INTERSECTING IDENTITIES: RACE AND GENDER IN A QUINCEAÑERA FASHION SHOW

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ABSTRACT

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Research on Latina girls often focuses on those stigmatizing experiences that mark them as highly susceptible to becoming young mothers, gang members and/or high school drop outs. Although quite scarce, there is research that interrogates the re-envisioning of Latina identities through transformative models that focus on how Latina girls are influenced by and in turn influence their surroundings. This paper focuses primarily on ethnographic research with four young Latinas from Toledo, Ohio who chose or chose not to participate in a Quinceañera Fashion Show sponsored by the social services agency Adelante, Inc. My interviews with some of the girls, as well as my observational experiences of the public events themselves, offered me a more complicated understanding of Latina girl culture as it relates to their community, family and peer lives. This study examined the girls’ impressions of the Quinceañera Fashion Show, their interest in participating in this program, as well as their general understanding of the role of quinceañeras in Latina girl culture. The girls’ experiences with the Quinceañera Fashion Show were the case through which I explored how gender and racial identities were developed and negotiated. Exploring the intersections of race and gender, this study examined whether this newest incarnation of the quinceañera, in the form of a fashion show, took on a contemporary quality that positively influenced the girls. This study also illuminates how the fashion show reproduced displays of normative femininity while also encouraging a sense of ethnic and pan-ethnic Latino/a pride. Furthermore, this study suggests that girls need to be afforded the opportunity to challenge normative ideals of race and gender and become producers of their own realities capable of defining what that reality should and needs to look like.
FOR MY DAUGHTER MAYA. MAY YOU ALWAYS REMEMBER THOSE BEFORE YOU AND FOREVER
BE PROUD OF WHO YOU ARE.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

After I entered the Toledo Main Public Library and marveled at its impressive structure and aisle upon aisle of books I focused on a group of young people chatting and joking at the center of the main atrium. They were an unexpected sight, not because they were a group of Latino/as or a group of young people at that, but because they were a group of young folks having a good time while learning the waltz in a library—of all places. This group of young people was practicing for a series of upcoming Quinceañera Fashion Shows sponsored by Adelante, a Toledo Social Services Agency that services the Northwest Ohio Latino/a community.

The two fashion shows identified in this study were scheduled to take place at the Toledo Main Branch Library and the Westfield Franklin Park Mall and featured the “hottest” quinceañera dresses and escort suits on the market from local bridal boutiques. The event showcased a rendition of a quinceañera court dance as well as more contemporary cumbia performances. A quinceañera court is composed of young women and men who symbolically represent the birthday girl’s fourteen years of life. Hence, in many quinceañeras you will customarily see fourteen young women escorted by fourteen young men leading up to the arrival of the birthday girl who represents her 15th year of life. In many quinceañeras you also see the court perform a choreographed dance of a traditional waltz and/or a Latino/a influenced musical style such as a cumbia. Traditionally a Colombian musical style, the cumbia has been adapted and adopted by many Mexican artists and it has become a quite popular dance form at quinceañera celebrations. As students from local public junior and senior high schools in Toledo, the Adelante youth group prepared for performances as part of a new effort to celebrate Latino/a Heritage month in spaces open to the Toledo public.
In its third year, the Quinceañera Fashion Show has grown from a one time display of dresses to an event that requires three months of preparation and involves youth participation in Adelante’s youth prevention services. Although the quinceañera events did not occur until October 4th and 11th of 2008, the youth began participating in weekly mentoring sessions with Adelante staff in August 2008. In addition, they participated in occasional community service outings to places such as local soup kitchens. Adelante’s goal was to keep the students off the streets and focused on their educational and personal betterment through a fun and creative celebration of a Latino/a custom—the quinceañera.

*Drawing closer to the atrium the excitement became infectious and I could not refrain from smiling at the sight of the youths’ intense concentration as they practiced their waltz and model walks. The youth were all comfortably dressed in jeans and t-shirts. One girl had an elaborate drawing of La Virgen de Guadalupe on the back of her shirt. The image fit the scene rather perfectly. A beacon of hope for Latinos/as, La Virgen is also recognized as one of Mexico’s most popular religious and cultural images. As I studied the girl’s t-shirt I wondered whether La Virgen’s significance as a virginal figure was even more apparent within a setting organized around the celebration of a Latina girl’s rite of passage.*

Adelante’s Quinceañera Fashion Show is unique for three reasons. First, it parts from traditional celebrations of the quinceañera by focusing on the collective group of girls coming into womanhood as opposed to one individual’s coming of age. Secondly, it includes an educational component that encourages personal and professional development. This is crucial because after the performances the youth continue to be involved in the mentoring component that takes place year round. Finally, this event is also unique because it takes a celebration that is mostly private and shared between family and friends and opens it up to include a more
expansive community. It showcases an aspect of Latino/a culture to the general Toledo
community who might not be as familiar with the quinceañera and the work of our Latino/a
youth.

However, it is not the showcasing of the Latino/a tradition that makes this event valuable,
but instead the pride the students radiate at being able to develop and present the event to the
community. Each student I encountered throughout the planning and execution of the
Quinceañera Fashion Show was excited to share details about Adelante, the youth program and
their participation and role in planning the events. During each show the young men and women
took on a more mature posture while wearing the fancy suits and dresses. They demonstrated this
pride by standing taller and sharing excitedly the program details. For example, one student who
I shall name Roberto, arrived early to the Public Library Fashion show. He was wearing a very
refined white suit, with a black button up dress shirt underneath. His black shoes were polished
to perfection. As he walked toward the event planners it was evident that we was standing taller
and carrying himself quite maturely. I was amazed, as this was a student who before that day
primarily wore baggy t-shirts and sagging jeans and was rarely ever on time let alone early to an
Adelante function. What is it about this program that made many of its participants stand tall
with pride? More importantly what is it about the fashion show that influenced the young women
who participated?

**STUDY DESIGN**

The above stories come from my field notes during thesis research in Toledo, Ohio. As of
September 2007 I had been working with Adelante as a Youth Staff Specialist assisting with the
tutoring and mentoring of elementary and junior high age students in Toledo. After learning
about the Quinceañera Fashion Show, scheduled for two separate Saturdays in October 2008, I developed a course of action where I could connect my academic work in American Culture Studies with my service within the Toledo Latino/a community. My interest in Latina girl culture as well as courses of study that complicate and examine processes of gendering and racialization in the United States fueled this thesis project.

A quinceañera is a ritualized celebration of a young Latina’s passage into womanhood during her 15th birthday. The Adelante-sponsored Quinceañera Fashion Show appeared as an ideal case for examining how Latina girls experience processes of gendering and racialization. One of the only rituals that center the exclusive participation of Latina girls,¹ the quinceañera, as celebrated within a United States context, becomes an ideal case for examining the performance of ethnic identity and femininity. While it is celebrated in Latin America, my analysis focuses primarily on those experiences specific to the United States. The quinceañera, presented into society as a racialized and gendered figure, becomes a symbol for the performance of a Latina girl identity. Despite my existing relationship to Adelante, for the purposes of my study I chose not to direct the programming aspect of the Quinceañera Fashion Show so as to allow myself the freedom to fully observe and interact with the girls in a non-administrative role.

Therefore, as part of my research, I attended three Quinceañera Fashion Show practices, both at the Main Public Library and at Adelante offices. After encountering the teens in other settings as part of my work with Adelante’s Youth Program, I recruited four girls to interview as part of my study. Distributing flyers at practices as well as requesting the help of the staff organizers of the event aided my efforts in securing the participation of these four young women. Early in the process I developed a script to help me effectively describe my study in age

¹ While the quinceañera is generally celebrated by Latina girls, non-Latina girls did participate in the Adelante sponsored Quinceañera Fashion Show.
appropriate language. I wanted to avoid intimidating the young women and therefore framed their participation as a low-key conversation about their participation in the fashion show and general impressions of quinceañeras. It was also important to me that the girls recognize their participation was voluntary and would in no way affect their relationship with Adelante or the Quinceañera Fashion Show.

I interviewed four young women. Despite this small number of interviews, each young woman had wonderfully rich stories to share. I chose to interview each young woman individually, instead of as part of a group session, to offer her an opportunity to share her stories candidly and freely. Each individual interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes to an hour, although 1½ hours were allotted. The digitally audio taped interviews focused primarily on their experiences as Latinas in school, at home and in their communities. In addition to the one-on-one interviews I also conducted field research by: (1) attending Quinceañera Fashion Show dance practices (as mentioned above) and (2) attending the two formal events, one at the Main Toledo Branch Library and the second at the Westfield Franklin Park Mall. My field notes, participant observations, and interviews, as elaborated upon in the following two chapters, include my own impressions regarding details about the space, the people and the interactions that took place within each setting.

To maintain confidentiality I have given each of my participants a pseudonym. My interest in doing so was to offer the girls a chance to speak a bit more safely and candidly about their experiences. When contacting each participant individually, each girl and I collectively decided the date, time and location of the interview. Because my participants were underage I requested that each girl provide a parent or guardian with a consent form detailing my project. These consent forms were provided in both Spanish and English to accommodate diverse
language abilities. I was also able to speak with each parental figure, either in person or over the phone, to further explain the project and answer any questions they had. Two interviews took place in a quiet and unoccupied classroom at Adelante. The other two interviews took place in the girls’ house, rooms chosen at a distance from their family members. All interviews took place after the Quinceañera Fashion Show, during the months of November and December. Each young woman consented to participating in my project. Of the four participants three had participated in the Quinceañera Fashion Show and one decided not to, but was generally aware of the event. Part of my research approach was to include two types of young women, those who did participate in the fashion show and those who chose not to participate. I did this in order to examine the reasons behind the choice to participate or not and whether each participant related differently to the Quinceañera Fashion Show. For example, does the program cater to only a particular type of girl or are there sufficiently varied opportunities for engagement?

All interviews were semi-structured. Although I generally asked questions in the same order, depending on the participant’s answers I introduced appropriate follow-up questions and/or comments. Generally I avoided sharing my own opinions and stories, but at moments it seemed appropriate and rather important to introduce my own ideas, so as to put the young women at ease and develop better rapport. I avoided, to the best of my abilities, introducing leading questions that would seem to elicit specific answers from the girls. My line of questioning followed five general segments: (1) biographical information, (2) family questions, (3) school questions, (4) community questions and finally (5) quinceañera questions (see appendix for list of questions). As this list of topics indicates, I was not solely interested in their participation in the Quinceañera Fashion Show events. Rather, I was interested in this event as a
window to understanding their identities and social relationships in relation to race, ethnicity, and gender.

Although both young men and women participate in Adelante’s fashion show and mentoring program, I limited my scope to the young women due to time constraints and the traditional focus of quinceañeras. Generally this tradition focuses mostly on a young girl’s passage into womanhood. Nonetheless, I do see the benefit in examining the experiences and contributions of young men in this process. As my observations indicate, both masculinity and femininity were performed in particular ways in this event. Future studies could develop this analysis further. However, I chose to focus on the ways girls experience constructions of race and gender through the fashion show and through other life experiences, such as that with family and friends. I chose to focus on Latina girls because of my combined interest in Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies and the gaps I see in both areas of study for more research focused on articulations of gender and race in populations of Latina girls. This field of study is also important to me because it allows me to examine the issues affecting young Latina girls and in the future develop programs that can address and respond to their social, intellectual, and political needs.

I have already mentioned why I think the fashion show is a useful case for examining processes of racialization and gendering among the Latina girls in my study. Additionally, my project is useful because it parts from traditional research on quinceañeras by not focusing on a typical birthday celebration. Most research on this birthday event focuses on an individual girl’s birthday party and narrates how the girl develops and then experiences her special day. Usually that involves following a young woman during the planning of her birthday celebration as well as conversing with key figures such as her mother or friends (Alvarez 8). This research tends to
focus on the traditions and the general idea that the quinceañera functions as a rite of passage into womanhood. Other popular publications about quinceañeras are mostly concerned with offering general descriptions about the event, focusing closely on those elements such as the dress, the cake and the party. Most publications function as a guide to planning a quinceañera (King 3; Salcedo 5). In contrast, the girls in my study were not chosen because they were planning their own quince\(^2\) celebration or participating in someone else’s birthday celebration, but instead because they had or had not decided to participate in a group event organized by a social service organization. Unlike individual birthday celebrations, this event focuses on a collective presentation of the quinceañera. While it primarily showcases quinceañera attire, it does so by presenting a group of Latina girls already involved in specific community building programming through Adelante. Therefore, it does not focus on the rite of passage of one young woman, but instead serves to symbolize the rite of passage of a community of Latina girls.

