my committee chair, Robert Philen and discussed my interest in the ritual of the quinceañera. She suggested hosting a quinceañera essay contest as a project in which I could become involved. (Field notes, May 2011)

My internship at La Costa Latina and the Hispanic Resource Center began in early May 2011. A few days prior to the center’s grand opening, I met with Grace, the director of the center and editor of the newspaper. During our first meeting, I was introduced to two other Latina volunteers: Rosie, a vivacious woman from the Dominican Republic, and Sally, an older woman from Cuba who kept us alert throughout the afternoon by making us cafecito. These two women and the various other Latinas I met while interning at the center proved to be an essential
part of my research. Additionally, as I interacted with the many Mexicanas I contacted during my internship, they informed me of their histories, hopes, dreams, fears, and ultimately their views of the world. The friendship I encountered during the internship and the willingness of participants to share experiences enabled me to move forward and complete my research.

**The Research Process**

Grace asked me to tell her about my interest in the *quince*. I told her of my childhood knowledge of the ritual and of my coming of age as a Chicana in Southern California. We shared some similar experience – we are both second-generation Mexican-American women however, whereas I identify as a Chicana, Grace sees herself as a Mexican-American or a Mexicana. I asked her to describe her *quince* and with a laugh and a fling of her long hair she described her *quince* as traditional, a white dress, Catholic Mass, a court of fourteen, and a party afterwards to mark the occasion. After mentioning to her how girls are taking an active part in determining how their *quince* is celebrated, she responded that that was not part of the tradition. For Grace, her *quince* is the embodiment of tradition and she identifies very strongly with it. It is a social marker for her, it is part of her identity. (Field notes, May 2011)

My interest in collecting data for my thesis and Grace’s desire to involve the community in the *quinceañera* coalesced. Grace had long been involved in the Hispanic community of Pensacola and had envisioned a community center available to the public for meetings, special events, and classes. Since its opening, the center has become a venue for all these activities. From the beginning, Grace’s aim was that the community center would be the unifying apex of the Latino community in Pensacola. One method to achieve this goal was through promoting cultural awareness and education. A key step in bringing together different sections of the community was offering a free *quinceañera* to a special young woman who wrote an essay describing what the ritual meant to her and why she should be awarded a free *quince*. *La Costa Latina* published the requirements for the essay contest and the stipulations for the free *quinceañera* and circulated the newspaper among its 10,000 readers in Alabama and Northwest Florida. I wrote a brief column on the importance of the ritual and attempted to engage the community through an open forum about the ritual. From mid-May until the announcement of the winner in July, *La Costa Latina* publicized the contest and ran the column.
Traditionally, certain components are necessary for a true *quinceañera*: the dress, the Catholic Mass, and the party. Early on, Grace had decided that we would focus on securing the party venue, a cake, the limousine, music, a professional photographer, and a videographer. The *quinceañera*’s family would likely choose to have the Mass in their local church. Grace’s standing within the community and her contacts as editor of the newspaper provided us a number of resources to approach for donations. Because *La Costa Latina* and the Hispanic Resource Center were financing the event, however, we decided early on that the cost of the dress would have to be absorbed by the family of the young girl who won the contest. The *quinceañera* dress or gown embodies a young girl’s transition from childhood into womanhood; her dress is a reflection of this transformation and has a deep-seeded emotional and symbolic significance. It is highly personal for both the *quinceañera* and her family. Grace understood this situation and made it a requirement that the family provide the *quinceañera* dress.

Three times a week, I drove from my home in Walton County to Pensacola to meet with Grace, share a *cafe con leche* with Julie, and contact local businesses about donating to the “Free *Quinceañera* Giveaway Essay Contest.” Grace taught me how to solicit individuals and businesses for monetary support by suggesting that their donation would strengthen their position in the Hispanic community. Taking advantage of free advertising in the only bilingual newspaper in Northwest Florida, many of these businesses realized the potential for tapping into a new market: the buying power of the Hispanic community. Our efforts were rewarded. We reserved a venue with a tropical garden ambiance; a local limousine service donated the use of a stretch limousine and a bilingual driver; a professional photographer offered his services; and two disc jockeys provided the music for the *quinceañera* and the public dance that took place after the ceremony. A party planner hoping to break into the *quinceañera* market in Pensacola offered to make the cake and provide the decorations for the cake table. Once the *quinceañera* essay winner was chosen, her family met with the caterer and decided on a menu for the event. Our countless calls to vendors and contacts describing the relevancy of the *quinceañera*, combined with the many women who dropped into the center and engaged in dialogue about their *quince*, provided
me the opportunity to describe my interest in the ritual and my research. My internship provided one other important feature: the women in the community began to know me and accept me as one of them. By July of that summer, I was granted approval for my IRB research, and we announced our winner. The young girl selected was a high school student who wrote of an unfulfilled promise: her *quinceañera*. Her name is Britani.

Our first meeting included the *quinceañera* winner, Britani; her mother, Alma; an event planner and pastry maker, Ofelia; Grace; the caterer, Rosie; and me. We learned that Alma was a mother of five and the sole provider for her family. We also learned that her husband, Britani’s father, was incarcerated. During this initial meeting, the stipulations for the free *quinceañera* were reviewed and agreed upon. Ofelia commented on the beauty of the ritual and its significance and shared her enthusiasm with Britani. Thus, the first element of my participant observation research process was set in motion.

**Formal Ethnographic Recruitment**

In addition to working on the essay contest, I pursued more formal ethnographic information. From July to December of 2011, I collected data in the form of questionnaires and formal interviews. Six respondents completed a questionnaire, and fourteen women took part in formal interviews. The interviews resulted from contacts made through my internship at the center and through networking among friends of my initial respondents. The women who took part in my research were a diverse group of Latinas ranging from sixteen to seventy years old. The questionnaire took place one evening during a sponsored event at the Hispanic Resource Center. *La Costa Latina* advertised an “Evening of Beauty” with a bilingual Avon representative as a way for women in the community to participate in a relaxed atmosphere and afterwards to join in an informal discussion about the importance of the *quinceañera*. I phoned the women that I had engaged in informal conversations about the *quinceañera* and specifically invited them to the event. I had hoped for twenty participants, but on a Friday evening it was difficult to muster twenty women with free time away from their families.
Six women participated in the discussion, and five answered the questionnaire at the end of the evening. Of the five participants, three were of Mexican descent, two were from Columbia, and one was Nuyorican (a New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent). Three of the respondents agreed to formal interviews and made arrangements that evening to set up an interview location and time. Two of the respondents were the *quinceañera* winner and her mother; they requested that I meet with them in their home. I arranged to meet the other respondent after hours at her workplace. One of the women I contacted for the “Evening of Beauty” event, Sonya, was unable to attend, however she was excited about my research and wanted to participate. She emailed her completed questionnaire and is included in the breakdown total. Sonya suggested that I interview her and her three daughters over lunch. Two of Sonya’s daughters had already had their *quinceañeras*, while the youngest (aged fourteen) was contemplating foregoing the cost of a *quince* in exchange for a car. We met for lunch one afternoon, and Sonya briefly discussed her *quinceañera* and the ritual’s importance and relevance for young women today. From this informal luncheon, I agreed to meet Sonya and her daughter Amelia for an extended formal interview in her home at a later date. Three interviews took place at the Hispanic Resource Center from contacts made with women who frequented the center. Two of these women were my “older” respondents. One was from Puerto Rico, and the other from Cuba.

On average, the individual interviews lasted from 35 minutes to an hour in length. Some lasted as long as 2 hours, and two involved repeat sessions. I had each interviewee read my research letter of intent and sign an “Agreement to be Interviewed” form (Appendix C). In the cases where I interviewed a minor, an adult guardian signed on her behalf. Prior to the beginning of the interview, every interviewee was given the option of using an alias. In the end, however, I thought it best to use an alias for all the respondents in my research. All of the sessions except for two phone interviews and two luncheon interviews were tape-recorded. For the luncheon and phone interviews, I took cursory notes and filled in the detail later that day. All of my respondents were given the option to not have a tape recorder present; in the instance of the luncheon interviews, I felt the presence of a tape-recorder would inhibit the overall informal
mood of the interview and decided against its use. I attempted to take handwritten notes during one of the quinceañeras I attended, but felt it too intrusive and quickly adjusted my approach and tempered my anxiousness by writing furiously as I sat in my vehicle afterwards.

I sought the participation of three female Catholic Hispanic Outreach coordinators in Walton and Santa Rosa counties. I conducted one live interview and two phone interviews with these coordinators. The Walton County Catholic Hispanic Outreach coordinator at St. Rita’s Church was instrumental in introducing me to six mother-daughter quinceañera participants who agreed to participate in formal interviews. However, after numerous unreturned phone calls, unanswered messages, and missed appointments, I was able to schedule only one definite interview with one of these mother-daughter dyads. Although I was somewhat dejected in the failed attempts to secure interviews with these women, I felt my efforts were not wasted as I was invited to three quinceañeras. I interviewed one male respondent, the Catholic priest assigned to St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Escambia County; he also conducted Mass at St. Rita’s Catholic Church on the second and fourth Saturday of every month.

My interviews with the Hispanic Outreach coordinators not only gave me much needed support in meeting possible participants in my research but also supplied important information on the Latino community in Northwest Florida. The interviews provided me a view of three different communities in Northwest Florida – South Walton, Santa Rosa, and North Walton Counties. Originally, I wanted a diverse group of women with different life experiences to provide depth to my research. Because I was able to interview women from all three communities, I believe I was able to achieve this goal. The diversity of all three counties was clearly reflected in my respondents. Escambia County demonstrated a greater diversity of Latinos, whereas both communities in Walton County were predominately Mexican. All three coordinators reinforced the importance of the quinceañera within the immigrant community as a marker for the successful instruction of a young woman of grace through the ritual’s Catholic component. All three coordinators mentioned the decrease in Church attendance at services and special Church events because of the underlining fear of possible Immigration and Naturalization
Service raids. Raids in Santa Rosa County in 2008 had shut down two Mexican restaurants, deported ten individuals, and forced countless others to leave on their own accord (Ida Smith interview 2011), impacting church attendance. Most importantly, their interviews afforded me an inside view to the ritual from a different perspective – the Church’s relationship with the Mexican community.

**Expectations and Subjectivities**

Beginning my research, I expected that my “insider status” would help in gathering data and establishing rapport with my informants. I learned very quickly that being a Chicana was not necessarily an advantage. When my participants asked what I meant when I described myself as a Chicana, they did not react with the same fervor I felt in offering my description. I found that my sensitivity as a feminist was at times at odds with the general beliefs of my informants. My expectation had been that in presenting the “evolution” of my identity, they in turn, would recognize the same plausible evolutionary feminist spark within. Hubris was my worst enemy. The tropes I attributed to being a “Mexican woman” were very much alive and functioning among the women I contacted. Their responses to my queries concerning the importance of the ritual were cursory and commonplace. The imagery of the *quinceañera* as a beautiful tradition, a reification of Mexican womanhood – woman of grace, submissive character, wife and mother – stood in contradiction with my inner sensibilities that spoke of other possibilities and opportunities. I struggled to find the balance between personal experiences, data gathering, and acceptance in the field. I felt the interloper for not having had a *quince* and inauthentic for not being a believer. It was this initial failure to recognize the importance of the *quinceañera* as an intersection for underlying themes of self, womanhood, and social process that constrained me from accepting its relevancy within the Latino community. I failed to divine the complexity of negotiation and contestation involved in the process of becoming a *mujercita* – a young woman in the United States through the ritual of the *quinceañera*. However, My original thoughts regarding the *quinceañera* changed through the events attended, the friendships forged, and the data accumulated through my research. Perhaps it would be more correct to state that I
changed and that my original negation of the importance of the ritual was in fact the catalyst for discovery.

A sense of alienation and anxiety has been a recurring theme among researchers in the field. My sense of alienation and anxiety stemmed from my fear of the dialectical process inherent within ethnographic work: perception, portrayal, and the deconstruction of self (Crpanzano 1977, 70). My fears were magnified as a first-time researcher conducting fieldwork among members of my own ethnic and gender group. Much has been written regarding the special insight a minority insider might have in his or her own ethnic and gender group (Abu-Lughod 1988, Baca Zinn 1979, Zavella 1993). My insider status had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. My insider “insight” did not always prove to be of service; my knowledge of what it took to make friends among Mexican immigrant women (although well intentioned) proved to be my undoing during my early attempts at entering the Mexican immigrant community in my hometown. In hindsight, this first unsuccessful attempt resulted primarily from a miscalculation and a poor understanding of the complexity of immigrant communities operating within the volatile political atmosphere of a dominant culture.

