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COM 380: Digital Death
Evocative Object Essay
18 NOV 2015

Anything but a Dress

In Latino cultures, a rite of passage for a girl into maturity is to have a quinceañera. “Quince” in Spanish means “fifteen” so the word, quinceañera, describes both the young girl and the celebration, depending on the context in which they are used. This Latino occasion usually begins with a religious ceremony first to give thanks to God for his blessings. Then the quinceañera has a feast and dance with family and friends. In Latino communities, this tradition serves not only to honor the young woman for her maturity, but also the girl’s parents and family, and godparents.

Most societies have rituals signifying a passage to adulthood for both women and men, but a quinceañera is very distinctive. In former times, a young girl’s fifteenth birthday would have signaled that she was an active, adult member of the community. It was a signal that she was fully ready to take on her share of responsibilities and indicated that she was of marriageable age and status. Today, the tradition has taken on other meanings, but remains a celebration of womanhood, family and community.

As far as the actual celebration with family goes, it is quite expensive and could typically last 6 hours. The parents, godparents, and often other families contribute something to make the party a reality. Often, there are godparents selected for the limo, godparents for the ballroom, godparents for the DJ, and so on that pay for a specific item and then bring it all together. Sometimes, if the quinceañera has enough siblings, friends or teenage family members, she can

also have her own quinceañera party which similar to a bridal party. It is quite an over-the-top experience. A main component to the feast is the cake, which is coordinated with the girl's quinceañera gown and marvelous decorations.

After a formal dinner, her mother and father and godparents play important roles throughout a ceremony by presenting the quinceañera with certain gifts that have different meanings. She is presented with a crown, trades simple slippers for a classier pair of heels that a young woman would wear, and is given a china doll to symbolize the end of her childhood. Then the quinceañera traditionally opens the party officially by dancing a waltz with her father or primary escort. There is also a toast, in which people remark on the quinceañera with pride and fond memories of her youth. This is the time when the parents impart special messages, transferring wisdom and life-experiences to their daughter. Towards the end of the night, there is dancing to plenty of contemporary dance music and older songs from the 80's and 90's for both young and old guests.

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Being a Mexican woman, the possibility of having a quinceañera was on my mind as far as I can remember. Right after I turned fifteen in February of 2009, my parents began bringing up the topic of such an occasion all the time. Being a teenager, I stubbornly declined *all the time*. The way I thought about it: I didn't want my parents to spend money just so I was able to wear a huge, horribly puffy dress. I didn't want a two-story cake with a water fountain nor did I want to do a choreographed dance in front of my family and friends. The planning was so extensive, money was tight even if my aunts and uncles helped and it was already after my birthday

anyway. I was in the middle of my freshman year of high school and I've seen the reality show where girls turned into the quinceañera version of "bride-zillas". I didn't want to go through all of that. I didn't want to keep talking about it. I just wanted a normal birthday.

My mother and I fought for so long during this time and because I didn't want to talk about anything that was related to a quinceañera, we did not talk at all. It was hard since she used to be the closest person to me. I remember we fought over my friends, every time I asked for permission to go out or wanted to buy something... We fought over every little thing. It was only until I came up with a risky proposal that settled the never-ending bickering. I proposed to my mother that if I found the right quinceañera dress, then I would agree to a small celebration and let her plan it all without me interfering. If I did not find one dress that I liked- then that was it. There would be no grand party and she would have to respect that.

Two weeks later, we were driving down 26th street in La Villita looking at boutique stores, seeking a purple dress. We spent 4 hours looking and fighting. She would show me dress after dress and I rejected them all before she made me go to the fitting room and haul those heavy things over my body:

"No, that's ugly."

"Mami, that's too pink- no."

"No, that's too purple."

"Ohmygod, I told you no ruffles, ma."

I knew I was really getting on her last nerve but since I only had one chance for one dress, I might as well find the perfect one. And I did when we walked into the last store.

“Hi, can I help you? What are you looking for?” said the Hispanic lady at the counter.

“Oh, we’re looking for a quinceañera dress, preferably a light purple,” I said already leafing through magazines while my mom walked around the displays.

“Hmmm, what size are you?”

“Um, eight...?”

“Good. Come to the back with me.”

My mom and I exchanged glances and followed her to the single fitting room with mirrors for walls. There, hanging off to the side was a dress- my dress. I knew it.

“This dress was custom-made for a girl but she did not like it and just left it here. If it fits, it’s yours for \$300.”

Trust me when I say, that \$300 for a custom-made quinceañera dress is a steal as they usually range between \$800 and \$1,500. I quickly stripped down while trying not to burst from excitement. I tried really hard to seem nonchalant about what was happening in front of my mom. I didn’t want to let her see that she had already won. But as soon as the lady finished lacing the bodice and we looked up to my reflection in the mirror, she knew it.

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My quinceañera dress is now somewhere in a box in my basement but still holds the memory of my very special fifteenth birthday that was celebrated late on August 25, 2009.

In that dress, I walked down the steps of my house as six of my cousins stood by. They were chosen as my chambelanes, an all-male party. In this dress, I stood before an altar giving thanks to God. In this dress, I sat in a chair in the middle of the ballroom while my mom crowned me; while my father changed my heels and made me feel like Cinderella and while I held my last doll. And in this dress, I waltzed with my father and then waltzed a second time in memory of my other father that should have been there celebrating with me. That is the best memory my dress holds. We waltzed and cried while everyone else in the room watched and cried.

What I have forgotten is the nervousness I felt as I presented myself before my family and friends. I have forgotten details such as the table centerpieces and decorations, all the times I had to smile for cameras, and the music I danced to with my girlfriends, and all the small drama that happened when a party doesn't have everything go as planned.

When my mother and I see that dress whenever we clean the basement, we still can't believe how the lady at the store practically gave it to me. She believes it was a sign so that she could plan her first daughter's quinceañera. My sisters both turned fifteen and did not have theirs so I am glad my mom had her chance with me. Most importantly, we remember how it brought us together during a difficult time. It is bittersweet that I will never be able to wear that dress again since you are only a quinceañera once but the memories of that day lie within the folds and delicate sparkles of the dress. Even if I don't recall all of it, I am reminded of the most important

moments of that year. I am reminded of the traditions I uphold of my heritage and that the dress is a part of me and anything but a simple dress.