I argue that the girls’ decision to participate or not in the Quinceañera Fashion Show and the different ways they monitored their involvement were all political decisions. Thus my research examines how this newest incarnation of the quinceañera has taken on a contemporary quality that positively influences the girls and influences how they experience race and gender. In fact, I ponder whether the quinceañera celebration, sponsored through community efforts, can be used as a vehicle for strengthening Latina girl identities in a society that highly stigmatizes them. While I recognize the Quinceañera Fashion Show may have positive effects on the girls, I am also interested in examining the ways in which their participation can lead to negative experiences of gendering and racializing. I examine the ways the Quinceañera Fashion Show encourages articulations of femininity in accordance with normative societal expectations, such

\(^2\) The Quinceañera is also referred to by the shortened word quince which means fifteen in Spanish.
as modest dress codes, while discouraging those behaviors deemed socially inappropriate for a young woman, such as sexual promiscuity.

The Adelante sponsored Quinceañera Fashion Show, therefore, provides a wonderful case for examining how race, ethnicity and gender get negotiated among Latina girls. This case is important because it highlights Latina girls in Toledo, a segment of the Ohio Latino/a community that often gets overlooked. Toledo is neither the biggest city nor does it have the largest population of Latino/as in Ohio. According to the 2007 US Census Bureau, Latinos comprise 2.5% of the Ohio population and only 5.5% of Toledo’s population. Instead, the 2000 census shows that the larger Ohio Latino/a communities are found in the city of Cleveland with a population of 7.3% Latino/as and in the city of Lorain with a population of 21.0% Latino/as. The 2002 census shows that Latino/as owned only 1.9% of businesses in Toledo, in comparison to the equally low 9.0% of black owned businesses. Despite their small population numbers and limited presence in Toledo businesses, the Latino/a community is constantly thriving and negotiating its presence in public and community forums. Through their participation in Adelante sponsored community and educational projects, Latina girls are a critical part of this growth. Latina girls participate in Adelante’s numerous community projects, in places such as soup kitchens and after school mentoring in elementary schools. They also have the opportunity to motivate future change through their participation in leadership conferences, their contributions to lobbying sessions across the state of Ohio, and their involvement in youth oriented service projects.

Because the population is often overlooked, I conducted a research study that documented the experiences of Latina girls in Toledo, Ohio. Most research on Latina girls focuses on the more common urban areas of New York City and Chicago, as well as various

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3 According to the 2000 Census, African Americans make up 23.5% of the Toledo population.
segments of the Southwest such as California and Texas (Dietrich 2; Denner and Guzman 7). These East and West coast locations have historically had larger Latino/a communities. Although there is a rich Latino/a history in Ohio, scholars are only now beginning to fully document these experiences (Macklin xxxi; Rivera 151; Mitchell 1187). This research study on Latina girls in Toledo is part of those new trends in scholarship. Thus, the purpose of my study is to examine the role of quinceañeras in the lives and experiences of Latina girls in Toledo, as a result of their decision to participate or to not participate in Adelante’s Quinceañera Fashion Show. All of the participants in this study are and continue to be part of Adelante’s youth program and are tied to the Toledo area Latino/a community in significant ways through their community and civic engagement.

Adelante’s primary mission is to provide programs and services to the Latino/a community, a population underserved due to cultural and language barriers. Adelante’s goal is to strengthen family structures, eliminate barriers to service and improve the wellness of the community. They try to achieve these goals through many youth oriented, adult, and family programs. The Quinceañera Fashion Show is one of Adelante’s biggest youth oriented activities, and it takes place during Latino/a Heritage month (October). It publicly showcases the traditional dresses worn during quinceañera ceremonies, the history behind the celebration, and the many artistic talents of the participating youth through song and dance.

My research question(s) explore the role of family, school, and community in the girls’ experiences as Latinas in Toledo, Ohio. I specifically examine their impressions of the Quinceañera Fashion Show, their interest in participating in this program as well as their general understanding of the role of quinceañeras in Latina girl culture. When I first began the project I suspected that the girls participated in the Quinceañera Fashion Show because it provided a
social outlet where they could interact with their peers. The participants were able to interact with friends from neighboring schools as well as meet new youth from the Toledo area. Thus the program functioned as a meeting ground for many of these youth. I was able to engage the girls in conversations about the event and other important facets of their lives to obtain a more cohesive picture about their worlds. The Quinceañera Fashion Show allows us to learn more about those things that are most important to the girls. It serves as one case for understanding how the girls negotiate race, gender and ethnic identity on a daily basis.

As discussed above, my field research focused primarily on the girls’ participation in the Adelante Quinceañera Fashion Show through individual interviews and participant observation during multiple practices and the two scheduled events. Therefore, this thesis (1) presents an ethnographic narrative about the girls’ lives and the ways they negotiate their ethnic, racial and gender identities, (2) examines their involvement with the Adelante Quinceañera Fashion Show, and (3) documents the experiences of four Latina youth. I center my analysis within a feminist and cultural studies framework that highlights how gender, race and ethnic identification occurs within various facets of a Latina girl’s life. Through my research, I explore the following questions: (1) How do the girls articulate the performance of ethnicity and gender and (2) How do the girls describe the world that surrounds them, their personal contributions and aspirations? In other words, although I think the Quinceañera Fashion Show is a fascinating case for examining gender and ethnic identity, I am most concerned with learning how the girls negotiate and mold their social worlds.

As a self-identified Puertorriqueña, I have always been fascinated by the connections between gender and ethnic identity, particularly as processes of self affirmation. As a Puerto Rican woman, I consistently negotiate those ethnic and gendered expectations associated with
being a woman of color. From my experience it is difficult to separate those moments when I am
gendered and/or racialized, because self-identifying as Puertorriqueña automatically aligns my
gendered ethnicity in powerful ways. Invoking this gendered ethnicity is an important source of
my self-affirmation. Incidentally, I was attracted to the quinceañera because it provides a unique
case for observing the often chaotic terrain of negotiating a Latina identity.

The quinceañera is a useful case for examining Latina femininity and identity because it
is critiqued as reproducing problematic gender and class politics (Alvarez 6; Davalos 108;
Horowitz 266). The ritual is most concerned with issues of purity, beauty, and patriarchal
supervision and outlines how “an unattached young woman” should properly behave (Horowitz
268). Despite these critiques some writers are fond of the idea of celebrating girls, but would
rather it take place in non-normative ways where girls are free to fully define their own existence
(Alvarez 251). These writers wish a girl’s 15th birthday could be celebrated as a special marker
for who she would like to become and what important steps she will need to take to get there
(Alvarez 257). Many of these authors could care less about pink dresses and fancy expensive
parties, but instead see the strength in empowering a young woman and allowing her the freedom
to explore the contradictions of the quinceañera (Alvarez 259; Davalos 119).

As a researcher I am one of those people interested in examining the contradictions of the
quinceañera and proposing ways for adapting it to benefit young Latinas. I turned to the
Quinceañera Fashion Show purposefully attempting to not impose critiques that might cloud my
analysis. This was extremely difficult. Born in NYC and raised in Puerto Rico, I participated in
my own share of quinceañera birthday celebrations. I was even able to participate in a peer’s
birthday court, decked out in a pink princess gown of my own. I remember being excited as I
tried on my dress at the seamstress’s house. It was a lovely pink satin gown with spaghetti straps
and criss-cross detail across the back. There were fourteen young women and fourteen young men, ages from fourteen to sixteen. The birthday girl wore a beautiful white dress with gold undertones. I remember thinking how closely she resembled a bride despite having her brother as an escort. We all attended mass in the local Catholic Church. Although I do not remember much about the service, I do remember the numerous pictures taken at the altar and outside the church. I think it is telling that I do not remember much about the religious service since many of these celebrations focus more pointedly on the festivities. As a young girl I was mesmerized by the tradition since it was so popular among my Catholic private school friends. Although I was quite shy, there was something exciting about being the center of attention, if only for one day.

However, I did not choose to have my own quinceañera; I was one of many who opted for a cruise instead of a one time birthday party, per my parent’s suggestion. I never wore a fancy quinceañera dress or a dazzling princess crown. I did not experience this sense of “becoming a woman” during my 15th birthday. Although it was one of the happiest and most memorable moments of my life that had more to do with sharing such a wonderful treat with my family.

It should not go without saying that class privilege was what made both my experience and that of my friends possible. We both attended a fairly expensive private school and had access to resources that would make our celebrations possible. We, quite honestly, expected some form of celebration for our 15th birthday. We can not assume that all Latino/a families have access to this type of celebration. Some authors propose that it is possible to view the quinceañera as a public response to “economic and social marginality in the U.S.” suggesting that a family gains social mobility as a result of presenting their daughter as social capital in the “marriage market” (Horowitz 259). This is an expense not every family can handle. Not only does it present a young woman as a material good, which is off-putting in itself, but it also
implies that to make the necessary advancements, Latino/a families need to make financial sacrifices. While it may be celebrated across the classes, every family is not able to handle the resulting debt.

Therefore, my experiences make me aware of some of the good things about the quinceañera, such as the public celebration of a girl’s date of birth and the festivities enjoyed by family, friends, and community members. The quinceañera allows a young woman to feel special, if only for one day. On the other hand, it also makes me critical about the limitations of this celebration, and how a young girl must fit a particular mold of beauty, refinement and economic position, if she is to be accepted by society. It is precisely this idea that a girl can only feel special one day in her lifetime, if and only if she models appropriate gendered behaviors that make me quite apprehensive. The fact that I chose not to have a quince myself indicates that although I was unable to articulate it at the time, I was still apprehensive about the celebration and how it was restricting young women to behave in certain ways. Although it seemed exciting to be the center of attention, I was apprehensive about the conditions under which I would be allowed to celebrate my identity as a young girl.

Here I am 12 years and countless feminist and ethnic studies texts later curious about how today’s youth encounter quinceañeras. My initial reservations regarding the Quinces have a lot to do with feminism. The experiences I remember above took place before I had an opportunity to recognize class privilege and engage with issues of gender identity. Now looking back, I recognize that quinceañeras are not as ubiquitous as I once suspected, nor do they exist without their own set of gender limitations. This focus on a young woman’s entrance into society is quite alarming when we consider that there is very little freedom to celebrate the quinceañera as one chooses. There are still specific expectations as to how one should dress and behave
during this transitional moment. A quinceañera is often expected to be innocent, demure, and exquisitely beautiful. The young girl should be respectful of her elders and uphold the highest level of respect for her body, maintaining chastity until she is of age to marry. Although my memories of past quinceañeras and my current hopes for the celebration will obviously color my research, I do not want to impose these critiques unilaterally on the Adelante fashion show. Instead, I want to understand what this celebration means to the youth participants and the goals Adelante has for the programming. However, I do not pretend to eliminate my critique of gender hierarchies and instead want to examine how the girls are being gendered as well as gendering themselves as a result of their participation in the fashion show. I do not intend to negatively characterize the fashion show and its mission, but instead critically examine how race and gender is represented and articulated during the preparation beforehand at the practices and the events themselves at the library and at the mall.

Hence, the two questions motivating this research study are: (1) how does Adelante’s program differ from or perhaps still reproduce traditional aspects of the quinceañera and (2) In what ways does examining race and gender in the Quinceañera Fashion Show inform how we understand the experiences of Latina girls in Toledo? I intend to examine whether the history and tradition of the quinceañera has taken on a contemporary meaning for the girls in the fashion show. I explore this primarily by examining the effect their participation in the fashion show has on their ethnic and gender identities. Concurrently I also intend to explore how their relationships with family, school and community members involves a negotiation of ethnic and gender identities. In the conclusion I intend to present elements of the quinceañera that might allow for the empowerment of Latina girls.
This project is therefore important for several reasons. Firstly, quinceañeras hold a rather tenuous place within Latino/a culture. In a time where MTV’s “My Super Sweet 16” is capturing the attention of teens worldwide it is no surprise that elaborate birthday celebrations are the popular thing to have. Popular literature is still debating whether quinceañeras are an “authentic” Latina rite of passage or whether it has simply turned into an over glamorized rendition of MTV’s newest fad. According to Karen Davalos in “La Quinceañera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities,” the exact roots of the quinceañera are yet to be confirmed. There is uncertainty as to whether it began in Pre-Colombian days or whether it is a ritual first developed by the Spanish and then passed on to its Latin American and Caribbean colonies. Most available literature also focuses primarily on its celebration in the United States which opens yet another tenuous debate over how it has become diluted from its “authentic” Latin American and Caribbean roots. The religious community is also incredibly divided over how sensational and over the top the celebration has become, losing sight of the messages of chastity and service that they wish the girls would instead respect (Davalos 108). Therefore, there is not one general description, nor appreciation, for the quinceañera. Instead there are multiple, divergent and colliding impressions. Despite the varied opinions, there is surprisingly very little scholarship about the Quinceañera. On the other hand there are many “how to” sources available, including numerous websites catered to quinceañera fashion and etiquette, guides for developing the perfect celebration, fictional juvenile stories as well as many newspapers articles documenting the many parties taking place across the nation.