My first attempt, my first failure, facilitated a better approach: the deconstruction of self, of sorts. I do not mean to say that I purged my Chicana feminist ideals; rather, I tried to enter what Crpanzano (1977) refers to as the “movement” of fieldwork (70). This concept is the dialectic between ethnographer and the other, wherein the ethnographer sheds the constraints of self – her identity in order to grasp the viewpoint of the other. Barring the psychosocial implications of this exorcism, especially its relevancy for ethnographers involved in fieldwork of some length, the movement of fieldwork is the heart of ethnography: to wear (assume) the viewpoint of the other. In order to grasp the meaning of the quinceañera, I subverted my political predispositions and set aside my notions of self to gain the perspective of my informants.

I presented myself as a second-generation Mexican-American woman who never had a quinceañera but who desired to learn about its relevance in ethnic and gender formation among Latinas. My feelings of inauthenticity mirrored those of Lila Abu-Lughod (1988), who
struggled with her conscious decision to dissociate from her identity as an Arab-American in order to live in Bedouin society; to do otherwise would have labeled her a “fallen woman” and precluded the completion of her fieldwork (149). I cannot say I was completely successful in my “transformation.” I still believed in my feminist ideals and my Chicanismo, but I found that I hid my identity so as to allow my informants the opportunity to voice their opinions, thoughts, and experiences. And not unlike Abu-Lughod, my sentiments and fears of inauthenticity dissipated. With time, the women I met during my research sought out my thoughts and reflections on what it meant to be a Mexican woman. For them, there was no hyphenated descriptor. I was simply a Mexicana, and so like Abu-Lughod who became an accepted member of Bedouin society (Abu-Lughod 1988, 149), I became a Mexicana in the eyes of my informants.
CHAPTER IV
ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Cultural Themes

Gathering data on the cultural patterns of the quinceañera began with the questionnaire administered during a women’s event at the Hispanic Resource Center. For the most part, the responses were short and lacked explication. In mining the responses, I employed another methodological tool, which though it is not a central aspect of my analysis, nonetheless helped me ground my overall discussion. I used the work of Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard (2003), specifically their article, “Techniques to Identify Themes,” to identify basic categories that sprang from my initial interview responses. I was also mindful of Morris E. Opler’s (1945) seminal work on themes, “Themes as Dynamic Forces in Culture,” in establishing what these categories were. Opler stipulates that in every culture there are “dynamic affirmations” to “denote a postulate or position, declared or implied, and usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity” (198). Themes for Opler are tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society, expressions open to discovery through observation, culturally agreed-upon principles often entailing instances of subtlety and symbolic overture, and inter-relationships among such principles. In searching out themes from my questionnaire responses, I noted repetitive words, phrasing, and common vernacular. The brevity exhibited the tacit cultural meanings of the responses. I fully expected that a broader meaning of the quinceañera would be revealed during the interview process, where smaller categories or domains would become evident (Spradley 1980, 88). The responses of the six women who participated in the questionnaire and the ranking of their responses are listed below. The themes were ranked according to repetitive use by the women within the answers on the questionnaire: rite of passage/transforms (6), family/familia (6), gendering/mujercita (6), tradition (5), church rite (4), community/communidad (4), empowerment (3) and “princess/feeling special” (1).
Drawing from Turner’s (1974) use of ritual as a form of redress for social conflict (39), I proposed the idea that the *quinceañera* can be a redressive mechanism in resolving the culture shock experienced by Mexican immigrants in the United States. The performance of the ritual serves as a cohesive action because it embodies the most salient and recognized values and themes of the group. As a rite of passage, the *quinceañera* denotes spatial transitioning or implies “territorial passage,” in which the initiate moves from one state to the next (van Gennep 1960, 15). This condition is both physical and metaphorical because as the initiate transitions one state to the next, her values, traditions, and customs also transition. The *quinceañera* ritual is one device used to engender this transition and ensures the new positioning within traditions and values. The cultural themes expressed in the responses reinforce the values of family, tradition, and gendering, and also reveal the validity of transformation, identity, and empowerment.

**Interviews**

Interjecting autobiographical experience can be a valuable hermeneutic device, creating a base from which to view human phenomena. As a Chicana, I understand the meaning of *la familia*, the need for tradition, and becoming a *mujercita* because these meanings were instilled in me. Listening to the women involved in the interviews, I found that they all believe in the values of family, tradition, and becoming *mujercitas* and that our differences are a matter of semantics. The women involved in my research are all different. Their individual histories and experiences are dissimilar because they come from different cultures. Culture is neither homogenous nor timeless and must be studied from a number of perspectives. Rosaldo’s (1989) *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* helped me to understand that ritual does not occur at a moment in time, but that it exists in the processes affecting that culture over time and that its effects linger. The analytical perspectives in question for this thesis began with descriptions of ritual, intersecting identities, and borderlands. The perspectives cannot, however, be understood outside the realm of social processes, historical perspectives, economics, and human expectations. By delineating these processes in the interviews below, I provide a view of
the quinceañera as a ritual that affects the initiate, her family, and community “before, after and during the ritual moment” and beyond (17).

**Sofía**

I met Sofia at the Grand Opening celebration of the Hispanic Resource Center. She was hobbling around in a cast, but the injury was not going to keep her from coming out to support Grace and the Center. I spoke with her briefly regarding my internship and interest in the quinceañera as my thesis topic. I told her I was very much interested in learning the significance of the celebration to the community and to the girls involved. She immediately responded with, “The quince is a rite of passage where a girl becomes a young woman.” I asked if she would allow me the opportunity to interview her about the quince and her reply was, “Well, I don’t know what more to tell you. I just told you that it is a rite of passage.” I replied that I would very much enjoy speaking to her about when she first learned or heard of the quince, what she thought of it, and if she had been involved in one. She asked me why I believed that she would have anything to contribute or would offer information more valuable than anyone else would. I explained that all women are a source of information because we all vary and that sometimes people think of Latinas in only one way. Her body language led me to believe she was intrigued: she moved forward, raised an eyebrow, and seemed to listen and nod her head, and she seemed more attentive. She rewarded my efforts by agreeing to be interviewed.

Sofía first heard of a quinceañera when she was twelve and living with her family in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico’s economic outlook during the 1950s was bleak (Ayala 1996). With a burgeoning work force and very few avenues for employment, Sofía’s father decided to send his two daughters to New York to stay with relatives in the hopes of bettering their future. Her family’s economic situation kept her from having a quinceañera. Her father’s intent was to keep them both “intact.” While I understood this choice of wording to mean “culturally intact,” I quickly realized it also alluded to being sexually intact. In New York, the two sisters lived with their grandparents and were taught to maintain their customs by speaking Spanish, cooking traditional Puerto Rican cuisine, and retaining their love of music from home. In discussing the
Sofia mentioned that during her youth in New York, the ritual was not as popular as it is today.

I was taken to New York, and I knew of it. I had never been to one, but I knew what a quinceañera was. And then when I turned fifteen, I was in New York and at that time not everyone, the entire world did not have a quinceañera, not like today. My parents did not have the means to give me one. In truth, I did not come to see or participate in a quince or to really know it until I was here in Pensacola.

In speaking with Sofia, I learned about the importance of holding onto customs and traditions and its relevancy for identity. Sofia described how she had named her sister-in-law as legal guardian for her young daughter until her son became of age. At eighteen, her son joined the United States military and became legal guardian to his sister should their mother become incapacitated. When I asked her why she had changed the document, she replied:

If she was in someone else’s care then we would worry that she would learn nothing of her culture, of being a Puertorriqueña, and so when my son turned eighteen and was in boot camp, we asked to change guardianship over to him. It is something that needs to be done by parents to ensure that our customs and traditions continue, and we knew that she would if she was in my son’s care because that’s how we raised him. My sister-in-law is lovely, but she is Americanized, whereas my children all say they are Puerto Rican and speak Spanish.

Sofia did not have a quinceañera, but since her time in Pensacola she has been asked to be a madrina – a godmother – and has participated in the ritual, an honor that she has taken seriously and very much to heart. She described the quince as a “lovely, lovely thing, occasion for a young lady. It is a teachable moment and for those who are present, we are glad, happy, very happy to see that our culture is passed on.” Sofia’s narrative brought to mind the importance of affirming one’s ethnic identity in the midst of Anglo influence.

All of the women I interviewed spoke of the importance of ethnic identity. While interning at the Hispanic Resource Center, I met a wide range of Latinas from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Their comments regarding the quinceañera supported the idea that there is no single Latina identity. Given the ethnic multiplicity of Mexicanos in Northwest Florida, the identities performed in the quinceañera are complex and shifting, reiterating Dávalos’ (2010) assertion that identity formation is multiple and shifts within the scope of the ritual and with the quince girl: “Culture can vary within one ethnic community. Their [the Mexicanas’] view of
multiple identities is different from the dominant perspective of distinct “either/or” identities and nations…[the women] signaled through their smiles and contestation that people are never either Mexican or United State Americans but a hybrid form” (22). The ritual allows participants to perform their connection with their cultural past while allowing for the influences of urbanization and immigration (Horowitz 2010, 31). However, underscoring Sofia’s comment regarding the importance of her children being Puerto Rican and speaking Spanish is the insistence among immigrants to express their cultural difference from Anglo Pensacola.

Sally

Sally accompanied Sofia on the day of her interview and also agreed to be interviewed. Sally volunteered at the Center. Highly animated, Sally was a lively sixty-year plus woman with a contagious laugh and sparkling eyes. She often broke out and danced a merengue, no doubt fueled by her Cuban cafécito. Her interview provides an excellent example of historical perspective and offers a view of her quinceañera as one point along a processual course. Below is an excerpt from her interview:

Q: Tell me about your quince.

A: It was beautiful! [clapping her hands]…we were part of the upper class. My parents were well to do. We had a beautiful house; it was white and very large, the gardens were always full of beautiful flowers and plants, and we always had the best parties with an orchestra, and there would be dancing. The women wore beautiful gowns and jewels, but I was not allowed to go because I was a girl and I had not had my quince yet. I was not out. It was like that for my quinceañera. My house was full of decorations; all my friends were there, all the people from both my fathers’ work, executives and their wives, and all my family, all my aunts and uncles, and my cousins. It was the biggest party I ever had in my whole life. I had a beautiful dress, a white dress, my first long dress that I can’t even think about; I wanted the same design for my wedding dress. We started the party the day before with a big dinner and then a party, but no church. We don’t do the Mass like in other countries. So the following day, my house was decorated, and everything was prepared: a caterer, then a beautiful cake and music. And then I came down the stairs on my father’s arm, and we started to dance a waltz, Verano de Amor, and then he gave me to my stepfather, and I finished the waltz with him. It was beautiful.

As I listened to Sally relay her memories of her quince, I was confronted with the full force of emotion that the quinceañera evokes in women. Sally’s recounting foregrounds different
social processes at work and proffers a view of the *quinceañera* as an intersection where various social processes converged. Sally’s *quinceañera* was more than a moment marked by a performance. Her *quince* was one point on her human map at which various trajectories converged and continued to affect her life after the ritual was performed (Bourdieu 1977, 2).

Sally’s *quinceañera* took place in Havana, Cuba, in January 1959. With her *quinceañera*, Sally had successfully transitioned into a young woman and was now able to realize the newfound rewards and privileges due her newly accorded status. January 1959 also witnessed Fidel Castro’s triumphant entry into Havana and his successful overthrow of Fulgencio Batista’s regime. The economic, social, and political changes that affected Cuba affected Sally’s family forever. Her privileged status and member of an elite class was stripped, and her family’s social status became tenuous. Within a matter of months, Sally’s future was determined: she was placed on a flight to Miami along with other children of wealthy elite Cuban parents. Sally’s new identity became that of a “Peter Pan kid.”

Organized in 1960 by and under the auspices of Catholic Charities of Miami, *Operación Pedro Pan* sent 14,000 children to the United States from Cuban parents fearful of Castro’s plan for indoctrination (Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc. 2009). Sally was among the first wave of children to leave Cuba. At the airport, alone and afraid, Sally’s mother reminded her that she was a woman now, and that God would look out for her. Her mother’s parting words of “Don’t you dare, do not look back Sally; you are a woman now” had an affect on Sally that guided and influenced her life in the United States. As she reminisced about that day, she stated, “I boarded that airplane to Miami, and I did not look back. It was an airplane full of tears, but I did not look back.” The expectations that Sally and her family had for her – meeting her future husband, marriage, and then motherhood – were realized in the United States. Sally did eventually meet her future husband, and she is a doting grandmother, but along the way her life took a different path. If she had remained in Cuba and if Castro’s attempts to overthrow Batista had failed, Sally may have been allowed to languish in the elite lifestyle to which she had been accustomed. However, during the interview process, I noted that all of Sally’s experiences while in the United
States forged a new woman, a resilient and self-reliant woman. As she told me her story, she was animated and clearly proud of her accomplishments in finding her first job:

Oh yes, let me tell you; I went to Miami High School, and I asked for a job. I was very shy, but the woman who worked there, she was from Puerto Rico, and so I asked her for work. She said, “Why you want to work you are a student,” but I said, “I will work for food.” And so they give me a little chore to do. I was fifteen.

On learning English:

I have another lady. She was an American lady, and she used to open her garage, and she used to teach us English. For free. My uncle, he would have me read the newspaper to him. I would tell him, “But I don’t know how to read that much.” And he say, “yeah, but read it.” And that is how I learn to speak and read English.

On brokering the family’s first house:

One day a friend tell us he is selling his house for $9,000+, and so we went to see the house. The grass was high, the inside was painted purple, and colors I don’t want to remember! I say to the owner, “Mr. Mendez, the problem is the house; we have to paint this whole house. We have to cut the grass, and we have to do a lot of repairs.” Well, what he did was give me the $300 down payment to fix the house. My mom and my stepfather, they not believe it, but I explain to them that I read the contract and so my stepfather he still wanted someone to look at it, and they did. They had my mom’s boss look at it, and he said the same thing. At that time, they didn’t have mortgage brokers only two people, signing the contract. So that’s how we bought our first house. That was the most beautiful house. Still today when I go to Hialeah, I pass by that house. I will never forget.

On buying her first house:

Well, I think to myself, I can do this too. So I say, “Mr. Mendez,” ’cause I was being very fresh, “Mr. Mendez, do you have any more houses that you know, you are selling? Because I will buy another house?” Mr. Mendez, he had another house that he wanted to sell to the family, but I say to him, “what about you sell to me?” “Yeah, I sell it to you.” And I asked for the same deal he did with my mom, and you know what? He sold it to me! And that was how I bought my first house. I was seventeen!

On being a business woman:

Because I say, “We can buy this one house,” I think myself, “why I cannot buy a house?” I can buy a house and rent it to another Cuban that cannot buy a house. So you know what? After I bought the house I rented it to my cousin! [laughing] And then later on, I sell it to her because she had a baby, and so I sold it to her and with that money I save, I go to school.

Sally was not bitter in telling her riches-to-rags story because as she pointed out, “I had a lovely quince. It was the last party I had before leaving Cuba. My quinceañera changed my life;
I will never forget my *quince*. Never.” In Sally’s view, at the age of fifteen she literally became a woman. She was faced with decisions that affected her young life and that eventually affected her future. At fifteen, she entered into a situation where others might have made different choices; however, Sally emphasizes her “success” as rising from her mother’s final words before leaving Cuba – “do not look back, you are a woman now.”

Sally’s *quinceañera* in Cuba during Castro’s regime provided the historical backdrop for her rite of passage and was the impetus that enabled her to persevere and to see herself as a resilient woman. Sally speaks of her *quinceañera* as a marker of her identity, womanhood, and empowerment. Examining the historical and economic conditions of Sally’s life at that time of her *quinceañera* provides a fuller understanding of the force of emotion Sally experiences when describing her *quince*. It also allows us to accurately distinguish between events and processes in ritual that appear to sway between cultural depth and mere platitude and that act as “catalysts that precipitate processes whose unfolding occurs over subsequent months or even years” (Rosaldo 1989, 15). As an aside to Sally’s story, her mother, sister, and stepfather were eventually allowed to leave Cuba and join Sally in Miami. Sally’s father never left Cuba.

**Alma and Britani**

Britani was a fifteen-year-old high school student living in Pensacola. She lived in a rented house in a lower-class neighborhood with her mother, aunt, and six siblings, of whom Britani was the eldest. An accomplished student at her high school, Britani played the clarinet in her high school band, was a state-level track star, and took advanced placement courses in mathematics and science. I met Britani during her initial meeting to discuss the terms and responsibilities of her free *quinceañera*. As winner of the “*Quinceañera* Give Away Contest,” Britani wrote an essay in which she spoke about the tradition of the ritual and how her father had promised her a *quince*. However, Britani’s fifteenth birthday had come and gone, and her father was no longer a part of the family. Britani’s mother and siblings marked her fifteenth birthday by going to Mass and having a celebratory dinner. But it was not the same as having a *quinceañera*. There was poignancy to her essay:
It has always been my dream to have a quinceañera since I was 6 years old. My family has had the experience of having a quince, so I want to experience mine. My parents would always tell me that I would maybe have my party if we had the money; my dad would promise me that I would have my party. Now he is gone, and I can’t have my quince. I’m alone with my mom and my 4 sisters and 2 brothers. My mom takes care of all of us and works part time at many things. My mom gave me the news that she couldn’t afford my party, and I know now I won’t have it. I was all right, but it has always been my dream to have the quinceañera, and I have tried to find many ways to at least have a little party and a misa at my church to honor and bless me that I’m turning into a young woman and not a little girl anymore.

In her essay, she stated that although her mother had given up on the idea, Britani had not and had been searching ways to have her quince. One day at school, Britani happened to pick up the edition of the La Costa Latina newspaper describing the quince giveaway contest. She went to the school library, typed out her essay, and sent it over to the office. It was the last day of the contest.

I met Alma and Britani to discuss the rules and regulations of the quince giveaway. Also at this meeting were the caterer and the event planner hired by the newspaper. Alma, Britani’s mother, appeared to be in her early thirties; she was slight in build and attractive. She listened quietly and seemed content to allow strangers to plan her daughter’s quinceañera. I had initially mistaken Alma for a traditional Mexicana: quiet, submissive, and resigned. She was late coming to the meeting. She had been asked to clean one more condo before the meeting and had stayed to complete the task. The money earned from cleaning condos and cooking lunches for sale at various work places where Mexicanos were employed sustained her family. During the course of the meeting, the conditions of Britani’s family life came to the foreground. Alma’s husband had been deported after police responded to a domestic disturbance at their home. Following a pattern in many deportations, however, the husband eventually found his way back to their home and beat his wife again. On this occurrence, he was incarcerated. The circumstances for the beatings were varied and inexcusable: economic stress, cultural patterning, ignorance, and drunkenness. It was apparent in our initial meeting that her father’s failure was a major issue for Britani. What struck me about her situation was her resolve not let her quince opportunity go by unmarked – her need to “live the dream.”
For Britani, the dream was to celebrate her *quinceañera* with all of the attendant symbolism. She wanted a Mass of Thanksgiving in her church, red roses to be placed at the Virgin’s altar, a white dress, her “last doll,” her hair up in “grown-up style,” painted nails and make-up, a fiesta with all of her family from both sides of the border, and her school mates in attendance. Most importantly, Britani wanted to dance her “first waltz” with her father. I cannot help observing that in celebrating her *quinceañera*, Britani was trying to right the pieces of a fractured family life. Britani’s *quinceañera* would be the transition from child to young woman, but in a very real sense she already had, irrespective of the *quinceañera*. Britani had witnessed her father beating her mother, perhaps on more than one occasion. Whatever hopes she may have had for a loving family life, a brutal reality stood in juxtaposition to this dream. As a first generation Mexican-American, Britani was coping with a cultural relic – *machismo*.

In a subsequent interview with Britani and Alma, the husband’s inefficacy in securing employment seemed to reinforce the idea of the macho identity in providing for his wife and family. However, underlying the beatings was the husband’s inability to cope with the change in gender role. His failure to accept change in a different setting and accept Alma’s ability as a family provider was one reason for his violent outbursts. The various reasons for not finding and

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3. The “first waltz” is a well-known term among Mexicanos and is one of the signifiers of the *quinceañera*’s entry into society. Prior to her celebration, the girl would not have been allowed to dance in public with a man other than her father or brother.

4. In *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, Matthew Gutman (1996) explores the faceted signification of being a macho. In my research, I came across the outdated idiom expressed by some of Gutman’s informants, that to be macho meant that a man normally thought of fulfilling his needs first before recognizing the needs of his family (221). Gutman’s book is about setting aside the myth of “being macho” and revealing the changing face of gender relations and identity in Mexico City. Gutman offers a new translation for “being macho,” one which includes the challenges of urban life and negotiation of what it means to be a man in the urban setting. In an informal conversation I had with a social worker assigned to a migrant educational center, I found that women frequently discussed beatings at the hands of their husbands. The social worker was quick to point out however, that the number of women who reported the beatings was still very small because to report the beating might mean deportation. She stated that most of the migrant worker families were from small towns or ranchitos in Mexico and that they were accustomed to the “old ways.” Her allusion was clear: poor, ignorant, traditional men beat their wives, and traditional women allow it.
keeping employment are pure conjecture; however, what remains clear is that Alma and Britani are part of the social process of changing gender role in the United States. Britani’s statement, “My mom takes care of all of us and works part time in many things,” is evidence of this process. The traditional roles for both men and women are changing, and life on the borderlands reflects the many contestations of these roles and parallels, as Gutman (1996) asserts, “Gender identities, roles, and relations do not remain frozen in place, either for individuals or for groups. There is continuous contest and confusion over what constitutes male identity; it means different things to different people at different times. And sometimes different things to the same people at the same time” (17).

During our final interview, Britani stated that she felt transformed. This stage is the final one in a rite of passage. However, what must be realized is that in the quinceañera, the transformation includes not only the initiate, but also the participants. In the process of the quinceañera, Alma was transformed as well. For example, during the initial stages of planning, Alma was reticent and almost eager to accept advice from Ofelia (the event planner) and Rosie (the caterer). However, when it became clear that Britani’s quince would become a reality, Alma slowly changed and began to openly express her ideas. For instance, she insisted on having mole, a traditional Mexican dish at the fiesta. Together, Alma and Britani met with the DJ and arranged the order of the musical tracks to be played at the fiesta. Alma’s logistical skills became apparent when family from Mexico – including her parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and Britani’s padrinos de Baptismo – accepted invitations. Sleeping arrangements had to be made; Alma met with the Hispanic Ministry Coordinator of her local church to choose the readings for the Mass and to discuss the quince rehearsal. In our last interview I asked Alma if she had had a quinceañera:

A: No, no. I’m from a ranchito (little ranch in a rural area), and my family didn’t have the money to do something, and there were so many of us, but I knew about them, and I knew girls who had them. I liked them.

Q: Would you have wanted one?
A: Oh yes, of course. But how? There was no way. There were so many of us, and we had nothing. I am happy that Britani had her *quinceañera*. It means something special, and she will always have her *quince* to remind her of the change in her life. She will always have these good memories. It marks the change in her life, the end of her childhood. I am very pleased and tranquil.

Q: So Britani, do you feel different now that you have had your *quinceañera*?

A: Yeah, I do. I feel different. I mean, it’s funny, but I have been thinking about it after you asked me that question the last time we met. I do feel different, inside. I feel more mature. I mean, I know that I now have responsibilities to mom and to my brothers and sisters, my family – you know? I mean, I always knew I did, but now it’s more serious. I know it inside [places her hand on her heart, tearing up]. That’s different. I’m different.

It was Alma who mentioned that she had supported the family while the husband was “looking for work” through an idea she had of cooking, packaging, and selling hot traditional Mexican meals at various work sites in the city. I can only surmise that her success was one more reason for her husband to feel emasculated and one more reason to beat her.

Interestingly, Britani’s mention early in the planning of the most important part of the ritual being the “first waltz” with her father – and the ensuing tears brought on by the topic – precipitated the discussion of her father’s incarceration. I later learned that prior to the church Mass, Britani had been sobbing because her father would not be present at her blessing. I had struggled to understand why Britani would still want her father to walk her onto the dance floor, announce that his little girl was now a woman, and be honored in the process of this transformation. What was I missing about the meaning of the *quinceañera*? Britani had mentioned that her friends often got the meaning of the *quinceañera* wrong:

My cousins and friends have always bragged how the party was or how big the dress was. A *quince* is not just a party, it’s a celebration where a little girl turns into a woman. Many girls do it just for the party and just to show off in who will be there and who will have a bigger party, or so their school mates can call it the “party of the year.” They don’t see the most beautiful thing of it. I want it all traditional, and I don’t care on how big it will be. All I want is an experience in how a mom’s little girl turns into a young woman. To me, it will mean the world if I have my *quince*. All I want is an experience – which I will cherish – but also my family. All I want is a chance to be happy and feel like it’s my time to shine. All I want is a *quinceañera*.
In her essay, Britani had stated that the experience of the *quinceañera* is “how mom’s little girl turns into a young woman.” Britani had become a woman even saying that she forgave her father for his failings, though recognizing her mother’s enduring strength to keep a family together. After the *quinceañera*, I asked Britani and Alma what their plans were. Alma said she hoped she could open a small Mexican restaurant and have her family work the venture together. She hoped it would keep the family intact. I noticed that she looked at Britani for confirmation. Britani offered, “I would like to continue my schooling. I want to go to Vanderbilt and do medical research.”