People are obviously fascinated with the quinceañera, although very little is written about how race, class, gender, and sexuality are constructed through its celebration. Furthermore, very little has been written to better understand the experiences of Latina girls and how their schools,
homes and communities influence both their identities and their impression of the quinceañera. Most research is concerned with documenting the planning of the celebration, with little attention given to the ways the ritual molds the girl or more importantly how the girl molds the ritual (King 3; Salcedo 2). Most research focuses primarily on privately organized birthday celebrations of individual girls (Hoyt-Goldsmith 3; Plummer 2). My case differs by presenting a situation where there is a collective presentation of the quinceañera where the girls and their social realities become the focus rather than the ritual itself. My study specifically focuses on the girls and their opinions about the quinceañera. It is a collective presentation because the girls participate in the fashion show as a group rather than any one girl becoming a focal point. The girls' participation in this study helped me further understand the role of activities such as the Quinceañera Fashion Show in contributing to the lived experiences of Latina girls. In addition, this study analyzes how the girls “use” activities such as the Quinceañera Fashion Show to negotiate their own lived experiences and identities.

The research I am presenting examines how groups stigmatized as a result of their race and gender encounter their experiences at home, school and in their communities. Thus, it is my hope, that my research can identify appropriate avenues of social change where the needs of these young women can be addressed through policy changes, alternative school/community activities, or new and innovative social services. Additionally, my research can be useful to Adelante as they evaluate their designated goals and outcomes for servicing Latina girls, particularly as it relates to the Quinceañera Fashion Show. I also hope my study will encourage the development of additional Adelante youth centered activities that focus on the importance of cultural heritage and tradition. Therefore, although I gained tremendously from hearing the
wonderful stories the girls had to share, ultimately I am interested in analyzing this information in order to benefit Latina girl experience as a whole.

Consequently, I also hope my study will benefit the participants by providing an opportunity for the often misunderstood generation of young girls to voice some of their concerns, opinions, and hopes on matters concerning their own experiences and that of their peers. I suspect many of these girls rarely get asked to talk about their home, family and school lives. They are probably even less likely to be asked about their experiences being Latina girls in Toledo, Ohio. I hope my study can be a vehicle through which they express themselves.

RACIALIZATION AND GENDERING

One of the main reasons I have decided to focus so closely on racialization and gender(ing) processes is because very few studies explore how racialization and gender(ing) occur together. I am interested in marking the intersection between the racialization and gendering processes. Theories and applications of race rarely ever adequately center the importance of gender, and thus do not interrogate them on equal footing. Before I can complicate these processes through my examination of the Quinceañera Fashion Show I must first review those texts that have informed my understandings of race and gender. Hence, this segment of my chapter will examine the works of Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States* and Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* as sources where race and gender processes are interrogated and complicated, although in different ways.

Omi and Winant develop a theory of identity formation that centers race and racial dynamics and has each functioning within every thread of U.S. historical, political, cultural and social structures. According to Omi and Winant, race needs to be examined as “an autonomous
field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning” (48). Therefore, in the latter half of *Racial Formation* Omi and Winant expound upon the shifting state of racial politics as a result of historical needs and expectations. Although Omi and Winant recognize that the concept of race is in fact fragile, unstable and at times indefinable, they argue that most, if not all, governmental, political and social decisions are structured as a result of racial categories and experiences.

It is incredibly important to consider race an unstable social concept, precisely because it is such a powerful structural tool within every aspect of society. Race does in fact influence access to resources, services, education and other sources of survival. The question is, by centering race in their analysis, do Omi and Winant cloud other axes of oppression such as gender? There is only one segment within their theory, where Omi and Winant express the intersections of race, class, and gender. It is in connection to Anthony Gramsci’s concept of hegemony that Omi and Winant see these intersections taking place. According to Omi and Winant, 

race, class, and gender (as well as sexual orientation) constitute ‘regions’ of hegemony, areas in which certain political projects can take shape. They share obvious attributes in that they are all ‘socially constructed,’ and they all consist of a field of projects whose common feature is their linkage of social structure and signification. (68)

If, according to Gramsci, hegemony is “the condition necessary, in a given society, for the achievement and consolidation of rule,” then Omi and Winant propose that race, class, and gender are thus the sites where these conditions take place (67). Omi and Winant emphasize that race, class, and gender “are not fixed and discrete categories…they overlap, intersect, and fuse with each other in countless ways” (68). Despite this contention, why is it that they still develop
an argument based solely upon the limits and contradictions of racial formation? It does not suffice to mention the intersections of these axes of oppression. Although their focus is in fact racial formation, one limitation of their theory is their inability to thoroughly examine the intersections between these axes of oppression.

Along with their fleeting mention of the intersections of race and gender, ever more dangerous is their assertion that race is more ‘socially constructed’ than gender. Omi and Winant contend that,

> Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characters (so-called “phenotypes”), selection of these particular human features for the purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. In contrast to the other major distinction of this type, that of gender, there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines of race. (55)

According to Omi and Winant some categories, such as race, are more socially constructed than others and certain concepts, such as gender, are more biologically defined. What is astounding is that despite their recognition that race has been erroneously defined in biological terms, where superiority is placed upon white bodies; they are unable to see the danger in marking gender as a biologically defined concept. Human features that denote racial category are unquestionably considered a social and historical process. Omi and Winant are unable to see how gender constructions, also aligned with human features such as genitalia, are also socially and historically defined. They argue that the categories used to differentiate between individuals along racial lines are arbitrary and often imprecise. What leads them to believe that gendered categories are less arbitrary or more precise? Gender is in fact just as nebulous a category as
race, precisely because it threatens both biological and social structures (Anzaldúa 106; Butler 6; Halberstam 1).

Despite this huge oversight, Omi and Winant contribute tremendously to our understanding of racial dynamics and the various processes that challenge social structure and power. Although it is important to center race, that must occur while complicating its relationship to gender. It does not suffice to fleetingly suggest that the concepts intersect and fuse in interesting ways, and suggest that “race is gendered and gender is racialized”, as Omi and Winant do, if you are not going to provide a complicated analysis about how this takes place within racial formation (68). Both race and gender are categories full of many limitations and contradictions, which Omi and Winant hint at, but do not explore as thoroughly as one would like.

On the other hand, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, thoroughly complicates gendered constructions. According to Butler, ”Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a seat of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). In her chapter “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” Butler interrogates the stability of constructed identities, naturalized categories such as *woman* and *feminist*. Gender provides the uniformity needed to regulate a privileged heterosexual system of order. Thus for example, the category of *woman*, which can be defined and experienced in diverse ways, is stabilized within a heterosexual network to represent a much more rigid and appeasing category.

Although Butler provides a complicated examination of the uses and misuses of gender, sex, identity and sexuality, for the purpose of my analysis I will focus on those segments that tie together gender and race. While interrogating the misuse of *woman* as a wholly unifying
category, Butler states a useful connection between axes of cultural identity and gender when she writes,

the term fails to be exhaustive because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (3)

According to Butler gender is not only experienced differently as a result of one’s historical and social context, but also as a result of other identifying factors. One can then argue that gender should not be examined as an extension of a racial identity, but instead as interconnected categories with no beginning or end. While Butler’s analysis suggests that gender and race hold a rather shaky and complicated relationship where the lines of connection can be blurred, unfortunately, similar to Omi and Winant she does not entirely examine how race and gender collide. We can extend a similar critique to Butler as we did to Omi and Winant, where connections are drawn between race and gender, but neither provides examples nor thoroughly examines how these connections occur. While both recognize the intersections, Omi and Winant center race and Butler obviously centers gender.

Omi, Winant, and Butler’s work suggests that race and gender are obviously fragile and unstable concepts. Each is marked by the historical and political contexts within which they are experienced. Informing my present research is the idea that both factors are interconnected, sometimes seamlessly. Omi and Winant developed a thorough analysis of racialization, but fail to offer a detailed examination for how race and gender interact. Omi and Winant suggest that while race is socially constructed, gender is biologically motivated. Butler, on the other hand,
challenges this rather profusely. According to Butler, gender cannot be separated from other axes of identification. Thus racialization would involve gender(ing) and vise versa. Hence, when I later examine experiences of gender(ing) and race(ing) amongst Latina girls I am suggesting that these processes do not happen neatly or distant from one another. In other words, Latina girls experience the intersections of gender and race, often in chaotic ways.

**LATINO/A STUDIES PERSPECTIVES**

Within the fields of Latina/o studies, Chicano/a studies, cultural studies, and educational studies there are various methodological and theoretical frameworks that are most viable for my research on Latina girls. Authors such as Dolores Delgado Bernal in *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology* and Nancy Lopez in *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education* propose diverse educational frameworks for examining how race, class, and gender influence Latina/o education. The works of Lopez and Bernal, who focused most closely on Latino/a youth and Latina women and girls in educational settings, were crucial in the beginning stages of my project development as I decided what models of research and theoretical frameworks to use in my study. For example, in *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology* editors Dolores Delgado Bernal, Alejandra Elenes, Francisca Godinez and Sofia Villenas interrogate how Chicana/Latina feminist teaching and learning is tied to experiences and articulations of family, community, and self. All of these are marked by the social, political, and historical factors that motivate one’s identities. These authors demonstrate their political commitment to developing pedagogies that include and value Chicana/Latina bodies and their agency. Their research encourages us to look beyond normative pedagogical
moments, to value the work of Chicana/Latina women and girls who educate and nurture their communities and families. In similar ways, my research looks toward examining how young women articulate their identities and sources of agency through the Quinceañera Fashion Show. What are those social, political and historical factors that influence and in turn are molded by the young women? What connections do the girls draw between nurturing their communities and families and their involvement in Adelante’s program? Through my research I intend to be as committed to respecting and valuing the contributions of Latina girls as do the authors of *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life*.

In “Haciendo que hacer: Braiding Cultural Knowledge into Educational Practices and Policies,” for example, Francisca Godinez provides a wonderful example for how race, class, gender and gender/sexual expression can be examined within an educational setting. Godinez’ educational setting is not limited to the traditional four walls of a classroom or the structure of a traditional school. Instead, Godinez’ work transcends school and community home lives to fully grasp all aspects of her participants’ experiences. Godinez identified a group of first and second year Mexicana identified high school students and proceeded to engage in personal and group conversation with the young Latinas. Through her conversations she was able to explore her research questions:

> What are the consejos and educación imparted to young Mexicanas by their maternal communities? … What are their cultural and social expectations about gender identities? … What connections do young Mexicanas make between their cultural knowledge and strategies and the value of schooling to succeed in American society? (28)

Godinez exposes Latina development and education in terms of “understanding integrity and brilliance” rather than the usual focus on deficiency (33-34). Deficiency models position Latina
girls as inherently deficient when compared to European American girls (Denner and Guzman 4). Godinez is interested in opposing such models and instead focuses on those experiences that show how Latina girls thrive. Godinez’ approach also examines critical race theory and Latina/o critical theory, making intersectionality central to her analysis. She centers theoretical developments while capturing the voices and experiences of her participants.

It is not always easy to bridge theory and personal experiences. Often theory outshines personal experience or vice versa. Godinez developed a multi-methodological approach which she terms *trenzas y mestizaje*. According to Godinez this approach is “the braiding of theory, qualitative research strategies and sociopolitical consciousness for interacting with and gathering knowledge from young Mexicanas” (26). The *trenzas* in Godinez’ research are the connections she draws between the series of conversations that took place between her researcher self and the young women. They are the moments where she is able to braid her own knowledge with that of the girls. According to Godinez, *mestizaje* is “a consciousness of an ethical commitment to egalitarian social relations” (28). Through *mestizaje* women of different cultural realities can develop an alliance. Although Godinez’ definition of *mestizaje* differs from conventional definitions of the term, she still implicates how race and gender are a distinguishing factor in the *mestizaje* process. Therefore, through *trenzas y mestizaje* Godinez examines how “gendered cultural socialization and *educación*, as cultural knowledge and practice, braid young Mexicana identities and social formations” (28).

Godinez extends the pedagogical debate beyond the traditional focus on Latina/o drop out rates to one more inclusive of other educational networks that influence the girls’ lives. In her case these are maternal community networks. Educational research primarily focuses on the various reasons Latina girls are unable to complete their studies. Godinez instead prefers to focus
on those factors that motivate and support a young woman, as do maternal networks. Combing through her field notes and interviews, Godinez was able to examine those moments where young women were receiving *consejos* and *educación* from these maternal networks. Godinez’ work purposefully extends the debate beyond the typical discourse of Latinas experiencing high pregnancy and school drop out rates, to an examination of those networks that influence and nurture Latina identity development.