During the planning stage for the *quince*, Britani and Alma decided that it would be appropriate to have Alma’s brother escort Britani onto the dance floor for the “first waltz.” When it came time for the last dance, however, Britani asked that Alma escort her onto the dance floor.

**Grace**

I include Grace in my interviews because as founder of the Hispanic Resource Center, she provided me the venue in which to proceed with my research. Additionally, Grace was a vital source of information regarding the Latino population in Northwest Florida. Although not a member of the immigrant community, Grace’s interview regarding her *quinceañera* and our conversations shed light on how identity is made and remade. Our conversations helped to formulate an analysis on intersecting identities, authenticity, and parental expectation.

Grace was born into a large family in El Paso, Texas. As one of nine children, Grace always managed to command attention. She is naturally vibrant, energetic, and very much an individualist. Unlike many daughters of Mexicanas that I spoke with, Grace is neither shy nor desirous of fading into the background. Grace’s teen years were spent during the 80s, an era that witnessed the birth of the Internet and the eventual development of smartphone technology and social media. This advent brought about a type of “get it out there” attitude that allows individuals to remain perpetually “wired.” Grace was very much influenced by this era.

Her high school memories were filled with funny anecdotes rather than the normal dire teenage drama. I cannot imagine Grace as anything other than bold. Part of her boldness stems from
being raised in a large family; if she wanted to be heard, she had to speak up. On other occasions, she spoke of "going along with decisions" so as not to offend her mother. As a Chicana, I understood her position. At that age, we were both on the cusp of impending womanhood and exploring who we were becoming, apart from our mothers’ expectations. We had to choose our battles. Grace was brought up to identify as being a Mexican-American, with an "emphasis on the American." During an interview, I asked Grace if she experienced any type of nationalism or political identity with Chicanos or other Mexican-Americans. She replied:

I don’t know if I was aware of the actual term Chicano. Or what it meant. I don’t think that I was aware that it specifically applied to Mexican-Americans. I think it was Hispanic American. To me at that time, there were no other Hispanics in my world, growing up at that age either. I wasn’t aware of Peruvians, you know, or Guatemalans, I had no stuff like that. They weren’t real people to me.

Grace’s statement that her identity was as a Mexican-American and separate from the Mexicans that lived less than six miles away is an example of the hard nature of the borderlands. Borderland identity is a construct shaped and reshaped according to varying influences and is better understood in terms of contrasts and contradictions. Grace’s visage bespeaks her Mexican heritage, and yet she was taught to be American “separate” from Mexicanos. I was surprised to learn that only English was spoken in Grace’s home. The language we use is an important marker of who we are, and along the border, language is a clear distinction that separates “us” from “them.” For Mexican-Americans living in El Paso, the “us” from “them” distinction is salient.

During the 90s, Silvestre Reyes, a Mexican-American native of El Paso, conceived of “Operation Blockade,” an action that was designed to intimidate and curtail Mexicanos from crossing into the United States (Vila 2000, 1). In a poll conducted by the El Paso Times in October of 1994, 85 percent of El Pasoans favored the action; 78 percent of those who approved were Mexican-American (Vila 2000, 251). Identity construction along the border is complex. In the interior of Mexico, inhabitants view Juarenses as being too Americanized, while Mexican-Americans in El Paso view their Juárez neighbors as reminders of the abject poverty and crime that they might have been born into if they were just six miles to the south. To some extent, it is
this fear that drives the dissociation with El Pasoans’ Mexican counterparts (Vila 2000). In our conversations Grace articulated this same feeling:

I was raised with this idea that I’m supposed to look at them differently. And since I really couldn’t communicate with them, you know, because they spoke only Spanish and I spoke only English, then it wasn’t a problem to have a line between, you know, me and people I’d meet from Mexico. And because I’m American, you know, I can; it’s okay for me to speak only English. I realized that the only difference between me and someone born from the other side is like six miles. Or less. I mean you could literally walk across the border and I’m in Mexico now. I’m not American anymore necessarily. But, it’s just realizing that but for the grace of God, I’m an American citizen. You know, had my mom been on the other side of the border just a hop-skip-and-a-jump from where I was born, I might not be, so… uh...

Grace left the sentence open-ended, but I believe her intention was clear. She felt privileged to have been born in the United States:

I was raised to understand that I am Mexican-American, emphasis on American. Very distinct from Mexican. We’re on this side of the border, and uh, that’s that kind of culture there. That you’re, you distinguish yourself from the other side, ’cause the other side is kind of stigmatized. It’s poor. It’s you know, always trying to cross over, and you know, [they] don’t speak English, which equates to ignorance, stuff like that.

Like the borderlands, identity construction is fluid. The borderlands are in a constant state of transition, and the women who pass through or reside in this area must be fluid. They must adapt to their environment. Their identity is constructed on their ability to remain fluid – readily reshaped, smooth, flowing and pliable. Grace’s identity as a Mexican-American began to dislocate when she moved away from El Paso. She married young, gave birth to two boys, and buried her husband – all at a young age. It was while she was living away from El Paso that her ethnicity was questioned. In her attempts to explain her background, she found that some people did not know where Mexico was: “People would stop me all the time and ask me, ‘what are you?’ And surprisingly back then, a lot of people didn’t even know where Mexico was, and for me to try and explain what a Mexican-American was, was difficult.” It was in her workplace and in the everyday occurrence of assisting people in need that Grace was mistaken for someone who could speak Spanish. And so she taught herself to speak Spanish. She found a purpose in helping
others and came into close contact with undocumented immigrants. Her understanding of their circumstances changed her views, and she began to question her old ideas:

Looking back, I’d say that most of the people I would meet from Juárez were very humble because they’re just trying to live from day to day. And I think that realizing that now, that I’m…I had this conversation with some of my friends back home, talking about the immigration issue. And I made the comment that I know we’re raised in the same neighborhood. I understand that it’s us and them there, but moving away from the border, I’ve, you know, come to realize that I am no different than people from Mexico that I used to see everyday. But living so far away, I realized that the only difference between me and someone from the other side was those six miles. Or less.

Living along the borderlands where identities often shift, Grace’s identity as a Mexican-American living in El Paso was insular. Grace had to leave El Paso for her identity to be remade in the scope of a Mexican-American, emphasis on Mexican. Her years away from El Paso have allowed her to realize her emergent interest in Mexican culture. She now provides a venue where people meet and share commonalities, publishes the only bi-lingual Hispanic newspaper in Northwest Florida, and organizes an annual Latino festival. The acceptance of the Mexican other sparked her desire to help others transition into Anglo America. Grace described the celebration as a “big cultural aspect for Mexicanos, it’s a big deal to me. It’s part of what I do.” In offering the free quince, Grace continues the tradition: “It’s okay to keep your traditions as you’re assimilating to being an American, or being in America.”

Maintaining traditions and customs was one of the key themes found in the responses to the questionnaire. It is also a way for gendering young Mexicanas. Whereas other quinceañeras had looked forward to their quince with great anticipation, Grace had been somewhat ambivalent towards hers. She thought of the ritual as a “girlie” event, and she was more of a “rocked out” tomboy. However, for Grace and other quinceañeras, the ritual is a way to demonstrate their personality, or as Grace stated, “it’s a way to style.” Having a quinceañera allowed young women the opportunity to “style” and interject their own idea of what the quince means to them through their choice of dress, music or their realization of their quince. “I knew I didn’t want formal dresses, you know; I didn’t want a floor-length dress. I wanted short dresses, and it was
summer time. It was the 80s. It was 1985, and Madonna and Prince were all the rage.” For all of her “rocked out” styles, Grace described her quinceañera as traditional. Although the quince was not an event she chose, as a dutiful and obedient daughter, Grace acquiesced to her mother’s wishes. The quinceañera did not have the same implications for Grace as it did for my other informants: “I felt it was my mother’s goal to put this thing together because it’s tradition, and that’s what mothers had, you know, that was a way especially then. I just felt it was something she could do for her daughter. That’s the way I felt about it then.”

Grace’s quince had the traditional elements: a Mass of Thanksgiving, the traditional court of seven girls with seven accompanying boys, fresh flowers for the Virgen, the gift of a gold medallion, and the “first waltz.” The other “traditional” elements of the quince – such as the tiara, the “last doll,”5 the wearing of her first heels, and the full-skirted evening gown with tight bodice – were absent. Grace’s quince was a way to please her mother, to bring her family closer, to offer her friends a “big party,” and a way to celebrate her emergent identity on her own terms. She may not have been a willing subject in the beginning, but as the planning of her quinceañera evolved, her interest and level of involvement increased, and she became an active agent in determining her quince on her own terms. I asked her to describe the religious aspect of the ritual and whether she felt the weight of its significance. “I don’t remember religious responsibility per se. I remember it being important to me, but it was a very personal thing; it wasn’t like this is what everybody has to do. I was concerned about getting it right for me, and it didn’t necessarily have to do with my age, or coming-of-age, or anything.”

Sonya, Elizabeth, Amelia, and Sara

I was given Sonya’s name as a possible informant through one of Grace’s contacts. I wrote to her, described my interest in the quinceañera, and attached a Letter of Consent. She wrote back immediately, sent her consent, and suggested that I include her three daughters, Elizabeth, Amelia, and Sara. Sonya’s responses to the questionnaire were detailed and thoughtful. She was outwardly friendly and suggested we meet for lunch so that I could meet her daughters.

5. The “last doll” is understood by Mexicanos to denote a girl leaving her childhood behind.
Sonya’s eldest daughter, Elizabeth, was twenty-seven during my research. She was married to a former Marine and had a three-month-old son who slept during the luncheon. The middle daughter, Amelia, had celebrated the ritual the year before our meeting. Sara, the youngest, was “on the fence” regarding the celebration. In her words, “I would rather have a car.”

Sonya was the product of a large family: four boys and two younger sisters. Her parents were migrant farm workers. As a family, they had traveled in a large Chevrolet Suburban, following the seasonal harvesting of various crops from coast to coast. The children’s schooling had coincided with the harvesting schedules; consequently, they had gone to school late in the year and finished early. Sonya’s strong sense of family was determined by the sacrifices her parents had made in keeping the family together. The sense of familial duty was impressed on Sonya at an early age, as it was her responsibility to care for her younger siblings. Indeed, Sonya’s childhood had been curtailed, and her early experience as a “little mother” had imprinted a responsible nature. As the eldest and because she was female, she had been expected to care for her younger siblings. She assisted daily in preparing meals, bathing, and watching over the little ones while in the fields or in the home.

Sonya had a *quinceañera* even though her parents struggled to pay for it; their indebtedness precluded the two younger daughters from having their *quinces*. The financial drain on the family was a sacrifice her parents were willing to make, especially her father. Her father believed that it was an important event in Sonya’s life and that it marked her transition from a little girl into a young woman of substance.

Sonya married and gave birth to two sons and Elizabeth. After the demise of her first marriage, Sonya joined the Air Force as a reservist. Although eligible for a higher pay grade if she deployed, it would have meant leaving her children in someone else’s care, a prospect that Sonya rejected. She opted to stay put and manage on her income. She eventually met and married an Air Force officer and gave birth to two daughters, Amelia and Sara. The entire family lives in a sprawling home in a middle-class neighborhood in Northwest Florida.
Family life and active membership in the Catholic Church is important to Sonya. The priest who celebrated the Mass at Amelia’s *quinceañera* was Filipino and not familiar with the ritual. He was happy to rely on Sonya for assistance in planning the Mass. She was a coordinator in the church’s youth group and facilitator for preparing young adults for the sacrament of Confirmation. Her daughters spoke well of the family and shared fond anecdotes of their brothers and one another.

During the luncheon, Elizabeth spoke of the important values of family and faith and how they are reflected in the *quinceañera*. As the eldest, Elizabeth was conscious of her status, and after her celebration she felt its responsibility: “My *quinceañera* was about becoming a responsible person. I knew I had a duty to my family.” After her *quinceañera*, Elizabeth felt this duty acutely and accepted her role as eldest daughter. When Sara – the youngest – interjected that she would rather have a car than a *quince*, Elizabeth remarked that it was important to have the *quince* because of tradition and responsibility. Elizabeth’s acceptance as a role model to two younger sisters stems from her belief that ethnicity and womanhood are intrinsic to the ritual. Elizabeth viewed the *quince* as a tradition that must be maintained as part of their *Mexicanidad* more than Amelia did. In speaking with Elizabeth, I learned that her father was a Mexicano. Sonya and he had married young because according to custom, any boy that a girl brings home to introduce to her parents is instantly considered to be *comprometido*, or engaged.

Regarding her *quince*, Amelia relayed how she felt special, “like a Princess,” and it was a feeling that she would never forget. Their descriptions formed a clear picture of family involvement and unity. Both daughters spoke of the closeness enjoyed during the *quinceañera* process because all members of the family were active in every area of planning – from choosing the decorations, deciding on the color of the dress, selecting the readings for the church service, and choosing the court, the venue, and the choreography. Because her entire family actively participated in her *quinceañera*, Amelia felt the full weight of her family’s love, engendering a newfound sense of true familial devotion. Elizabeth’s quince was also a special event; however, it was not as elaborate: “Although I knew that money was tight, we were able to find a dress that
Elizabeth’s court consisted of her closest friends, who found ingenious ways to help finance the special day. They made a contest to see who could find their gown for the least amount of money. In return, they were given free reign to choose the style and color of their gown. In the end, the winner had spent all of twenty dollars on her dress. They enjoyed the process so much that one of the other girls repeated it at her quince.

The planning for Amelia’s quince began a year prior to the actual event. Once the court was selected, they met six months prior to the event to learn the elaborate steps in the choreography. It was a hectic and joyous time for Sonya, and she thrived in this atmosphere. But more importantly, Sonya felt that the times the court met provided her a moment to express her feelings regarding the meaning of the quinceañera and the importance of faith in a woman’s life:

The first meeting was in October. It was so that we could all get to know each other. And I had a meet over at the track because it was a fun place to meet, and I had everyone introduce themselves to each other, ’cause some of them, like I said, were coming from other schools ’cause they were Amelia’s childhood friends. I told them what the quinceañera was all about…I gave them the whole bit. And then I told them that we were going to have a lot of fun.

Sonya explained the tradition of the quinceañera:

It means to become part of society as a young woman and not be a little girl. It also means to become part of community within the Church to which you can participate as a young adult, not to mention the thrill of attention as “the Princess.” It gives a girl a chance to shine and feel beautiful and important…not just for this one day but for the beginning of the rest of her young adult life.

For Sonya, the quinceañera is also as a social marker of a young girl’s responsibility toward becoming a woman of faith and substance within the Catholic Church:

The most important overall part of the quinceañera is the Mass of Thanksgiving, no question about it. That is the offering of oneself along with parents, family, and friends to God. The request to have God take her and mold her into that beautiful young adult with wisdom, knowledge, love, faith, hope, prayer, and so, so much more. And to ask guidance from our mother Mary for a moral and righteous life, to profess in one’s own words a prayer that asks all of the things in witness of the priest, parents, family and friends. This is the moment of truth for the young girl wanting to become the young adult woman. It is the beginning of the rest of her “growing up life” as she becomes the example and is willing to testify to it with the blessing from the Church.
Sonya expressed the *quinceañera* as “acknowledgment of responsibility that go with the title of being a *quinceañera*.” It describes a young girl’s entrance into womanhood, but does not deny “that she can’t be a kid anymore at fifteen. It just comes with added responsibilities and duties that will prepare them for the adult world.”

**Magdalena, Maria, and Felipe**

I met Magdalena, or Magda, as she preferred, through Reyna, the Hispanic Ministry coordinator at St. Rita’s Catholic Church in Walton County. Reyna had contacted several mother-daughter *quinceañera* dyads and asked them to consider being part of my research. I was introduced to four mother-daughter pairs after Mass one evening, and all four were excited about the prospect of being included in my research. But after numerous unreturned phone calls, Magda and her daughter Maria were the only ones who set a definite date for an interview. I arrived at her home at the appointed hour only to find that Magda and her husband Felipe were still dining. I felt embarrassed for having interrupted their time together, but they were very polite and invited me in.

Magda and Felipe faithfully attended the Spanish language service at their local church on alternating Saturday evenings. Magda had been employed as a housekeeper in the various condominiums that dotted the beach. She had utilized this experience as a housekeeper to start her own cleaning business. Felipe, in turn, had begun a handyman service after having been employed in the housing industry along the beach. Their current ventures relied heavily on the Mexicano community of South Walton County for their success.

Magda and Felipe have three daughters: Maria, the *quince* girl; Adriana, who was twelve at the time; and the youngest, six-year-old Mimi. The girls had come out from the back bedrooms to meet me, and Adiana and Mimi returned to the bedrooms after the introductions were made. Maria and Magda’s interview reinforced the previous themes discussed: family, transformation, gendering, and tradition. However, they also spoke regarding the need for *comunidad*, or sense of community. I asked Magda to tell me about the *quinceañera*. I began by asking if she had had a *quince*: 
No. No, I didn’t have one. I would have liked one, but in Mexico it would have been very, very hard. Times were difficult enough for my family. It would have cost too much, more than my parents could really afford without going into debt. And I had completed going through the secundaria [high school] that was important for me to complete. And during high school, there were many parties and dances, but you have to pay for those. So my parents had that expense; to add the cost of a quinceañera would have been impossible. So I told my parents that it was better for them to pay for my party at the high school.

I asked Maria to tell me when she decided she would have liked a quinceañera. She replied that she first became aware of the ritual when she was invited to attend her cousin’s quince in Texas. Magda had not discussed the quinceañera with her daughters when they very young. However, when Maria turned eleven, she was invited to perform in her cousin’s quinceañera. Maria was to play the part of the young girl still playing with her dolls during her cousin’s choreographed dance. Maria shared the excitement she first felt at the attention that was given her cousin and decided that the quinceañera was an event she would like. Magda also had been caught up in the activities of her niece’s quince, and perhaps because Magda had forgone her own quinceañera, she decided that Maria would not miss out on the once-in-a-lifetime event.

Maria’s photos depicted a lovely young woman in a tropical blue satin gown. She was on the beach surrounded by her court, which consisted of five chambelanes. Maria’s gown had a tight bustier that held in her voluptuous frame. Hundreds of tiny seed pearls formed an arabesque that encircled the bodice of the gown. The hem of the gown repeated the design from the bodice; more seed pearls and sequins formed tendrils that fell away from the waist, interspersing the body of the full skirt. Her glossy black hair was curled and pulled back from her face, her hair falling in cylindrical curls along her bare shoulders, and on her head she wore a “diamond tiara.” Her make-up had been done professionally earlier that day, as had her nails. Her chambelanes were all relatives: cousins and nephews of both Magda and Felipe. They were dressed in black slacks and shirts with rolled up long sleeves; they wore matching tropical blue ties and pocket squares. Maria smiled with one hand on her hip and a slightly raised chin. As I stared at her smiling countenance, her stance and attire depicted a confident and sexy young woman. I looked up from gazing at the photo and looked at Maria. She was watching me, and I smiled and said,
“You’re beautiful, Maria.” But I was also contemplating that the quinceañera offers a glimpse of what a young girl may become. It is not the whole story; it is an allusion that unfolds as she matures. But the allusion speaks to sexual awareness, confidence, and success and in many ways mirrors the prospects of Mexicanas in this community.

That evening, Magda and Felipe spoke of their families, their accomplishments, and their lives in Northwest Florida. I was struck by the importance they placed on comunidad for their success. As mentioned earlier, both Magda and Felipe rely heavily on the Mexicano community for their businesses. The Mexican restaurants that line the main highway in this community all have Mexican storefronts adjacent to their buildings. While many local Anglo businesses felt the affects of the real estate crash in 2008, the Mexican storefronts remained opened and flourished. The Mexicano community in South Walton County appears to be more united than does its North Walton County counterpart. This observation became apparent after attending weekly Mass in North Walton County. The Catholic Church in North Walton County had smaller weekly attendance, averaging 40 to 50 parishioners. Conversely, the biweekly church services in South Walton County consistently had well over 100 in attendance. Building a sense of comunidad is essential for this community’s social and economic existence.

I spoke with Felipe and Magda about their community in relation to the quinceañera. They felt the importance should be placed on keeping the “old traditions” alive because these traditions infuse a sense of belonging and harmony: “It’s up to the parents to pass on the traditions, especially here because we have a small community. We go to church, and we see our friends, and then they come to our quinceañeras, and we see our girls becoming women. It’s very important.”

Creating community among Mexican immigrants involves the notion that there is a subjective feeling among members that they belong together and that there is solidarity and an understanding of shared identity. Part of this identity is the belief in family, or familia. Family will always be available when times warrant assistance. For Mexicans, family extends beyond the nuclear members and comprises aunts, uncles, grandparents, and distant cousins. In times of
economic hardship, a *familia* is an economic necessity. Mexican families will divide labor among those who can find employment and contribute financially and those who can care for younger children and maintain the home. Additionally, building strong familial ties allows the opportunity to come to one another’s aid, as in the case of the *quinceañera*. *Compadrazgo* has long been key in unifying families and cementing networks of economic and social support and parallels building *communidad*. In bolstering families, *compadrazgo* assists in building communities by establishing links among individuals of varying economic and social background. For example, a family with fewer economic resources will often “invite” a distant family member with more economic resources to be a *padrino/madrina* in their daughter’s *quinceañera*. The expectation is that the wealthier family will fulfill an obligation in assisting their less-endowed family members. The less-well-off family will be asked to return the assistance at a later date, and in the process, they align themselves with a family on a higher economic level. This action not only fosters appreciation and fulfills communal expectations; it also creates networks of families built upon varying socioeconomic levels existing on deep horizontal and vertical comradeship.

Related to the concept of *communidad* is the idea of “us” and “them.” This idea was prevalent in Magda and Felipe’s interview. When discussing the idea of Mexican family, Magda stated:

> We have a large family; the Americanos they don’t know about family. It’s not that they don’t love family. They do, but to them family is just the parents and the kids. But what about the brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts, and you can’t forget about the grandparents, or what about the godparents? Hijo! Family is important for Mexicanos. That’s why our *quinceañeras* are so big! Hundreds of people come, from everywhere. I sent out over 250 invitations, and each one could invite more people.

Felipe in turn offered:

> Family is everything. And then to do this for my daughter, to show my family that we have a good life here, a nice home; she is doing well in school; she’s a good girl, and she’s a *quinceañera*. It was very important. It shows that we love her. Americanos don’t show their love for their daughters the way we do. Do you understand me? What it means?

In relating the differences between Mexican and Anglo-American families, both Magda and Felipe repeated a common conception held by all of my informants. At the root of this idea is the
ritual of the *quinceañera*, its symbolic significance, and the absence of its equivalence in Anglo-American culture. This mode of reasoning lends credence to the idea that Mexican immigrants claim moral superiority to counter existing derogatory images.

**Pastor José Mendoza and Community Church Coordinators – Reyna and Ida**

The spiritual content of the ritual performance cements within the Mexican immigrant community a sense of sacredness or a church blessing conveyed upon the parents of the initiate. By extension, the community is given its blessing as active participants in right relationship with the Church for a successful passage of the initiate. In 2008, the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops published a bilingual blessing entitled, “Order of the Blessing on the Fifteenth Birthday.” The publication came at a significant time for the Church. The U.S. bishops had been split as to the importance of their continued participation in the ritual. The debate centered on whether to support a social event which emphasized an unnecessary financial burden on Mexican families, or to view the ritual as a tool to evangelize the Mexican community by positioning the ritual within a historical Catholic frame (Dávalos 2010, 17). My discussions with Catholic ministry coordinators brought into focus the Church’s support in evangelizing the Mexican community in the Catholic faith by embracing the *quinceañera* ritual. However, during my interview of Fr. Mendoza, he appeared at odds with the diocese’s recent discussions on eliminating the number of Spanish services offered in their parishes. Fr. Mendoza said that eliminating the number of Spanish language services would counter the efforts to evangelize the Mexicano community.