Similarly, Nancy Lopez in *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education* examines the plight of young Latino/as in educational settings. Searching for a new approach to understanding the race-gender gap in education, Lopez maps “intersecting racialization and gendering processes as key to understanding educational trajectories” (5). Lopez focuses on how experiences of race-gender affect Caribbean young men and women, influencing how they understand the role of education in their lives as well as their prospects for social mobility. Lopez maps these processes by asking a series of important questions:

How is the second generation racialized and gendered? How do they experience race and gender in daily life? How do *racialized* and *gendered experiences* shape life perspectives? … How do formal and informal institutional practices within schools “race” and “gender” students? … How can oppressive racialization and gendering processes be revealed, interrupted, and rearticulated to create more equitable and liberating educational opportunities, particularly for low income urban second-generation youth? (5-6)

Although I do not intend to focus primarily on educational experiences, Lopez’ questions regarding the race(ing) and gender(ing) processes are, in fact, central to my examination of the Quinceañera Fashion Show. Her theoretical framework is used to examine how Latina girls
experience these intersecting race(ing) and gender(ing) processes through their participation in the Adelante fashion show.

Lopez relied heavily on qualitative research methods. In her study, Lopez conducted various types of interviews with second generation Caribbean youth. These included focus groups with college students, life history interviews with young adults, and a six-month participant observation study at an urban high school in New York City. According to Lopez, New York City youth go through experiences of race(ing) and gender(ing) within urban public school settings. She examines not how ethnic identity is formed in second generation communities, but how second generation youth are racialized and gendered in daily life and in educational settings.

Thus like Godinez, Lopez presents qualitative multi-methodological tools for examining marginalized youth, particularly how racialization and gender(ing) take place. One of the strengths of her work is the connection she draws between race and gender and Latino/a youth rendering each process of identification fluid and malleable. Lopez’ focus on qualitative data along with her research questions outlined above is central to my research. Reworking one of her questions slightly, I am interested in examining the ways racialization and gendering processes can be revealed, interrupted, and rearticulated to create more equitable and liberating opportunities for Northwest Ohio Latina youth.

Texts like *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys* and *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life* stand out among educational research because the authors complicate identity, power, and politics as a result of constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They transform the way we understand Latina identity by addressing the systems that diversely effect different types of Latinas (Lopez, 2003; Bernal et. al., 2006). Latinas experience race, class, gender and sexuality
in varied ways. I, too, intend my research to contribute a more complicated understanding of Latina girl culture examining how the Quinceañera Fashion Show serves as a vehicle through which we better understand their views on community, family, and peer life. My research builds off of these two studies by: (1) not focusing on deficiency models that further stigmatize Latina girls and (2) using a methodological framework grounded in qualitative research. By utilizing qualitative research methods I intend to strike a balance between examining the girls’ voices and theory. My research also builds off of these studies by exploring the links between social programs such as the Fashion Show and how the girls articulate their educational aspirations and experiences.

THE WORLD OF QUINCEAÑERA LITERATURE

There are very few scholarly works that exist about the quinceañera. Those works that do exist focus exclusively on the positive aspects of quinceañeras and emphasize the event’s ability to celebrate the transition from girlhood to young womanhood (King 2; Plummer 1; Salcedo 3). Many of these texts are how-to and popular guides to planning the events and are therefore invested in emphasizing the positive qualities of this celebration. These writers are often consumed with its commercialization and materialism, focusing closely on those aspects such as the appropriate clothing to wear, how to make the necessary financial arrangements to support its planning and social etiquette that should be followed during its celebration.

On the other hand, there are three texts that provide a more complex discussion of quinceañeras, and those are the most useful to my project. “‘La Quinceañera’: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities” by Karen Mary Davalos focuses on the tensions associated with the quinceañera, particularly how “tradition” is constructed or questioned by religious officials, the
families, and the girl participants. According to Davalos, her examination “bring[s] to light how particular explanations, descriptions, and forms of the quinceañera are embedded within people’s ideas about appropriate gender roles, ethnic identity, traditional culture, sexuality, class position, and anticipated results of culture contact” (104-5). Although not originally designed to exclusively study the quinceañera but instead to investigate various displays of ethnic identity, Davalos marveled at how often the celebration of quinceañeras came up in discussion. Davalos documents the numerous people involved in constructing and de-constructing the celebration of a quinceañera, while highlighting how race, class, gender and sexuality are defined and instituted by these multiple figures.

Davalos informs my analysis in two important ways. First, she initiates her examination of quinceañeras with an interesting debate about insider/outsider status in ethnographic research. An ethnographer has an ethical responsibility to her subjects, but this is further complicated when one seemingly “belongs” to the ethnic community under examination (Zavella 42). Most examinations of quinceañeras include a researcher’s general impressions, which usually involves an ethnographer defining the ritual and its celebration in his/her own terms. As a self-identified mexicana and Chicana, Davalos purposefully avoids writing from this perspective and instead sheds light on how others, including those involved at any level with the planning and/or experiencing of the Quince celebration, describe the ritual. This is quite powerful as it shifts, to an extent, the authority of the researcher. Davalos, as ethnographer, still obviously decides what theoretical frameworks are most important to her analysis of the quinceañera, in her case the work of third world feminist and Chicano/a studies. She also decides the focus of her research: Catholic and religious officials as well as mexicanas and chicanas living primarily in the Chicago area. Her authority as researcher is not completely absent. Davalos instead recognizes
the pros and cons of her shifting insider and outsider status, as a Latina researcher, and chooses to write from a standpoint that centers her participants’ voice rather than her own. Davalos’ authority shifts when she addresses her positionality and makes the decision to not generalize the ritual, as she states,

I am not willing to generalize about the quinceañera in an attempt to encourage readers to focus on different voices and discourses, other ethnographers and journalists have been willing to do so. I include their accounts of the quinceañera to provide the reader with a point of reference. (Davalos 106)

This point is well taken. Research is much simpler to document if we had a general idea of the quinceañera that could be easily transferred to any circumstance or group of people. There is a natural urge to fully grasp a concept or experience, before offering a new set of ways to examine it. A researcher always hopes for a big picture before he or she can delve into the parts of that big picture that are most important to them. Unfortunately there is a danger in generalizing about the quinceañera because it encourages one to believe that there is an authentic way for its celebration. This is dangerous because, as will become apparent, quince celebrations are as diverse as the individuals that plan them.

Hence, as Davalos, I am also not interested in generalizing about the quinceañera so as to offer a neat and concise depiction of a Latina girl’s rite of passage into womanhood. However, for the sake of clarity, towards the end of this chapter I will offer what I have pieced together as a history of the quinceañera from the limited texts available about the celebration. I piece this history together to demonstrate: (1) the misfortune to have so very little written about what seems to be one of the more distinguishing Latina rituals for girls and (2) to mark the
discrepancies between its various defining features. The quinceañera means different things to
different people and both the history as well as my analysis will expose this.

Secondly, Davalos informs my research by exposing how critical “gender roles, ethnic
identity, traditional culture, sexuality, class position and anticipated results of culture contact”
are to individuals’ impressions of quinceañeras (Davalos 104-5). For example, religious officials
use quince celebrations as a means for encouraging chastity among young women and imposing
sexual expectations. Some of Davalos’ participants mentioned that celebrating a quinceañera was
a means to honoring one’s ethnic roots. What Davalos exposes is how critical race, gender,
ethnicity, sexuality and class are to experiences of girlhood, particularly as it relates to aspects of
the quinceañera. According to Davalos, celebrating a quinceañera involves a negotiation between
one’s ethnic and gender identity as it “makes a girl into a woman, but more importantly makes
her into a Mexican woman” (114). This negotiation between gender and ethnicity in
quinceañeras is a focal point in my research.

The second crucial text within quinceañera literature is Ruth Horowitz’ work “The Power
of Ritual in a Chicano Community: A Young Woman’s Status and Expanding Family Ties”
where she focuses primarily on Ritual theory and the performance and symbols dramatized
through the quinceañera. For Horowitz the quinceañera ceremony represents three things: (1) an
adaptation to the economic marginality of Chicanos in the U.S., (2) a need to maintain
“Mexicanness”, and (3) a need to connect to the past by stressing an urbanized traditionalism
(259-260). Along with thoroughly examining the various elements associated with a quinceañera
ceremony, as a ritual theorist Horowitz also focuses on the symbolic action of the celebration and
its connection to self-hood. According to Horowitz, “Rituals provide a means to communicate
“We are this kind of people and value [these] types of social relationships” (262). The
quinceañera celebration ceases to be a simple birthday party and instead communicates a series of values and preferences.

Horowitz became a participant-observer and engaged with young people in the 32nd Street community of Chicago. During the course of her study she attended many community celebrations that included Quince celebrations, weddings, private parties and public festivities. She focused primarily on the Quince celebrations and the various people who planned and sponsored the festivities. She connects the ways each participant defined and obtained meaning from the celebration, everyone from the mother, the birthday girl to the compadre and the escorts. Horowitz concludes that each audience member has a different symbolic interest in the ceremony although “the very ambiguity of the symbols allows the ritual to remain powerful for each audience and to provide strong links among them” (277). For some the ceremony may represent the girl’s chastity, while for others it may connect them to their ethnic pride. However, the collective connection is still apparent. Horowitz presents an interesting point: while the quinceañera can be celebrated by different people for different reasons, there are elements of the ritual that may in fact connect them to one another. Horowitz suggests that as Chicanos become more visible in dominant U.S. society, but are still neither fully “American” nor fully “Mexican,” rituals like the quinceañera allow the group to perform their difference in a unifying fashion.

Horowitz’s work is helpful as I examine the role of ethnic pride and racialization in the Quinceañera Fashion Show. Her focus on performance suggests that the girls in my study perform their gender and ethnicity through the fashion show and all events and experiences leading up to the “big day.” Are the girls performing their difference through the Quinceañera Fashion Show? In fact, how did the girls feel they were appropriately representing their Latino/a identities through their experiences of gender(ing) and race(ing)? Although I find Horowitz work
helpful in encouraging these questions, she does not fully examine how race and gender are implicated through the performance of difference. Horowitz does not sufficiently examine race and gender, nor does she explore how the intersection of both categories is influencing this “performance of difference.” If quinceañeras “[allow] people to see themselves as respectable and independent with a heritage of which they can be proud in a world that often does not offer them respect” as Horowitz suggests, how do experiences of race(ing) and gender(ing) influence these moments (9)? This is a question my research can inform.

The final text that informs my research is Julia Alvarez’ work, *Once Upon a Quinceañera*. An intimate recollection of interviews about a series of coming of age quince stories, *Once Upon a Quinceañera* is the only available comprehensive text about this Latino/a ritual. After being invited by an editor to write a book about quinceañeras, Alvarez decided that the ritual had much to say about the story of Latino/as in the United States. Alvarez chose to immerse herself in the tradition and get a sense for why the girls and their families were upholding this tradition and to distinguish what it meant to “young Latinas trying to integrate their dual cultures, each with its own gender handicap”(6). Although she interviewed five girls and was able to join each one during their celebration, she primarily tells the story of Monica, and weaves in the stories of the other four, Maritza, Chantal, Xiomara and Maria. Along with these five stories, she also connects her own coming of age story to that of the girls, making it a rather personally invested journey.

Alvarez ponders the role of quinceañeras in responding to high pregnancy rates, school drop outs and other problems ailing Latina girls. Alvarez claims she does not intend to primarily focus on these deficiencies, but they are a large presence in her work. This focus on social problems is common in the literature on Latina girls. Many scholars are interested in shifting the
discourse away from a deficiency model to instead include examinations of positive identifications and girl agency (Godinez 27). Jill Denner and Bianca Guzman, authors of *Latina Girls: Voices of Adolescent Strength in the United States* argue that most research on Latina girls focuses on those stigmatizing experiences that mark them as highly susceptible to becoming young mothers, gang members and/or high school drop outs. According to Denner and Guzman this cultural deficit model frames young Latinas, the minority, as deficient and contrasts them to the majority group, usually white girls, assumed to be superior (5). Denner and Guzman argue that this is problematic because it fails to account for the diversity within the Latina community and by focusing on deficiencies we then know very little about the successes (5). As a stigmatized group Latina girls are evaluated in relation to normative behavioral codes that differentiate between threatening primitive brown bodies and standard white bodies (Anzaldúa 59). The popularity of this approach presents it as one of the few lenses through which Latina experiences can be examined, hence contributing to its commonplace in quinceañera research. Although there is merit in examining the ways Latinas handle these stigmatizing experiences, it is more interesting to add to that body of literature that focuses on how Latina girls are active agents negotiating their own lives and not solely being negotiated by it. The cultural deficit model only sees Latina girls in relation to social problems, and experiences that deviate from that perspective are thus invisible. Even Alvarez, towards the end of her book, positions Latina girls as active agents when she argues that,

How these young feminists are redefining and enlarging the ground of feminism is applicable to our Latinas as they negotiate and expand the ground of their ethnicity…the quinceañera offers them an opportunity to explore that variety and contradiction within the supportive context of family and community, of custom and ceremony. (258-9)
In Alvarez’ example, Latina girls are not simply being manipulated by society, but instead are actively opposing normative racial and gender conformities and redefining them to suit their needs.