After having made contact with the church rectory, I met Reyna, the Hispanic Ministry Coordinator at St. Rita’s Catholic Church in South Walton County. Reyna requested a letter of intent, which I supplied. Reyna was inquisitive of my personal background and asked very detailed questions regarding my research, status with the university, and my personal religious background. In retrospect, she was guarded about the information she offered related to the

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6. The terms *Pastor* and *Father (Fr.)* both denote a priest. I use the terms interchangeably, depending on context. During the informal setting of luncheon with Reyna and Fr. Mendoza, it was appropriate to use the term *Father*. However, the use of *Pastor* is used during a more formal setting, as it denotes an individual who who been appointed by a bishop to lead a parish. (Catholic Answers)
Mexican parishioners in the church. She asked that I begin by attending the Spanish service. Considering my failed attempt to meet women in my neighborhood church, I felt Reyna’s invitation to join her providential. After Mass, Reyna suggested I meet with Fr. Mendoza during a luncheon in her home. Her only request was that I supply her a list of questions.

I began the interview by presenting Fr. Mendoza my letter of intent and a description of my thesis statement. Fr. Mendoza divided his time among pastoring at St. Sylvester Catholic Church in Gulf Breeze, St. John’s in Pensacola, and St. Rita’s in South Walton County. He had recently begun offering a Spanish service in Quincy, Florida. Fr. Mendoza was born in Columbia into an elite family. Entering the priesthood was not an unexpected vocation, as his uncle was a bishop in Columbia. While at university, Fr. Mendoza studied cultural anthropology and sociology before deciding to enter the seminary. He has performed missionary work throughout Latin America, including four years in the parish of Ixtlatapa, one of the poorest colonias in Mexico City.

Regarding the significance of the quinceañera and the Church, Fr. Mendoza fears that there is not enough emphasis placed on the girl’s responsibility to God and the Church:

There is not a strong mindset of responsibility to lead a life devoted to God. At best, the quinceañera is a marker of ethnicity, and for the girl it is a passage, a change in her social status. She is now thought to have more rights: she can wear some make-up and go out with friends. Many times, I have seen the girls at the altar looking about rather than focused on the seriousness of the moment. But it is still very important to the congregation, and it offers the Church a way to catechize.

Pastoring in Ixtlatapa, he realized the significance of the ritual in establishing compadrazgo:

This was one of the poorest areas of all Mexico City and yet, there were quinceañeras booked in my church every Saturday, one after another. Compadrazgo allows the families to form a network of alliances which enable them to put together a little fiesta, and hundreds, literally entire communities would come. In fact, there was a waiting list.

I asked Fr. Mendoza if he was aware of other dioceses’ attempts to discontinue the ritual. He had been aware of these attempts and viewed it as a mistake by the Church. He agreed with the Bishops of America and their assessment of continuing with the quinceañera as a teachable moment: “The ritual is not a sacrament, but its overwhelming importance to the Mexican community cannot be ignored.” The decision to curtail the ritual in some dioceses reflects
bad judgment, in Fr. Mendoza’s opinion. When I mentioned that the Mexican community’s observance of the ritual precipitated the statement by the Bishops of America, Fr. Mendoza replied, “The diocese does not always have the right perspective in dealing with the Latino community. Where they see dwindling numbers, they are choosing to close churches or end Hispanic masses.” Fr. Mendoza’s goal is to forge a community based on faith, which he believes is the true strength of the Mexican community. Filling empty pews in churches seems to have some historical significance in the immigrant Mexican community.

Both Fr. Mendoza and Reyna envision a Mexican community that is faithful to attend the biweekly Mass. During the interview, both Reyna and Fr. Mendoza lamented the fact that the Spanish Mass yields only 100 to 150 individuals. However, a *quinceañera* witnesses an entire communal effort with hundreds in attendance. According to Fr. Mendoza and Reyna, there is a large Mexican community with longstanding roots in the area. These Mexicanos own businesses, hold respected positions in the area, and send their children to the local schools. The community is heterogeneous. Its members span the economic and social spectrum to a degree, but they identify as being Mexican. According to Fr. Mendoza and Reyna, the biweekly services should attract hundreds. In their minds, church attendance reflects community spirit. Fr. Mendoza’s fear that the diocese’s discussions to eliminate the number of Spanish services offered at their parishes because of low attendance will serve only to dislocate the existing community and dwarf assimilation attempts. Historically, Latinos have resisted these attempts at assimilation more effectively than any other ethnic group largely because of Latinos’ insistence on holding on to ancestral religious traditions, celebrations of religious feasts with music, processions, and rich symbolism (Badillo 2006, 42). The *quinceañera* is a tradition that incorporates all of these elements.

Ida, the Hispanic Ministry Coordinator in a Northwest Florida parish, has worked in her community for six years. She has been the *de facto* leader of the church’s Latino community for five years. Ida was born and raised in California, but her family moved to Mexico after her fifteenth birthday. While in California, Ida placed importance on “trying to fit in” and negating
her Mexican heritage: “Oh no, we’re not Mexican.” Her mother, however, felt differently and decided to return to Mexico City and instill her family with Latino values. It was in Mexico City that Ida met and married her husband, an Anglo-American. Ida never had a quince, but in Mexico City, she was often invited to attend her cousin’s quinces and wished she had not foregone the ritual. Ida has always had a deep faith in God, the Church, and la Virgen de Guadalupe.

When a position became available in the rectory, Ida became involved in the church because she felt God was calling her to do this work. As a member of the congregation and the community, Ida was aware of the Latinos living in the area. “They would come to church and sit in the back. They were very humble. But I could see that there was a need to bring us closer together as one community, American and Mexican.” Ida asked God to show her how she could be of help, and slowly she reached out to individuals and invited them to Mass:

We had a very small community back then. We actually had Mass only twice a month, I believe. It may have been only once a month, and then with Father William as the community started growing, he tried to do it twice a month. Our Mass time was seven o’clock at night on Sundays. We figured that quite possibly that was a difficult time for people with families to get here and get back home afterwards and prepare for school the next day. So we changed it to twelve-thirty in the afternoon on alternating Sundays. Since then, our community has been growing. In the beginning, attendance was inconsistent; this lasted for months, but then after a year as the word got out, people started coming.

Ida was also concerned with the difficulty in building a community:

I believe they’re all scattered. I don’t think there is like a neighborhood or anything where there, where people tend to be. I guess apartments you know, apartment complexes that kind of stuff. The word gets out where they can maybe get some low income, you know, housing. And you might have more families in just one building. But they’re pretty much everywhere. We have parishioners who come from Pensacola. We have a lot of families who come from Pensacola even though they have the option to attend St. John’s.

Ida believes that the large community of 100 parishioners at St. John’s may be a factor in keeping some from joining. Given that on average, the number of parishioners that attended Ida’s church was below 20, “a hundred” would indeed be large. Her instinct is that some Latinos might feel more comfortable in a smaller church setting. The overall feeling of a smaller Latino community might engender closer familial ties, whereas individuals tend to become “lost” in
the larger church. Ida noted that within the community at St. John’s, there are smaller groups
of Latinos aligned along ethnic identity. Church attendance by Latinos in Ida’s community has
been predicated upon the whims of local law enforcement officials to enforce immigration laws.
In 2008, two restaurants were raided by local police officers intent on investigating identity
theft and in the process detained 10 individuals of Mexican and Guatemalan descent. They
were ultimately deported. Ida recalled this period as a time when only five individuals attended
Sunday Mass. Consequently, lingering feelings of fear and distrust compiled with current fears of
new immigration laws restricting their livelihood and movement have continued to hinder church
growth. However, Ida has seen resurgence in attendance and is hopeful for further growth:

We have a good number of regular people, like 15 maybe 20, and then outside of that it
could be, it could fluctuate, and it could be like every other Sunday that we see the same
faces. If they’re not here, then the other group comes in, so it fluctuates because of work.
You know some people get a job, and they just can’t be here on Sundays or every other
Sunday, but we do have a group, a small group that tries to come and tries to stay.

In this small church congregation where Anglos mix with Latinos, the pastor and staff are
mindful to include both groups in church activities. During social events like feast days or Our
Lady of Guadalupe Day, the church celebrates with food, music, and Mass, and everyone is
urged to attend and bring a casserole to share with the congregation. Building community among
members who share the same ethnicity exists because of shared historicity and an ongoing and
contested process (Hurtig 2000, 31). Contestation requires differing points of view, and in this
small community where both Anglos and Latinos merge, community will be forged through the
dialectic. I asked Ida if she feared that Latinos might not come to the church events if there are
Anglos present:

I think it holds them back a little bit. We’d leave it up to them. When we’d make
announcements, we’d say, okay, for Guadalupe Day or a feast day we say, okay, come and
bring a covered dish if you can, and we didn’t worry about it. Hopefully, they’ll show up.
We were trying to put emphasis on the fact that we are a community within a community.
So, you know we share certain traits and stuff, but we want to share that with the larger
community. One of the projects we have coming up is a festival. We are having a booth,
Latin Flavor, and we just started it three years ago because we didn’t have a Mexican booth
here. But that has been a blessing in disguise. It’s become a little ministry with the church
because it’s an opportunity for people to help because most of them don’t have the means, the financial means to help out the church. So, labor is one of those things they can help with. You have to encourage them and say, “Hey, here’s an opportunity, would you like to help?” And because the booth is about Hispanic food, they have taken ownership of the project. I don’t know if I can use the word pride here, because it might bring a negative connotation, but they think, here’s a little bit of my culture that they want to share with the larger group. So we’ve had a little bit more success in getting people to help out there. And they actually call me every year, “Hey, can I volunteer for that?” So, it’s a big step for Hispanics, yes.

Ida’s prompting of members of the Latino community to engage in church activities is a way to promote communal growth and solidarity. Promoting cultural events like the Latin Flavor booth engenders an ethnic feel to the Church that the immigrant will find inviting. Immigrants will turn to the Church as a support network and a center of celebration for special occasions: baptism, marriage, the feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe and the quinceañera ritual.

Overall, the interviews provide a diverse set of experiences all ultimately structured around the common themes of family/familia, ethnicity, rite of passage, gender construction, and comunidad. The interviews reinforce the original cultural domains expressed in the responses to the questionnaire. More importantly, the interviews are indicative of the processes embarked on by the respondents in becoming mujercitas. In my concluding chapter, I will offer some observations about the relationship of the quinceañera to the economic and familial conditions among Mexicanos in the Florida Panhandle.
CHAPTER V
ENDINGS

“At the polar extremes, rituals either display cultural depth or brim over with platitudes.”

(Rosaldo 1989, 15)

“…A story they tell themselves about themselves.”

(Geertz 1973, 448)

This thesis began by advancing the quinceañera as a form of redress for Mexican immigrants newly arrived in the United States. Unquestionably, being discovered and deported back to Mexico is a very real fear for undocumented immigrants; equally valid is the surrealness of a foreign culture. In this context, Mexican families grow to rely upon each other for financial well-being. Mexican parents also struggle with the reality of their daughters “losing” their culture, traditions, and values (Romo, Mireles-Rios, and Lopez-Tello 2014, 274). All ritual is of vital importance to newly arrived Mexican immigrants because it reinforces ethnic and gender construction and enables formation of deep compadrazgo networks by uniting families and building strong communal ties. And, as ritual, the quinceañera symbolizes social reproduction that melds immigrants’ view of how the world is with the way they believe it should be.

My own research allows me to generalize on a number of levels: first, within the region where I worked and second, on a wider cultural scale. Indeed, I have already offered a number of empirical generalizations within my ethnographic summary. Clearly, the local situation was complex and varied; even so, a mythos, a structured story of the quinceañera, permeates all of the stories I encountered. There also remain important questions, some of which can be addressed by my work and deserve discussion now. For example, what factors determine whether a young girl receives a quinceañera? Within the family, what factors determine outcomes for different children? How important is the church in supporting the process? How important is the process for ethnic identity or actual family connectedness? Given many diverse gender situations in the borderlands, how important is the process for actually determining gender construction? It
is clear that the symbolism involved in the *quinceañera* promotes the ideal of womanhood and strength in the family, but as a cultural process redressing perceived conflicts of identity, what does the range of outcomes for individuals say about symbolic transformation? Let us begin a synthesis by considering the local/regional level of generalization, providing contrast along the way with issues in the broader Hispanic world as it relates to the *quinceañera*.

**Gender**

In the area of gender, the *quinceañera* performance enacts the ideal of womanhood by presenting a chaste young woman before the Catholic Church and her family. Her parents gain social and symbolic capital because they have fulfilled their familial and religious obligations by presenting a responsible *mujercita* before the community. It should be clear from the Chapter IV discussions that not all of these gender associations are perfectly reflected in every case. For example, in the case of Britani, the father’s role was diminished through his personal actions and inability to cope with existing economic constraints. While the mother’s symbolic transformation offers a departure from the feminine ideal – reticence and acquiescence – Alma flowered into a strong and self-reliant woman capable of making decisions and becoming the head of the family.