Alvarez is not only concerned with examining the quinceañera ritual, but also presenting the countless ways consumer culture, Latino/a families and the girls negotiate the celebration. According to Alvarez, power and privilege are central to the quinceañera. There is a negotiation of monetary power as well as authentic notions of ritualistic tradition. She focuses on various contributors to the tradition from religious officials, cake makers, event planners and court participants. Alvarez focuses on the various participants and their distinct voices. Alvarez is not as tied to limitations based on her research status, precisely because she is not a researcher, but instead a literary writer. While Horowitz and Davalos explain their theoretical frameworks and outline their methodological approaches, Alvarez does not. Using her presence as an author, Alvarez is granted access to many spaces and allowed limitless possibilities to the types of questions she could ask. Alvarez never mentions being confined by the research process and instead approaches and writes about the subject in a more popular fashion. Her writing style and use of the fairytale beginning “Once Upon a…” in the title, make the book accessible and appealing to a wider audience. After seeing the book at the library I mistook its cover for a fictional narrative, but for the purposes of my research was pleasantly surprised to find it was in fact an extensive text about quinceañeras.4

Despite Alvarez’ widespread exploration of the quinceañera, the segments most useful to my research were those that focused closely on the gender(ing) and race(ing) processes.

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4 Alvarez’ work does not fit any given genre as it is neither fiction nor completely non-fiction. See Ette, Otmar Literature on the Move. Trans. Katharina Vester. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003 for a detailed examination of the relationship between literature and scholarship and questions of literary space.
Although Alvarez would not have used these terms, there are multiple moments where she highlights how the girls are gendered through the quince celebration or use the ritual as a means for celebrating ethnic pride. Not to be confused, Alvarez is skeptical about the quinceañera being advertised as a marker of ethnicity, when in her opinion it is instead a tradition “remade in the USA” (116). Therefore, Alvarez implies that a tradition developed by an ethnic group in the United States is somehow not ethnic or “authentic.” Alvarez highlights those moments where there is a significant appreciation for or challenge with gender and racial experiences. For example, Alvarez questions the flaws of the Quince celebration by examining the relationship between mothers and daughters. According to Alvarez, “this maternal push for quinceañeras is steeped in nostalgia for the fairy-tale life the mothers themselves never had” (175). Apparent in this example are the gendered experiences of inadequacy and the supposed inability to impart healthy gender identities. Thus, in this example Alvarez suggests that girls are gendered as a result of their mother’s expectations for themselves and for their daughters.

Along with this experience of gender(ing), Alvarez notes a rather amusing aspect of the contemporary quinceañera. According to Alvarez, “to have a full-blown traditional quinceañera in our Pan-Hispanic United States is to have adopted every other Latino group’s little traditions and then some” (75). Thus a quinceañera might involve Mexican mariachis, a Dominican merengue inspired court dance along with a dinner course of Cuban black beans and rice. The ethnically “authentic”5 celebration must now incorporate pan-ethnic Latino elements. Racialization, in the quinceañera, does not solely imply performing those ceremonial elements that reproduce one’s specific national origin or ethnicity. Instead, a girl who is interested in

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5 I highlight “authentic” because of the problematic connotations it reproduces. As a researcher I do not believe that there exists an authentic Latino/a identity nor an authentic way for celebrating a quinceañera. On the other hand, part of what makes the quinceañera stand out as a Latino/a ritual, are those elements that reproduce a particular Latino/a narrative. The use of pan-ethnic elements, such as common foods and musical styles, makes it seem more “authentic” and acceptable. These elements are what guide a young woman in the planning of her celebration.
planning an “authentically” Latino/a celebration, may feel forced to embody a “traditionally” Latina girl identity. And by traditional I mean she is forced to perform those elements of her ethnicity that mark her as Latina, such as speaking English and Spanish and enjoying Latino style music. To this end, a Mexican American girl must now embody pan-ethnic Latina qualities to successfully plan a quince celebration. Although Alvarez does not examine this, I am curious to see how my research may shed light on this idea. Nonetheless, Alvarez’ work further suggests that gender(ing) and race(ing) is taking place as a result of the Quince celebration.

The works of Davalos, Horowitz and Alvarez all suggest that race(ing) and gender(ing) takes place through the envisioning, planning and experiencing of the Quince celebration. Each examines the quinceañera through their investigative lens with their research or in the case of Alvarez, non-research purposes. While Davalos may center race and gender, both Horowitz and Alvarez deal with both categories in a much more tangential manner. Alvarez and Horowitz do not focus on gender and race, but instead reference their momentary connections to the quinceañera. Quite apparent is the limited scholarly information about quinceañeras. Furthermore, there is very little focus on how Latina girls are racialized and gendered in this process. What are those experiences or elements of the quinceañera that racialize Latina girls and how do they, as a result, negotiate these racial and gender identities? By racialize I mean in what way are Latina girls expected to perform their ethnicity. How much do we know about how identity, power and politics influence constructions of race, class, gender and sexuality in young Latinas? If the Quince celebration is no longer an ethnically specific extravaganza, but one with more expansive and Pan-ethnic origins, as Alvarez suggests how has this new incarnation of the quinceañera taken on a contemporary quality that might positively influence the girls and their racial and gender identities? But first, let us further understand the history of quinceañeras.
HERSTORY OF LA QUINCEÀÑERA

Despite being celebrated across the world, in places like the Caribbean, Latin America and the United States, descriptions of the quinceañera differ dramatically. The opinions regarding its origins change repeatedly. Hence this attempt to piece together a history of the quinceañera should not be understood as comprehensive, but instead an opportunity for the varying perspectives to enter center stage.

In *Quinceañera: The Essential Guide to Planning the Perfect Sweet Fifteen Celebration*, Michele Salcedo offers various origin stories for the ritual. In more than 200 pages Salcedo offers teens and their mothers the opportunity to plan every minute detail of their families Quince celebration. She covers everything from how to set a date to choosing an appropriate videographer. Sprinkled through out the text are bits and pieces of historical information as well as detailed descriptions of participant’s roles in the celebration. It reads similarly to the many wedding guides currently on the market.

According to Salcedo there are two competing origin stories, one which takes us to Europe among the Spanish and the other that speaks of various indigenous groups and their coming of age celebrations. In Nicaragua, for example, Salcedo suggests that the “quinceañera tradition arrived [there] with the Spaniards, but became more popular in the nineteenth century” (210). In Brazil’s Festa das Debutantes, Salcedo writes that, “the Portuguese nobility brought the tradition of quince años celebrations in the early nineteenth century as a way of introducing their young daughters to society” (212). On the other hand, Salcedo offers two accounts for quince celebrations originating among indigenous people. Salcedo writes of coming of age celebrations among the Zapotecas and the Quechuan people. For the Zapotecas who have resided in Oaxaca for thousand of years, quince celebrations have been a common occurrence to communally
celebrate the coming of age of an attractive young woman (Salcedo 213). According to Salcedo, an unattractive Zapoteca woman never had a quince celebration. The Quechua, on the other hand, developed special coming of age ceremonies for boys and girls transitioning into the world of adult responsibilities, sexual maturity and marriage availability (Salcedo 21). Although not a specific celebration of the 15th birth date, there are striking similarities of dance and party between this Andean tradition and that of the quinceañera.

Julia Alvarez, in *Once Upon a Quinceañera*, provides a comical anecdote regarding the tracking down of the Quince tradition. According to Alvarez, “trying to track down the origins of the quinceañera tradition is a little like playing that old party game, telephone” (111). This representation seems accurate. Although most assume the quinceañera has European and/or Indigenous origins, each person’s description varies quite a bit. For example, Alvarez notes that through her research of quinceañera books, articles and websites the tradition was often placed within Aztec or Mayan traditions (111). Interestingly, when Alvarez searched for bibliographic information very few sources were available. There seems to be an interest in making claims to authenticity by tying the ritual to “ancient” and indigenous origins. Per the suggestion of a nun named Sister Angela, Alvarez was able to track down the validity of the Aztec origin story by examining the testimonies of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and a group of Franciscan monks in the *Florentine Codex*. Although she hesitates to understand this simplistically as the reflection of truth by stating rather cynically that the book exposes “a conquered nation as understood by Catholic priests,” Alvarez does acknowledge that there is evidence for rituals celebrating a young girl’s passage into womanhood (112). Unclear is the age at which these rituals routinely took place.
In Aztec ceremonies the ritual usually involved mothers and fathers publicly celebrating and cautioning their daughters to a life of “perils and possibilities” (Alvarez 113). In Mayan culture puberty was celebrated through a ceremony where a mother, cutting off a red shell formerly tied around her daughter’s neck, presents her daughter as “ripe for marriage and childbearing” (Alvarez 113). While Alvarez does initially question the veracity of certain “indigenous” accounts, she nonetheless concludes that, “We don’t have to prove the legitimacy of these rites. They are what they are, part of our human legacy” (113).

According to Alvarez, connecting quince celebrations to “indigenous” roots is a rather contemporary idea (113). Those quinceañeras that took place in Latin America and the Caribbean would never have willingly associated with an indigenous past. Instead, these elite families would have played down any association to an indigenous heritage and emphasized a regal European tradition. It is through what Alvarez terms the “democratizing of the tradition” that a native association became desirable (114). Comical yet again is that despite Spanish origin stories, Alvarez finds that quinces are unknown in Spain. According to Alvarez, “you don’t need a pretend court when you already have a real one” making its celebration seemingly pointless (114).

In addition to the numerous ritual origins, the quinceañera has seen various shifts in celebration. It has shifted from being a celebration organized by families of means to include those of other classes. According to Alvarez, quinceañeras became an option for middle and lower class families in the United States after the vast migrations to “el Norte” in the 1960s (116). Thus, the most recent incarnation of the quince celebration has made it widely practiced, but not necessarily accessible to all communities regardless of economic status. The system of compadrazgo, where family and friends sponsor different aspects of a quince celebration make it
a community investment and spread the costs among various individuals. Although it may still be a financial burden on families, it is not uncommon to see people from a variety of economic brackets planning and sponsoring a celebration for their daughters.

Consequently, quince origin stories are as varied and diverse as the many people planning the celebrations. Whether tied to Spanish, Caribbean, or Latin American locations, economically privileged or financially disadvantaged situations, there is no one quinceañera origin story. The more common the celebration becomes in the United States, the more varied the stories associated with this long-time tradition. Therefore, although this examination of its origin(s) may help to see the connections between various histories I find it much more worthwhile to explore how its celebration differs on the basis of gender and race.

Some might argue that the most important element of any quinceañera celebration is the dress. Dresses are traditionally white or pink to represent the purity and innocence of a young girl transitioning into womanhood. quinceañera celebrations typically involve a religious ceremony held in honor of the birthday girl at a local church where she is blessed in the eyes of God as a young woman. These are primarily Catholic ceremonies. Some girls include a court of fourteen young men and women to represent every year of her life called the *corte de honor* in Spanish. Girls are typically joined by their friends, family, and the court at the religious ceremony. Afterwards, all of the guests are invited to a big celebration held at a town hall, where music, food, and other refreshments are provided. The number of guests can range from fifty to more than one hundred guests composed primarily of family, friends, and community members. Before the party is under way, the birthday girl is introduced by her court of fourteen couples and customarily performs a group dance of the waltz and/or a Latino/a influenced musical composition. Before officially being considered a young woman, a quinceañera is offered
traditional gifts that mark her transition from girlhood to womanhood. These gifts were printed on Adelante’s official program for the events and they are as follows: (1) a bible, to represent “the basis of the quinceañera’s faith and is a place for her to turn to for advice and companionship throughout her adult life”, (2) the tiara, which “symbolizes that the quinceañera is a princess in the eyes of God”, (3) the scepter, which “indicat[es] the acceptance of the responsibilities of being an adult,” and (4) the earrings, which “remind the young woman to keep her ears turned to the Word of God.” Lastly, another important element is the birthday cake. The cakes are often multi-tiered and artistically crafted around a particular theme. If there is a princess theme one might find a carriage at the center of the arrangement. If instead the focus is on the Quince court the cake might include a staircase with a couple on each step leading up to the quinceañera at the top.

While these are the elements associated with a traditional quinceañera, my case focuses on a Quinceañera Fashion Show where a total of seventeen young women and eleven young men showcased typical quinceañera fashions at the Toledo Main Branch Library and the Westfield Franklin Park Mall during Hispanic Heritage Month. This case is different because it showcases a group of young women, instead of an individual girl’s celebration. Adelante avoided highlighting one girl by presenting the fashion show as a collective youth effort. There was no religious celebration, no hall, nor a birthday cake; instead the organizers of the event described each element so as to educate the public on the ways in which the quinceañera is often celebrated. This case is also different because while a traditional quinceañera is mostly celebrated by a Latina girl, the fashion show was officially open to anyone interested in participating, regardless of race. The only requirement was that the students involved be members of Adelante’s weekly youth after school program. Hence, my case differs by not
necessarily performing each of the rituals, but instead presenting them to the public as customary in a quinceañera celebration. Thus the purpose of the fashion show was to educate the Toledo community about the quinceañera in an educational and fun manner.

In the subsequent sections of this document I present my research findings and develop a nuanced examination of the Quinceañera Fashion Show. This examination primarily focuses on the ways in which the girls in my study identify moments where they negotiate gender and race. In the second chapter, titled “Narrating Participant Observations,” I detail my experiences as a participant observer during multiple practices leading up to the two fashion shows at the Toledo Main Public Library and the Westfield Franklin Park Mall. In this chapter I also include an examination of femininity and masculinity as I saw it taking place among the Latina girls and boys participating in the fashion show. My observations will also be supplemented by the voices of my participants, interviewed after the events to get a sense of their impressions of the planning process and the fashion shows importance to the Latino/a community.

In the third chapter, titled “Data Reflections: The Interviews,” I focus primarily on my conversations with the four young women in my study. I examine their experiences at school, with their families and in their communities to get a better sense for how they are organizing and articulating their lived experiences. From their stories I weave an analysis of experiences with femininity, ethnic identifications, pan-ethnic Latina identities, sexuality, and gender performances. I evaluate those moments where the intersections of race and gender are taking place. I also examine those challenges the girls’ voice as most significant in their experiences and the various strategies they implement to actively engage with and respond to their social worlds.
Finally, in the conclusion I weave together the various elements that set my study apart from typical examinations of quinceañeras. Here I reintroduce the general themes that distinguish how the girls in my study are articulating constructions of gender and race, as it relates to their lives. In this final section I also intend to identify how the girls describe the quinceañera ritual and whether this alternative approach at presenting the custom allows for a positive re-envisioning of Latina girl experiences beyond deficiency models. In other words, I intend to answer whether the fashion show includes elements that I identify as positively nurturing Latina identities and furthermore, suggests strategies for working with this population of girls.
CHAPTER II: NARRATING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

With an interest in uncovering themes and issues that influence Latina girls in Toledo and their experiences with gender and race, I conducted individual interviews with three girls who chose to participate in Adelante’s Quinceañera Fashion Show and one girl who strongly chose not to participate. The following chapter includes a narration of my experiences as a participant observer during a rehearsal at the Toledo Main Branch library, the first Quinceañera Fashion Show at the library, and the final quinceañera fashion at Toledo Westfield Franklin Park Mall. All events took place as part of Adelante’s general programming for Latino/a Heritage month. In its third year, the Quinceañera Fashion Show has grown to include a more diverse group of young people, of various ethnicities and age groups. Within this analysis you will catch glimpses into the lives of my four participants, Brenda, Sophia, Kaila and Lisette. Later in Chapter three, titled “Data Reflections: The Interviews,” I will more thoroughly present their rich stories and the manner in which family, school, and friends’ impact and respond to the girls’ experiences with race and gender.

When I first considered the Adelante Quinceañera Fashion Show as a case for examining race and gender I was still uncertain as to the overall goal of the event, and whether it was in fact keeping youth off the streets and promoting conversations about Latino issues. In the next two chapters I will work through some of these concerns. Many of the girls participated in the fashion show to, as Brenda would say, “try something new” despite being nervous at the thought of being out “in front of a whole bunch of people modeling” (289-92). Sophia, for example, credits her participation in the fashion show as encouraging her to take part in Adelante’s organized community service projects. Therefore, the girls were not simply modeling pretty

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6 All names of people are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants/interviewees.
dresses, but were making decisions about their racial and gender identities as well as being influenced by societal factors such as class along the way. To better understand their lives, let us first examine the field of my observational study.

REHEARSAL

Although I attended multiple rehearsals I have chosen to focus on one at the Main Branch Toledo Library a couple of weeks before the scheduled fashion show. One of my first encounters with the Adelante sponsored Quinceañera Fashion Show was precisely one of the final practices at the library. The first performance was scheduled for Saturday, October 4th from 11:00am to 3:00pm in the middle atrium at the Toledo Main Branch Library. This location was chosen as a way to motivate deliberate links to the Toledo community beyond the Latino/a population and was made possible because of a pre-existing connection between the fashion show organizers and a Latina library staff person.

After entering the atrium around 7:00pm one evening I took in my surroundings and noticed the lively bunches of young people scattered across the atrium. There were students I recognized as 8th graders from a local north end Toledo junior high school, Leverette. There were also students I recognized from a series of local high schools, Woodward on the north end, Waite on the east side of Toledo and the Toledo School of Arts in downtown. This is the first year Adelante has allowed younger students to participate in a program that has traditionally been offered as a special treat to high school students. When chatting with one of the organizers, I learned that it is with some reservation that Adelante has allowed the participation of their junior high youth group. According to her, they have not always been the best behaved nor the most mature while participating in Adelante sponsored activities and events. The invitation was
mainly offered to those who participated in Adelante’s summer youth program and would require they consistently attend after school programming and occasional weekend community service projects. There were very clear behavioral expectations for all of the students, but more specifically for the junior high group. They were expected to treat each other with respect and to be committed to the program. Absences to quinceañera related practices and performances would be detrimental to the success and cohesiveness of the event, since one missing person would completely throw off their choreographed dances and fashion show.

Considering Adelante’s reservations, I was very aware of how the students interacted with one another and with the adult youth staff. During this first practice at the library I noticed a group of Leverette girls hanging out by some couches and carrying on rather loudly. There is one high school student, Angel, a freshman at Woodward, who is goofing around with friends from his former Junior High School. I have seen these students interact on prior occasions. Although this one young man seems to consistently enjoy bothering the young women it is apparent that the girls enjoy the attention. Although no one seems to be romantically involved, the students are extremely friendly with one another and the occasional pulling of a girl’s hair by this young man is also followed by hugs and other forms of affection. Of short stature and white skin toned, Angel is constantly referencing his Mexican identity and has an incredibly boisterous personality. On more than one occasion I have heard him change the lyrics to “Party Like A Rockstar” by Shop Boyz to “Party Like a Mexican.” In doing so he attempts to reclaim a Mexican identity that he can not easily access due to his “unconventional” Latino features. Participating in the Quinceañera Fashion Show as a male escort has offered this young man a chance to perform a Mexican identity. Also, the practices themselves have provided one more occasion where he can flirt with the girl participants and perform both his ethnic identity as well
as those gendered expectations of male Mexican bravado. While I do not focus on male performance of ethnic and gender identity in my study, through participant observation these interactions between the young men and women were noticeable.

One of the reasons I noticed this interaction between Angel and the young women was because it was apparent that some of the young people used the Adelante fashion show and practices to connect with their friends as well as their romantic companions outside of school. Adelante staff were always on the look out for couples hiding in corners or drifting away from the larger group. One staff member shared that she had to be very vigilant with the young people in her van while transporting the youth to and from practices since couples were known to become romantic during these trips. One of Adelante’s youth missions is to educate young adults on matters of love and relationships, and during these programming moments, they expect their students to behave in appropriate ways. Brenda, a 17 year old fashion show participant who I interviewed, shares that Adelante youth always found it amusing to talk about relationships during their weekly after school meetings. Brenda shares, “Sometimes it’s funny, because a lot of times people make it fun, they joke about it…but they also talk about STDs and everything and different ones, [the] kinds [that] are here” (198-9). Talk about relationships and sexual behavior are part of Adelante’s prevention curriculum. They are meant to encourage healthy relationships. Although these conversations were not connected directly to the planning of the Quinceañera Fashion Show, they did occur as a result of the expectation that the youth participate in general youth programming. Considering the numerous couples that participated together in the fashion show, a conversation of this kind added an additional educational component to the program.

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7 Numbers in data analysis refer to lines in interview transcripts.
In addition to noticing the romantic and non-romantic interactions among the youth, I also noticed the ethnic diversity. While Adelante is an agency that services Toledo’s pan-ethnic Latino/a community most of its target population is of Mexican heritage. Therefore, I expected most of the students at the rehearsal to primarily be of Mexican background. While that was more or less true, it became apparent that there were students of mixed heritage, other Latino/a national origins, and some who might be defined as “Latin American.” In addition, participants had a range of phenotypes, including Angel, who “looked white” and several students who would be classified as “black” by U.S. racial categories. All of the students who did not appear to be of Mexican/Latino/a background participated in the fashion show at the request of their friends. Two young men, one who appeared to be black and the other an exchange student from Latin America, participated at the request of a young Latina, a friend to both. In a casual conversation with one of the Latina girl participants, she referenced the participation of two young women, who she identified as being of mixed background. This young woman was uncertain whether the girls were also Mexican or Puerto Rican, but she did refer to them as being black. The two girls she was referring to were darker than the rest of the participants, and while speaking Spanish is not necessarily common among this group of Latino Toledo youth, Spanish sounding first and/or last names are. These two young women had what this girl referred to as “black sounding names” (Field notes, October 2008).

Although I began this project recognizing the quinceañeras pan-ethnic celebration, given my impressions of Toledo as being mainly composed of youth from Mexican backgrounds I expected most of the participants to be of Mexican origin and to define the fashion show in Mexican terms. My observations at the practices as well as some of the comments made by the participants in my study suggest otherwise. In fact, the one interviewee who classified the
quinceañera as a specifically Mexican celebration was the one young woman who did not participate in the fashion show or attend any of the practices. Lisette, an 8th grader at Perrysburg Junior High, when asked to describe the quinceañera says, “I would tell them it’s a traditional, like Mexican 15th birthday” (307). Despite self-identifying as Puerto Rican and being adamant about not wanting a traditional quinceañera for herself, Lisette still referred to the celebration as a Mexican tradition. Lisette’s knowledge of the quinceañera was limited, but I am convinced she calls it a Mexican tradition because what little she does know about it is as it relates to Adelante’s fashion show. A teen that has lived in Cleveland, a city with a large Puerto Rican community, and northwest Ohio, with a large Mexican community, Lisette now encounters the quinceañera in an environment where Mexican traditions dictate most Latino celebrations.

However, other respondents described the quinceañera in more pan-ethnic terms. Both Kaila and Sophia, of half Mexican/half Puerto Rican and half Mexican/half Nicaraguan identities respectively, came from what Sophia referred to as “blended” families. When asked to describe her ethnic or racial background, Sophia shares, “It’s different. My dad’s from Mexico and my mom is from Nicaragua. So I’m kinda blended” (9). Neither girl referred to her participation in the fashion show as a way to demonstrate a specific nationality. They describe “culture” and “customs” as referencing something Latino/a and not specific to any given nationality within the Latino/a population. Kaila, for example, when asked what the Toledo community thought about their performance during the fashion show shares that Latinos, “…were proud. They were like ‘yeah this is what our customs are like’” (427). According to Sophia participating in the fashion show served as a way for “entertaining people, show[ing]…what we are like, what [our] culture does, what [our] background does” (309-10). On the other hand, Lisette, of Puerto Rican heritage, identified the Quince celebration as a “traditional Mexican 15th birthday” (307). I use
these moments in the interviews to suggest that the girls from these blended families had a more pan-ethnic or ethnically neutral understanding of the fashion show and the quinceañera. I suggest this is related to their mixed heritage backgrounds. On the other hand, Lisette who did not identify as mixed described the quinceañera using nationalistic terms, highlighting Mexican influences. When asked to describe the quinceañera Lisette called it a “Mexican tradition” something I will explore further in the following chapter.

Therefore, at this initial practice I began to notice some of the threads for how gendering and racialization took place. Although the scope of my analysis will focus primarily on the young women, my observations during this rehearsal suggest that young men were also experiencing and at times imposing their own racialized and gendered realities. For example, Angel experienced his ethnic and gender identities through the performance of an overtly flirtatious Mexican male personality. Some of the girls responded to this performance energetically. The one young man who was physically identified as black by one of the participants was being racialized as non-Latino despite participating at the request of his Latina girlfriend. Perhaps this is a result of the Latino/a community in Toledo being primarily composed of Mexican Americans where blackness is usually associated with being identified as African American. Although the young man may have been African American, could his ethnic identity have been mistaken because of his darker skin? Could the young woman have been racializing him as African American because he did not fit the normative mold for a Latino and/or a Mexican?