The *quinceañera* uses symbolic units of meaning that reinforce and promote the ideal of emerging womanhood, or becoming a *mujercita*. And although the common response to the meaning of the *quinceañera* was “it’s a rite of passage in which a girl becomes a woman,” what is understood is that the initiate is not quite a woman. She may be allowed certain liberties such as wearing heels, using make-up, and in some instances being allowed to attend peer functions, but only in a group and under the supervision of adults. For the most part, she is still considered to be under her parents’ care and control. Her familial duties and responsibilities increase because she is now required to learn how to cook, maintain a household, and care for younger siblings. However, because these young women interact in a world where their instilled values come into direct contact with American notions of womanhood and independence, their existing values may be contested and questioned. Such was the case with Britani. She yearned for a traditional *quinceañera* with its rich symbolism of young womanhood and *familia*, yet her desire
was to complete high school and gain acceptance into medical school, which would take her away from her family.

La Familia

The quinceañera mother-daughter pairs I spoke with all “believed” in the ideal of chaste and obedient daughters. However, I came to realize that this belief is negotiable. The contradictions faced by young Mexican and first-generation Mexican-American women living in Pensacola is that they have learned to find strategies for dealing with restrictive rules and changing gender roles. For example, only Britani chose a white dress – the symbol of purity and chasteness – while all of the other quince girls wore brightly colored and embellished gowns. With regard to boyfriends, Britani had recently ended a relationship with a boy because he was not considered to be “serious about his future.” Alma’s knowledge of the boyfriend and of his subsequent dismissal provides a view of a mother-daughter relationship open to personal disclosure in variance with the more restrictive and traditional parenting found in Magda and Felipe’s home.

While interviewing Magda and Maria, I noticed that Felipe remained in the room attentive to the discussion and, in fact, chose to contribute. His moral implication that Mexicanos care more for their daughters than Americanos speaks to family strength and values. Mexican immigrant parents are fearful that their children may become too Americanized and learn to place more value on the ideal of “independence” than on the strength of la familia. This model of familismo refers to strength of family ties and its obligations. For example, it is expected that older siblings provide instruction and care to younger children. After her quinceañera, Elizabeth accepted her new role as the responsible older daughter and provided instruction to her younger sisters. When Sara downplayed the importance of the quinceañera, Elizabeth was quick to point out its relevance for tradition, familial responsibility, and ethnicity.

Magda and Felipe’s remark that Anglos view family as consisting only of nuclear members underscores a key feature in Mexican families. Mexican families are extended families. For Mexicanos, extended family provides social and financial support when needed.
Mexicanos may have to endure feelings of isolation or hostility from an Anglo world, familia provides familiarity and emotional encouragement. *Familia* builds *comunidad* because as one family is established in an area, it acts as a home base for future family members. The ritual of the *quinceañera* fuses families across time and space by forming networks of ritual kinship through *compadrazgo*.

**Comunidad and Ethnicity**

A strong sense of *comunidad* predicates whether incoming Mexican immigrants will remain in the area. Undoubtedly, newly arrived immigrants often choose to remain where there is a strong *comunidad*, as exhibited by local *tiendas*, Mexican restaurants, a Hispanic *misa*, and observation of Mexican traditions. These elements were somewhat differently manifest in the communities I studied, but some element of *comunidad* was present in all of them. For newly arrived Mexican immigrants, the inviting familiarity of the existing *comunidad* arises largely from the observance of ritual practices, including the *quinceañera*. Because it is regarded as a Mexican community tradition, the *quinceañera* is a sign of community set against a chaotic and foreign background of difference.

Interning in the Hispanic Resource Center afforded me an opportunity to speak with Latinas from all areas of South America, not just Mexico. Their view of the *quinceañera* took a common theme: a rite of passage signifying the end of a girl’s childhood and entrance into young womanhood. Where they differed with the Mexican view of the ritual was with the Mass of Thanksgiving. Latinas did not place equal significance on the religious aspect of the celebration, choosing instead to focus on the gathering of family, friends, and the impartation of traditions. The celebration is regarded as an ethnic and cultural identifier. For example, although Sofia, a Puerto Rican, was not raised with knowledge of the *quince*, she has come to accept the celebration as an ethnic event: “It is a teachable moment and for those who are present, we are glad, happy, very happy to see that our culture is passed on.” For Sofia, the observance and passing down of tradition is what is key.
The *quinceañera* ritual is an ethnic marker regarded by Mexicanos as a celebration unique to Mexican culture. Because of its reliance on the religious aspect, the ritual confers a sacred quality and denotes a sense of being “set apart.” Felipe and Magda’s philosophy that the *quinceañera* is a tradition that Mexicanos observe because they love their daughters further implies that it “stands outside” of Anglo-American culture. One of the phases in a life crisis ritual is separation from structure, or society. Through the use of symbols that have specific meaning to the Mexican community – the Mass of Thanksgiving, the medallion, the “last doll,” the fiesta – the ritual merges ethnic markers into a cohesive whole. In the immigrant context, the ritual not only conveys a message of ethnic pride to the *quinceañera* and her family but also aids in building ties to a somewhat scattered ethnic population – *comunidad* involves social ties manifest especially at ritual times, but less evident in everyday situations. The ritual process acts to shape the participants in such a way that they appropriate culturally held beliefs as their own – the final phase of ritual. The use of the symbols in the enactment of the ritual shapes consciousness in conformity with “deeply rooted” moods and motivations of the community. The symbols of the *quinceañera* communicate the worldview of the community as a world lived and the world as imagined – the enactment of the mythos of solidarity – fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, which turn out to be the same world for all, even though from group to group the enactment has many different manifestations (Geertz 1973, 112).

**Economics of Reciprocity**

*Comunidad* is built upon extensive networks of *compadrazgo*. Locally, families aid relatives and friends who have fewer financial resources, with the expectation that the relatives and friends will return the assistance. Family linkages in reciprocal relationships with expectation of a mutual return benefit all. The family who conveys the aid also gains prestige in the community and the expectation of a return beyond the circle of those to whom aid is directly given. Meanwhile, a family accepting the aid is often forever linked through a *compadre/comadre* (co-parent) relationship with a family of higher economic status. During the
quinceañera, compadres are accorded special significance. However, it should be noted that the significance is hierarchical, with padrinos de Baptismo having greater honor than compadres.

Still, the quinceañera can represent a substantial expense, and not all families are able to muster the personal or social resources to guarantee a ceremony for a child. My informants include several women who could not receive a celebration for financial reasons and families who could not afford a quince for all of their daughters. From the examples of my research, it should be clear that economic factors are a significant element in determining for whom, or even if, a quinceañera can be arranged. Still, the case of Britani shows that a family can and will respond when a way seems possible. It is very significant that the wider familia supported Britani’s quince in the end and that the required financial responsibilities were taken on by Alma.

The Church

On September 19, 2008, the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops published a bilingual publication entitled, “Order of the Blessing on the Fifteenth Birthday.” It was designed to help the Mexican community and the Church celebrate the ritual of the quinceañera inside and outside of Mass. While the publication does not offer an official liturgy for the quinceañera because it is not a sacrament, this publication is an interesting development. Prior to its issuance, the U. S. bishops had been split as to the importance of the ritual and their participation in it. The debate centered on whether the bishops would support an event that appeared to be socially centered and that caused Mexican families to incur debt rather than to give thanks for the successful upbringing of a young girl in accordance with the Catholic Church. In some locations around the U.S., some parishes had decided to have one all-inclusive celebration rather than individual quinces; in other parishes, the Church refused to celebrate the quince altogether. The Catholic Church’s official stance on the quinceañera currently recognizes that the ritual helps the Mexican community celebrate their cultural heritage and build bridges with other Catholics in their community. Thus, the Church has come to view the celebration as a way of solidifying its influence in the community.
The Catholic Church’s incorporation of ritual symbols that speak to ethnic traditions effectively links the Church with national heritage. Immigrants from different regions of Mexico enter the Church because it “reminds them of home,” experiencing comunidad in the process. As a way to signify the religious importance of the quinceañera, many of my informants viewed it as an extension of a Catholic sacrament. However, the Church is quick to respond that the quinceañera is not a sacrament; rather, it is beautiful ceremony celebrating a young girl’s growth as a Catholic woman. Recognizing the importance of the ritual, the Church has likened the quinceañera to a syncretism of Catholic, Aztec, and Mayan rites, thereby appropriating the tradition and establishing the Church as an arbiter of the authenticity of the ritual aspects of celebration.

Although the local priests and coordinators in Northwest Florida actively supported the cultural interests of the Mexican community, nationally the Catholic Church has had an ambivalent relationship regarding the ritual of the quinceañera. The Catholic Church’s appraisal of the quinceañera is twofold: (1) it places greater significance on the unnecessary monetary expenditure of the ritual rather than on the catechism, and (2) the ritual in effect broadcasts the initiate’s availability for sexual activity (Dávalos 2010, 108). However, Fr. Mendoza argues that the Catholic Church is missing a valuable opportunity for evangelization by providing a “teachable moment” in the Latino community (Fr. Mendoza interview 2011). Fr. Mendoza believes that the popularity of the ritual nationally forced the Catholic bishops to reassess the Church’s role by legitimizing the quinceañera as a tool of recruitment.

General Conclusion

Though a young woman is honored by the quinceañera ceremony, her family and community understand that she is now a woman who holds the same beliefs and values as the entire community and that she has new responsibilities. Through my research, however, I have found that the transformation is symbolic for both the initiate and the community; the young girl in the immigrant community is not literally transformed into a Mexicana woman. And although she may believe in the core themes of familia, comunidad, and becoming a
mujercita, the quinceañera becomes an active agent in making/choosing her own identity. Historical events can circumvent established social processes, as was the case with Sally. Sally’s symbolic transformation into womanhood was forever changed by the Cuban revolution. She came to understand the meaning of becoming a woman outside the ritual of her quinceañera. It was through her mother’s words to her at the airport that Sally’s understood the full meaning of becoming an adult woman. Her transformation was more than symbolic, and like Britani’s, the ceremony grounded the feelings of self-worth that enabled her to become a more effective, independent woman at a very young age.

Community transformation through ritual performances like the quinceañera enhances a sense of unity while adding membership. The expectation is that each new member will hold the same views and values. In chapter one, I stated that Mexican immigrants operate in a liminal frame to express their “betwixt and between” feeling of not quite belonging. Another feature of this stage is the shedding of hierarchical markers of status to become a “comity of comrades” (Turner 1967, 100). This description accurately applies to the participants during the ritual, especially at the fiesta when the entire community sheds its fears and exults in solidarity.

However, the ritual process does not exist outside of society at large and the changes that occur over time. Ritual works within limited traditions, sometimes mainly to reinforce a heritage for members of the community, rather than promoting an actual timeless continuity of tradition in society. For every young woman who has a dream or a story of her own making, she enters into the quince ritual not to be transformed into an exact copy of all women. Individual motivations and desires play an important part. The same is true for the community. Mexican immigrants come to this country with a dream. The dreams all vary individually, but the hoped-for realization of the dream is the same: to better their lives. They come into a society that is hostile and foreign to them. But when they enter a comunidad, they are at once made to feel safe and welcomed because they see vestiges of home and hear their own language. Through the ritual, a pervading sense of solidarity follows. They believe in a mythos, a storied ideal of how their lives should be, which includes a strong sense of community, familia, and ethnic pride. And
it is through the transformative power of rituals such as the quinceañera that they can experience the mythos as a part of their reality. It is through the quinceañera and other rituals that Mexican immigrants are afforded a vehicle to tell their own story about themselves.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Original Institutional Review Board Research Proposal
My research objective is to determine how ritual is used in a Mexican-American community to establish and reinforce social and cultural markers of gender and ethnic identity. My research goals include determining the performance elements of the ritual and its symbols which assist in constructing accepted gender and ethnic identity. Recruitment for my research will be chosen from female volunteers in the Mexican immigrant community of North Walton County. My methodology includes both quantitative and qualitative features: entrance, recruitment, questionnaires, free listing, pile sorting and interviews.