Therefore, although I observed the students practicing the waltz, and the *cumbia* in preparation for the library and mall fashion shows, I was more interested in examining their interactions with one another in this section. I was able to distinguish those moments in the
practices where the young men and women were negotiating performances of gender and race. In this one rehearsal, for example, I was able to identify the limitations of Latino/a physical identity, and how blackness and whiteness are imprecise categories for defining Latino/a-ness. Consequently, these processes of racialization also had an effect on how gender was performed. For example, Angel, as a result of his light colored skin tone chose to overcompensate for the absence of brownness and perform a male Mexican bravado. Performing his masculinity in a more aggressive fashion allowed Angel to access a Mexican identity that he associated as being denied as a result of his skin tone.

**MAIN BRANCH PERFORMANCE**

After my experiences during the rehearsal I was excited to observe the first celebration of the Quinceañera Fashion Show at the Toledo Main Branch library. The fashion show was included as part of a larger celebration of Latino/a Heritage month at the library. When I arrived that Saturday I expected to simply be attending the fashion show, but to my surprise there were also a series of other activities being sponsored concurrently by the library. In the main atrium they had built a small stage and catwalk for the showcasing of the dresses and tuxedos. Directly in front of the stage a space was left for the dance performances by the youth as well as the short stroll and step show presented by the brothers of Beta a Latino fraternity from the University of Toledo. The DJ and Master of Ceremony (MC) station was at the farthest wall across from the stage. When I first arrived, there were chairs along both sides of the catwalk in typical fashion show format. Later someone suggested they be organized in theater format along one side of the catwalk. This would provide an easier flow of traffic to some of the library’s other events for that afternoon. Along one wall there were designated tables for local non-profits interested in
educating the public about their services. One table offered literature on adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes offered on Toledo’s east side. This caught my attention since unfortunately Adelante had lost grant funding for its ESL program earlier that summer. After learning they are free classes, I hurriedly took some business cards for future referrals. The Adelante agency table features information about a wide variety of programs offered to adults, children, and families in Toledo. The most popular pamphlet is not one discussing these services. Mothers and daughters bypassed the other flyers advertising Adelante’s programs for youth after school tutoring and pregnancy related resources. They, and other guests, were most interested in the pamphlet advertising the dresses available at the boutique that has donated all of the quinceañera gowns in the fashion show. In a room alongside the atrium, the library had organized a workshop on traditional “Hispanic” foods. The guest chef, who did not self-identify as Latino/a, was teaching a group of approximately five people how to make bean burritos and other fairly generic Mexican-American food items familiar to Midwest residents. There was also a cookie station including sugar, chocolate chip and oatmeal raisin cookies that was not specifically Latino/a in a way that I could detect. Most of the people in the room designated for refreshments were Latino/a adults with the occasional entrance of an Adelante youth searching for something on which to snack. Although it was located close to the fashion show, there were no signs guiding guests effectively to the room with refreshments. Most of the fashion show guests spent their time choosing central seating where they would have the best view of the show and the performances. Although I think the idea was to encourage fashion show guests to also participate in a library organized program, the location of the food or perhaps the type of food did not seem to appeal to Adelante’s guests. On the other hand, there were some non-Latino/as who did search for and locate the food, but decided not to stay at the fashion show when invited
to do so by the organizers. Perhaps it was their unfamiliarity with quinceañeras in general that
discouraged their attendance. Although it was a public space and free to the community it still
felt like a Latino/a and/or Mexican event with the youth’s friends and families occupying many
of the spaces in the audience.

The girl’s dressing room was a large space with three or four long tables along one wall
with chairs set-up. Across from that wall were three clothing racks with dresses awaiting the
arrival of their particular quinceañera model. All of the girls already there had changed into their
quinceañera gown. My first thought upon entering the space was how wonderful the young
women looked. I first catch a glimpse of Angelica, a young woman who normally dresses in very
laidback jeans and t-shirts. I was in complete awe to see her wearing a beautiful and delicate pink
gown. Although her hair is normally tied back in a pony tail that day she is wearing it down in
these very pretty soft curls. Her mother is in a corner helping her into some costume jewelry,
while Angelica’s two younger sisters play on the floor. There is no man or boy in sight, simply a
group of five older women helping more than fifteen young women get dressed for the fashion
show.

Feminine qualities such as beauty and behaving in a demure fashion are often associated
with maturity for young women. This type of evaluation only acknowledges a certain type of
maturity for girls. It was challenging, as a researcher and observer, to not link the beautiful and
delicate components of Angelica’s dress to the girl wearing the gown. I tried to avoid describing
Angelica as delicate, despite her dress gendering her as such. Angelica, commonly identified by
Adelante staff as having behavioral problems, took on a totally different persona when she
stepped into her gown. In this case, a young woman was recognized as mature when she
appropriately embodied beauty and innocence, qualities often associated with a quinceañera.
This is one way the fashion show gendered the young women, using normative performances of femininity as the standard. Accessing maturity therefore became a privilege, made possible by embodying normative beauty standards. This is concerning because by associating maturity to beauty and innocence only girls able to dress the part are successful. One then wonders where this leaves girls who do not fit the part.

As I observed the other girls in the room I noticed that the dresses were lovely shades of pink, red, turquoise, white, and purple. Every girl was wearing high heels and painstakingly applying or having someone apply their make-up. Most of the girls transformed into their “new selves” upon arriving at the library, with the occasional girl arriving complete with hair style and make-up done. I was unable to tell whether they had been professionally styled, but what was apparent was their obvious care for appearing properly groomed. In this context, properly groomed implies neatly manicured nails, curled or straightened hair and an overall appearance of cleanliness. Most of the girls were wearing make-up in neutral tones, such as light pinks and shades of coral. Every single girl looks absolutely stunning. In knowing some of the girls personally it is apparent that those without abundant economic resources were still able to participate in the fashion show and there is no visible difference between the girls who come from less affluent families and others. While Adelante assumed all of the rental costs associated with the dresses and tuxedos, the make-up, shoes, and hair styles were only covered if absolutely necessary. Thus, all of the girls and their families had to decide how to finance these other components.

Leading up to the library event there was one exchange I witnessed between a staff organizer and a young woman’s mother that speaks to the financial burden that can exist in these types of events. All of the fashion show participants were asked to have their guardians sign a
document making them liable should borrowed garments be damaged or dirtied in any way. Two sisters never shared this document with their mother thinking that she would never agree to sign it. These also happened to be the same young women who were perceived as being of mixed heritage and/or black. When the staff organizer, per the request of the young women, contacted the mother requesting permission for her daughters to participate, the mother yelled at the Adelante staff member saying she could not be held liable for her daughters’ actions. She also felt she could not be expected to afford the purchase of heels and professional styling the days of the performances. The mother claimed that she was financially incapable of allowing her daughters to participate. While the mother seemed quite frustrated, I think the situation could have been alleviated if the girls and/or an Adelante staff member would have engaged the mother in a conversation about these concerns earlier in the planning stages. Although Adelante is simply trying to instill responsibility in the students by making them liable should the borrowed garments be damaged, they need to further consider the burden this places on parents who are unable to accept this financial responsibility. While the staff member proposed that Adelante could have helped these young women obtain the necessary items for participation, the mother was obviously upset at being unable to provide for her daughters. This interaction, when compared to the financial burdens associated with a typical quinceañera celebration, is quite telling. While the fashion show is intended to include students who primarily come from economically disadvantaged households, the population Adelante serves, it still involves financial sacrifices that not everyone can take on. Although the Adelante staff member mentioned that no one has ever had to pay for a gown, the threat of having to do so, should their child damage a garment, is enough for any parent to reconsider their child’s participation.
Aside from it becoming a financial burden, another concern the mother shared with the Adelante staff member was her inability to understand why her daughters would participate in the first place considering they were not “Mexican.” While some of the girls in my study identified the young women as black and/or of mixed heritage, their racial/ethnic identity was never explicitly established. The mother’s response suggests that the girls, identified as mixed by my participants, were perhaps maintaining this ambiguous identity to participate in Adelante’s resources and to develop connections between themselves and their Latino/a peers. These girls signed-up for Adelante after learning that some of their friends were going to participate. In my prior interactions with this group of adolescents I remember them being the only two girls who did not “seem” to identify as Mexican and/or Latina. They never mentioned, in my presence, that they identified as Latina. The Adelante staff members also described them as African American. Although I am unsure of how they would self-identify, their peers were marking them as mixed and their mother was identifying them as black. Hence, the performance of gender and race, through participation in the Quinceañera Fashion Show, became a burden for this family. They could not afford the necessary elements to reproduce the expected gender performance, such as having the funds for elaborate hair styles and make-up. Consequently, they could not embody the expected racial performance of Mexican identity that is anticipated for a quinceañera. I can speculate that they wanted to participate on the basis that they connected with the other fashion show participants. In other words, they shared similar gender, race, and class backgrounds. On the other hand, their gender, race, and class became what separated them from the overall group. Although Adelante provides Latino/a resources, the public rarely knows that the agency also serves many non-Latino/as as well.
As this story indicates, although Adelante’s Quinceañera Fashion Show allows all youth regardless of race to participate, this does not mean that others do not perceive it as a “Mexican” celebration. The girls mentioned above were not allowed by their mother to participate in the first performance at the library, but I did notice them in the crowd with their mother. It must have been incredibly difficult for the girls after having practiced for the last couple of months with their peers, to be in the audience and not participating. Fortunately later that following weekend I noticed them on stage at the Westfield Franklin Park Mall fashion show.

After observing the girls getting dressed for the performance at the library I went out to the main atrium to observe the audience. Although quite small, the crowd was full of family members, younger brothers and sisters, grandmothers, aunts and uncles. Everyone was ready with digital cameras and cell phones in hand. The DJ began to play contemporary music that I am unable to identify as any specific genre. As the music began, the young men and women begin to file out. Each male escort helped his partner on to the stage, after his initial stroll down the catwalk he twirls the quinceañera and then it is her turn. Some girls speed down the catwalk, obviously nervous despite the small crowd. Sophia and Brenda, participants of my study were most nervous about the library performance. Brenda shares,

The library at first I was really nervous and my body tensed up and stuff. But I think I did it funny because I think I was moving too fast because I was shy and scared. Nervous and everything. At the mall, I was less nervous and [more] relaxed because I was laughing, because it was more people than at the library. (443-446)

Brenda described herself as shy during the interview, and being put on display in such a public manner terrified her. Sophia also shared a similar feeling at the library. According to Sophia, she “was more terrified at the branch because it was [their] first… that was where [they] performed
first. [She] tripped at the library branch [when] going up the stairs,” but thought, “it’s ok, it happens” (504-6). Sophia describes the library audience as “a quieter audience” where “people were seated” and it was “more organized a little bit…because [people] were seated in rows” (508-10). Kaila, on the other hand, was much more nervous at the mall, given the bigger crowds. Kaila perceived both audiences to be equally diverse full of “little kids, grandmas, adults, teenagers, kids…a big variety of people” (355-6).

After showcasing all the tuxedos and dresses, the dancers lined up and strolled out unto the dance floor. As the waltz began, the youth walked out one pair at a time and proceeded to dance in a group circle across the middle of the atrium. Each young man twirled his partner to the left and exchanged one quinceañera for the next. The level of precision was admirable; not one student skipped a beat. Each young man and woman looked straight ahead and danced with extreme professionalism. As I was observing the waltz, two older white women came up behind and remarked how this was reminding them about their dances long ago. Although I suspect they were not referencing having had quinceañeras, they were able to connect the formal attire and the refined dancing to a former time in their past. Never would I have suspected that this group of young Latino/as from some of the most difficult neighborhoods in Toledo could remind a pair of older white women of their youth. Despite being of different racial and ethnic backgrounds the formality of this quinceañera tradition bridged two unexpected realities. Sophia also described the waltz in a unique way, according to her during a quinceañera celebration “you do the church and then you come back and do the waltz…after you put your heels on [you] do the waltz…it’s kind of like you’re dancing into your new age, becoming a woman” (475-6). Perhaps the older women were connecting to this idea instead, the experience of being gendered, of dancing into womanhood. They could have been connecting to that moment in their youth where they were
first allowed to receive male suitors and attend formal balls, a direct connection to entering a “new age” as Sophia suggests. Thus, a performance with the goal of demonstrating a quinceañera tradition can obviously speak to many different people, Latino/a or not.

The waltz was wonderful to watch, because it showed the students in a different fashion from how I was accustomed to seeing them. I have already remarked on how the students were classified as more mature by wearing gowns and tuxedos. Their typical outfits, outside of the fashion show, might be defined as an “urban style,” associated in the dominant population with delinquency. The students, instead, took on a normative persona of maturity wearing these tuxedos and gowns. By looking professional and exquisitely groomed, the students were classified as mature. The waltz, a normative dance form associated with sophistication, therefore, had a similar influence on the students and further classified them as mature. On the other hand, the cumbia added a Latino/a element of excitement. It was not particularly un-refined, but it did not present the students in a similar fashion. Sophia’s impression of the second dance, the cumbia was quite telling. When asked what she thought the cumbia piece added to the performance Sophia shares,

It kind of added like a little flavor to it…like a different flavor. Like a waltz, obviously you are going to do that in a quinceañera, but a cumbia is kind of like a special dance you do that shows, kind of like, represents where you’re from. It kind of like shows that quinceañera, what she’s most interested in…it kind of added that special flavor to it.