**Entrance**

As a researcher with outsider status, entrance into my chosen community is key to establishing credibility and necessary for recruitment (Zinn 1979, 213). Recruitment for my research will originate within the local Catholic church, therefore “entering” into the church community through regular attendance will ease my access to participants. Establishing relationships with prospective participants will be further facilitated through involvement in the various events sponsored by the Spanish speaking group. My involvement in communal events and projects is also invaluable in providing insights into the Mexican immigrant community and how it relates to the surrounding Anglo community. My first step is to meet with the parish priest and the two missionaries assigned to this church and inform them of my research project, its goals, and its methodology. I will provide the written forms I plan on using in the gathering of my data, including: Informed Consent, Interview Consent, and Child Assent for Minors forms. All the forms being used in this research will be in English and Spanish.

**Recruitment**

For ethical reasons I plan on making my interest in the *quinceañera* known from the onset of my entrance into the church community. I believe that my interest in a well known and loved ritual will aid in communicating about my research and engender interest with prospective volunteers. General word of mouth by women interested in my research will further attract participants, any instance of reticence or taciturnity would be dispelled by their interest in the
research. Furthermore, the tacit approval by the church hierarchy for my research will further aid in recruitment of female volunteers within the Mexican immigrant church community.

Participants will be chosen from among these volunteers. I expect twenty female volunteers of varying ages to participate. Each volunteer will be given a copy of the Informed Consent Letter and Consent to be Interviewed form, and girls fifteen years of age who wish to participate will have to be accompanied by an adult woman, and have a Child Assent form signed by a parent, legal guardian, or an adult attesting to the girl’s assent to participate in the research. This group of twenty women ranging in age from fifteen years to senior adults will take part in four phases of research: questionnaire, free listing, pile sorting, and interview.

**Phase One – Questionnaire**

The first phase will take place in a preapproved location such as the church hall. Choosing a well known location for the first part of my research will provide a familiar and practical setting to begin. A familiar setting will be conducive for placing my informants at ease and ensuring full attendance. Research will begin with a simple questionnaire on the quinceañera consisting of basic questions about the quinceañera including: general knowledge of the ritual, their views on its importance to gendering, when they first became aware of the ritual, and what values did it promote. The questionnaire should be completed in a short period of time, no more than 20 minutes. An informal refreshment break will follow allowing the participants to discuss amongst themselves the questions asked and share their responses. My intent is that the participants discuss the questions amongst themselves and to open new avenues of discussion with others away from the research setting. This type of examination on the part of the participants will help prepare them for the second phase – free listing.

**Phase Two – Free Listing and Pile Sorting**

In *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, H. Russel Bernard (2002) sets forth free listing as a deceptively simple and powerful tool used in cultural domain analysis (282). A cultural domain is a category of meaning ascribed to observable and physical things that can include events, emotions, dreams or even clouds. Every culture
creates thousands of categories by taking unique things and classifying them together (Spradley 1980, 88). Analysing the categories of a cultural domain affords an opportunity to delve into how people think (Bernard 2002, 280). It requires participants to list all the attributes relating to a specific topic, in this case, the various cultural themes expressed in the questionnaire and discussed informally among the participants. By involving respondents of varying age and social background in the questionnaire and the subsequent discussion session, their responses to the free list segment will be sufficiently diverse with an undercurrent of shared themes or patterning. The value of free listing is that it provides this researcher with another tool in which to grasp the mind of the participant by seeing how the women think about items that are grouped together.

Data collected from the questionnaire, the informal discussion, and the free listing exercises will provide the cultural themes, phrasing, or single words, to be used in the pile sort segment. Again this phase will take place at a location and date agreed upon by all participants. The themes collected from the previous activities will reflect the relevancy participants assign to the topics of: the *quinceañera*, ethnicity, traditions, religion, gendering, and family. Each of the themes, values, verbal expressions, phrases, or concepts conveyed during the previous exercises will be written on an index card. On the back of each index card will be a letter of the alphabet as an identifier. Participants will be asked to sort the index cards into various piles that demonstrate shared meaning among the cards, I will ask the question, “Which cards do you believe belong together?” The women will be allowed to make as many piles as necessary to fully convey the meaning they attribute to a given topic. During the exercise the participants will be prompted to offer any explanation on their grouping of the cards. Participants will be allowed to change their grouping of the cards with attention given to the reasoning behind the change. Once the participants are satisfied with their piles each pile will be banded together into bundles and collected for analysis.

The identifiers on the back of the index cards and the sequence in which they were selected will be entered into a computer program, ANTHROPAC 2.6. This program will generate a multidimensional scaling of the data, which will be used to measure how strongly the
participants feel about the data presented. The value of using pile sorting and multidimensional scaling is that it provides another inside look at the reasoning behind the women’s choices. In the minds of the informants the cards sorted and their ranking are related to one another, forming a relationship that may not be conscious to the participants, but that can possibly reveal some internal operating structure and patterning.

**Interviews**

The exercises and activities described above are meant to collect, analyze and interpret the data by linking quantifiable and qualitative features. However, symbols and attributes aligned with gender and ethnic identity can also be located in everyday experience therefore, the last phase of research will be formal interviews. Formal interviews allow participants to fully describe their experiences and offer their point of view. Informants provide the best resource for validation of results because they are natural participant observers. Their personal experiences as Mexican immigrant women engaging in an Anglo setting will contribute to my research and validate results. Women from the original participation group will be asked if they are willing to consent to be interviewed. Participants will be on a strictly volunteer basis. Ideally, at least ten women in varying ages and socioeconomic backgrounds will be asked to volunteer. Each volunteer will sign an agreement form prior to the interview; and in the case of minors, a parent, guardian, or adult must sign on their behalf attesting to their assent to be interviewed. Interviews will be from one to two hours in maximum length and held at a preapproved location and time spaced over a two-week period. Interviews will be based on pre-selected questions with responses recorded by hand and through the use of a digital recorder. The use of a digital recorder is in the Agreement to be Interviewed form and can be waived by the participant.

**Confidentiality of Data**

All information collected from my research through interviews, private conversations, group discussions, questionnaires, free lists, and pile sorting will be stored on a password protected flash drive which will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home office.
All field notes, questionnaires, and free lists will first be digitally transcribed onto the external flash drive. Tape recorded sessions will be digitally transcribed onto the same password protected flash drive. No information regarding this project will be stored on my hard drive. I plan on making a back-up of the external flash drive which will also be password protected and stored in the locked cabinet in my home office. The locked cabinet will be accessible only by myself.

**Risks to Participants**

Because I am working with an immigrant community, questions related to their immigration status may pose a risk to my informants, therefore I will not ask any questions regarding their immigration status. I will protect their identity through strict confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms in my research.

**Informed Consent**

Informed consent will be obtained by a verbal description of my research project and its goals and through the use of an informed consent letter. See attached letter and form.
Ms. Gloria Bibby  
691 Hubbard St.  
DeFuniak Springs, FL 32435

Dear Ms. Bibby:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Research Participants Protection has completed its review of your proposal titled "La Quinceanera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identity in a Mexican Immigrant Community," as it relates to the protection of human participants used in research, and granted approval for you to proceed with your study on 06-01-2011. As a research investigator, please be aware of the following:

* You will immediately report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to human participants.

* You acknowledge and accept your responsibility for protecting the rights and welfare of human research participants and for complying with all parts of 45 CFR Part 46, the UWF IRB Policy and Procedures, and the decisions of the IRB. You may view these documents on the Research and Sponsored Programs web page at http://www.research.uwf.edu/internal. You acknowledge completion of the IRB ethical training requirements for researchers as attested in the IRB application.

* You will ensure that legally effective informed consent is obtained and documented. If written consent is required, the consent form must be signed by the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative. A copy is to be given to the person signing the form and a copy kept for your file.

* You will promptly report any proposed changes in previously approved human participant research activities to Research and Sponsored Programs. The proposed changes will not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participants.

* You are responsible for reporting progress of approved research to Research and Sponsored Programs at the end of the project period **12-31-2011**. If the data phase of your project continues beyond the approved end date, you must receive an extension approval from the IRB.

Good luck in your research endeavors. If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact Research and Sponsored Programs at 850-857-6378 or irb@uwf.edu.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard S. Podemski, Associate  
Vice President for Research  
And Dean of the Graduate School

Dr. Carla Thompson, Chair  
IRB for the Protection of Human  
Research Participants

CC: John Bratten
APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Forms
Consentimiento por Escrito

Investigación: La Quinceañera

Hola, me llamo Gloria Cuevas Bibby. Soy una estudiante de la Universidad de Florida Oeste en Pensacola y me gustaría pedir su ayuda. Estoy solicitando su participación voluntaria para una investigación. Desde que era una niña, yo estoy interesada en la quinceañera y su significado. Ahora tengo interés en la quinceañera y el significado para las mujeres jóvenes y sus familias. Creo que esa costumbre refleja valores importantes que definen una mexicana joven, su familia y su comunidad. Solicito su ayuda para investigar esos valores.

Si aceptara participar, me reuniré con Usted para dos sesiones. En la primera sesión, realizaré un grupo de preguntas sobre la quinceañera y su significado. Sus sentimientos son importantes y no hay respuestas incorrectas. Pediré que haga una lista de atributos sobre la quinceañera, sus experiencias personales sobre la tradición y algunos pensamientos sobre ser una mujer y mexicana. En la sesión final, ensamblará fichas con atributos en modos diferentes según sus pensamientos. También quiero reunirme con usted para preguntarle acerca de sus experiencias personales como mexicana.

Las sesiones tendrán una duración mínima de una hora y se podrán llevar a cabo en donde usted indique. Pueda traer sus niños. Yo traeré refrescos.

No voy a usar su nombre o dirección en mis investigaciones, solamente un seudónimo. Usted tiene el derecho de privacidad y no haré nada que haga daño a Usted. Voy a anotar y usar un grabador porque no puedo escribir todo de las conversaciones. La información y la grabación serán guardadas en un armario cerrado al que sólo yo puedo acceder.

El beneficio de esa investigación es de revelar la importancia de la quinceañera y como ayude a las mujeres aprender sobre sí misma, y lo que las importa a ellas.

Si tiene alguna duda o quiere participar en esta investigación agradeceré que me llame, mi número de teléfono es 850.305.2313.
Su participación en esta investigación es voluntaria totalmente. No hay consecuencias si quiera terminar su participación a cualquier momento. Si quiera participar, por favor llámeme para establecer un tiempo para reunir.

**Acuerdo del Participante**

Al firmar debajo estoy aceptando participar en el cuestionario, discusión y dare mi opinión sobre los important atributos de ser una mujer, al igual que una Mexicana. Entiendo que puedo terminar mi asociación con este proyecto en lo cuanto desee. Muchas gracias por su ayuda.

____________________________________  _________________________  
Firma  Fecha

Si el voluntario tiene menos de 18 años, un padre o tutor necesita firmar.

____________________________________  _________________________  
Firma de padre  Fecha
Informed Consent Form

Student Project: La Quinceañera

Hello, my name is Gloria Cuevas Bibby. I am a graduate student at the University of West Florida in Pensacola and I would like your help. I am asking for your voluntary participation in my school project. Ever since I was a young girl, I was interested in the quinceañera and what it meant. I am still very interested in the quinceañera and what it means to young women and their families. I believe that this ritual reflects important values which define a young Mexicana, her family and community. I would like your help in finding out what these values are.

If you agree to participate you will be asked to meet for two sessions. In the first session you will meet as a group and will be asked a few questions about the quinceañera and what you think is significant about it. Your feelings and sentiments are important and there are no wrong answers. You will also be asked to list important attributes about the quinceañera, your personal experience with the ritual, about being a woman and a Mexicana. In the final group session, you will be putting together cards with the attributes you thought were the most important in different ways. I would also meet with you privately to ask you about your personal experiences as a Mexicana.

The sessions will meet for about one hour; some might take a little longer. You may bring your children and I will bring some refreshments. The personal meetings will be wherever you prefer, these should also last one hour.

I will not use your name or address in my research, I will use a pseudonym instead. You have a right to your privacy and I will not do anything which will harm you. I will take handwritten notes and use a tape recorder because I will not be able to write down every conversation. The information on the tape recordings will be kept in a locked cabinet and no one but myself will have access to it.

The benefit of this research is in discovering the importance of the quinceañera and how it helps women learn about themselves and what is important to them.
If you have any questions or concerns, or if I can help you in any way, please call me, my number is 850.305.2313.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate at any time during this project there will not be any negative consequences. If you would like to participate in an interview between you and me, please let me know so that we can set a time to meet.

**Participant’s Agreement**

By signing below I am agreeing to participate in the questionnaire, discussion, and listing of important attributes about becoming a woman and a Mexicana. If volunteer is under the age of 18, a parent or guardian must sign this form. Thank you for helping me.

____________________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant  Date

____________________________________  _______________________
Parent/Guardian Signature  Date