(481-4)

While the waltz exudes class and nobility, the cumbia is meant to represent Latino/a traditions. The participants of the fashion show seemed to associate Mexican-ness with the cumbia. Performing the waltz they embodied normative standards of sophistication, while performing the
*cumbia* they embodied their Latino/a pan-ethnic identities. Sophia references this notion of flavor that connects the idea of Latino/a traditions such as the quinceañera to the food of the people, the flavor that seasons the Latino/a experience. Sophia also seems to be connecting how spice and flavor define a stereotypical, but supposedly authentic, Latino/a experience. While there is something to say about challenging the high-class approach to dancing a waltz during the quinceañera, does the introduction of the *cumbia* instead speak to a more contemporary need to protect one’s ethnic heritage and/or to define it in limiting ways? Are young women incorporating *cumbias* into their celebrations as a way to exercise their ethnic pride in a society that often overlooks these customs? It can go both ways.

While I would love to believe that Adelante incorporated the *cumbia* to encourage the youths’ appreciation for Latino/a styled music, instead they could have included the performance to make the event even more “authentically” Latino/a. While non-Latino/a, mostly Caucasian and African American community members, might easily identify a waltz, a *cumbia* is not as common. I suspect very few non-Latino/a attendees recognized the musical style as being a *cumbia*, but they are likely to associate these rhymes as vaguely Latino/a, Hispanic, or Spanish. On the other hand, I also suspect that many Latino/as perhaps did not recognize it as a *cumbia*, but instead a general Latino/a musical style. I for example, am much more familiar with Caribbean Latino/a styles such as salsa, merengue, and bachata. Being unfamiliar with the *cumbia*, I depended on my participants to describe the musical style and dance. While the *cumbia* is technically a Caribbean musical style, the rendition used for the fashion show had Mexican influences. Adelante tried to incorporate many elements that would make it obviously Latino/a. The participation of a Latino fraternity, and their performance of a step and dance routine to a reggaeton song, is yet another way Latino/a influences were incorporated to make it
further authentic. Although step routines are originally of African American origins, Latino fraternities have adopted this dance style incorporating Latino/a musical rhythms, such as reggaeton. Despite the fact that only three fraternity members attended, the performance was still positively received by the audience. Incorporating the fraternity also added a youthful element. While the *cumbia* may be associated with older Latino/a crowds, the step and dance routine to reggaeton were obviously catering to a younger and less racially/ethnically specific population. Therefore, in addition to identifying those elements of the quinceañera that mark the participants in accordance with ethnic factors, such as their clothing or behavior on stage, I also observed structural elements of the fashion show that served to produce constructions of Latino/a identity.

The library event was special for two reasons. First, it celebrated Latino/a youth within a space where books and learning were essential. While the event had little if anything to do with literacy, it gave the youth an opportunity to perform a Latino/a custom within one of Toledo’s most publicly accessible spaces, a space associated with reading and learning. Second, through this event many of the Latino/a families may have been entering the Main branch library for the first time, making it a new resource for them. Although it would be naïve to think the fashion show guests actually took advantage of the library’s resources, after this one event, simply accessing the space for the first time could encourage their return at a later date. I did notice some younger Latino children searching for the youth section on the upper floor before the fashion show commenced. The library staff also organized a raffle during intermission where they presented winners with exciting prizes, one of which I won, which was a guide to making 101 things with tortillas. Amusing at best, it was still a nice way to incorporate books into the lives of their fashion show guests, making the library into a more exciting space.
THE MALL

The second Quinceañera Fashion Show performance took place in the newly named Toledo Westfield Mall at Franklin Park, more commonly referred to as the Franklin Park Mall. When I arrived on the day of the fashion show on Saturday, October 11th I was immediately amazed at how the Adelante staff had transformed a portion of the mall food court. In the place of your typical food court chairs and tables was a huge sectioned off stage and catwalk. At the right of the stage was a huge Adelante banner advertising the Quinceañera Fashion Show. Although there had been various community resource tables available at the library, at the mall the only table I noticed was Adelante’s agency table. Here the Adelante staff had propped up a display of pictures of numerous Adelante functions and program participants. There were also post card sized flyers with general information about the fashion show and the schedule of events.

When I arrived the young men and women were already dressed and ready to show their outfits. They were all lined up behind a curtain off of the stage excitedly awaiting the start of the event. The food court was packed with general shoppers, families and friends. According to Sophia, at the mall, which she refers to as Franklin, she “would look out at the crowd and just see a whole bunch of different people, African American, white, Asian…and they [all] looked interested in what we were doing” (432-4). I have to agree with Sophia there was an incredibly diverse crowd surrounding the fashion show stage. Having been to the mall on about three other occasions, I was more amazed at the number of Latino/as present. The presence was absolutely powerful. I got a chance to speak with some of the mothers and children I service as a youth specialist for Adelante. One of the little girls I tutor was very excited about seeing all of the “pretty dresses.” One mother was looking forward to taking pictures of her son who had never worn a tuxedo before.
The schedule of events followed the exact same order in the mall as it did in the library. The first segment of the program was the fashion portion, followed by the couples waltz, the *cumbia* performance and the dance routine performed by the Latino fraternity. During the mall fashion show all of the young men and women strolled down the catwalk as they had at the library. Many of the young men seemed to swagger more than they had before. The young women also sashayed with more confidence. By swagger and sashaying I mean the boys and girls seemed to perform their masculinity and femininity by way of their walks, while still behaving in accordance with moral codes. In other words, the girls did not sashay or walk in a seductive manner nor did the boys swagger or walk in ways that would be deemed inappropriate. Perhaps they wanted to impress the huge crowd of family members and young people. Both girls and boys gained momentum after each audience applause and shout of excitement. The energy was absolutely infectious. As they each strolled down the catwalk the MC shared important details about each participant, such as their name, age, the school they attend, and details about their outfit. Afterwards the MC shared a brief history about the quinceañera, generally explaining its role as a rite of passage for young women during their 15th birthday. She referenced the gifts given to the young woman such as the last doll, the crown, the change from flat shoes to heels and the princess adorned dress.

One of Adelante’s most public and lively events of the year, the Quinceañera Fashion Show at Franklin Park seemed most appropriately located in this center of materialist consumption, the shopping mall. While the fashion show is not solely about showcasing material goods, what better place than a mall to highlight the newest quinceañera fashions. It surprises me that boutiques in Toledo have not jumped at the chance to showcase their quinceañera type dresses. Instead, all of the dresses were borrowed from a boutique in Adrian, Michigan. Perhaps
more local retailers suspect there is no real demand in Toledo. This would be a mistake since there seems to be a quinceañera planned for almost every weekend in Toledo, especially during the warmer months. One participant, Kaila, also shared how her family loved how she looked in the quinceañera dress so much that they purchased it for her actual birthday celebration taking place this spring. The fashion show does directly lead to purchases, although I do not suggest that it happens without its own set of sacrifices and limitations. Not every girl who participated would be able to afford the dress they wore, as not every girl in the fashion show would be celebrating her own quinceañera birthday celebration.

After the fashion portion, the select group of approximately 11 young men and women stroll out to the dance floor and commence their waltz. The youth are obviously having much more fun during this performance smiling at their partners and the crowd. Sophia appreciated the Franklin Park crowd the best because “they would go and then smile. They were like a more active audience” (512). Afterwards the cumbia performance begins. Once their portion is complete they run out to the crowd and ask friends and family to come dance the remainder of the cumbia. It was quite a deviation from the library event, where everybody seemed a lot stiffer and confined as a result of the space. During the cumbia sons ran out to ask their mothers and sisters to dance, while daughters ran out and asked their fathers and little brothers. I did not notice any same sex couples, such as mothers and daughters dancing. I also did not notice any non-participant couples dancing, but perhaps that is a testament to the watchful eye of families and friends. Some youth even tried to ask the staff organizers to dance, which did not prove successful.

After the fashion and dancing segment, the brothers of Beta returned to perform one final step show. Once again three members of the fraternity present a step and dance routine to a
Serrano 66

reggaeton song. The crowd of young people is particularly excited during this performance.

After a brief intermission the agenda is repeated one more time and the fashion show participants return to the stage. While Sophia and Brenda were more nervous at the library performance, Kaila was the only participant of my study who was most nervous during the Franklin Park performance. According to Kaila, “there was a variety of everything. There were little kids, grandmas, adults, teenagers, kids” and she was “actually more nervous for the mall because there were more people” (355-361). When asked why she thought Adelante sponsored the fashion show, Brenda suggested it was to

maybe show that Latinos are here too. [That] they do stuff. To show and spread out the word about more Latinos. To have more things about Latinos cause they have a lot of stuff on whites and the blacks, but maybe they want to something about Latinos to count more. (487-9)

Here Brenda is referring to what she understands as the limited Latino/a presence in Toledo. She would like to see the Latino community have a greater presence in the area and feels that Adelante works at making that a reality. For Sophia it was “rewarding to see people around, different backgrounds being interested in [her] background” (435-36). Kaila also saw how the fashion show could create options for Latino youth in Toledo. She shares

[that] if Adelante can take these kids and like keep them off the streets and keep them out of trouble in something like a fashion show [where] they could have fun with [it], then it shows that they care about the community and about the kids in the community (445-7)
The fashion show is not simply just another cultural program meant to entertain an audience. It also meets meaningful goals such as encouraging the presence of Latino/as and Latino/a youth, more specifically.

**COMPARISON OF LIBRARY AND MALL PERFORMANCES**

My experiences as a participant observer largely suggest that there are numerous ways that the youth in the fashion show are racialized and gendered. In the library I was able to observe the young women getting ready prior to the fashion show. This offered me a chance to examine how young women were being classified as innocent, beautiful, and mature, identifiers that impact how one articulates a gender identity. The fashion show at the library was also a place where the display of ethnic identities seemed most out of place. A fashion show in a library is obviously unexpected, but even more so is the display of Latino/a bodies as they model a traditional Latino/a custom. Hence, despite being racialized as an ethnic “other” within this library setting, the event also had the potential for challenging the absence of the Latino/a presence. Thus Adelante’s idea to present the Quinceañera Fashion Show, in an unexpected location, is also challenging the impression that Latino/as are absent and/or a limited presence in the Toledo population.

The library and mall performances also helped me observe how Latino/a youth are agents actively participating in their gendering and racialization. In the mall fashion show, Latino/a youth were able to energetically display their ethnic pride as a result of their lively strides down the catwalk. They fed off of the excitement produced by the crowds, composed of family, friends, and strangers. The *cumbia* dance performance was a moment where they negotiated publicly a display of ethnicity. Describing it as a “special dance…that adds a little flavor,”
Sophia was articulating how Latino/a-ness was a marker of difference, albeit a positive display of ethnic difference. By adapting the original dance routine to include the introduction of community members, the youth had an opportunity to invite the guests to celebrate a shared expression of ethnic performance.

Despite these optimistic analyses of gender and ethnic performance during both fashion shows, the performances themselves had their own successes and difficulties. While the Main Branch library was a wonderful space to encourage literacy, the fashion show did very little to incorporate that in a more central manner. Instead the organizers missed out on connecting issues of education and literacy in the Latino/a community and the goal of the fashion show to encourage these interests in their youth. While primarily concerned with fashion, Adelante attempted to use the program as a means for organizing the youth. I suspect they hope getting the youth involved will ultimately translate into encouraging their interest in education and literacy. On the other hand, being part of a greater calendar during Latino/a Heritage month at the library afforded Adelante great possibilities of spreading the word about the services they provide. Not only would non-Latino community members have the option of learning more about Adelante, the events at the library and the mall may have spread the word to Latino/a community members not already connected to the agency.

Later, in the following chapter, I will speak more centrally to how the young women were racialized and gendered as a result of their participation in the fashion shows as well as other experiences tied to their Latina girl identities. Since I do not focus primarily on young men in my study, this section on participant observation allowed me to examine how some of the young men performed their race and gender through a generally female event. In this chapter I also referenced, in a more tangential manner, how class figures into the economic burden of the
fashion show and the quinceañera. Later on I will delve more deeply into how the young women articulate their class backgrounds in ways that engage with their racial and gender experiences. We have begun to get a sense for how pride and power are articulated and challenged through the fashion show. A pride and power that manifests as a result of young girls’ access to womanhood and cultural integrity. In the following chapter I will examine the intersections between gender and race and explore how the young women articulate these experiences in their own words.
CHAPTER III: DATA REFLECTIONS: THE INTERVIEWS

The Latina girls I interviewed all had wonderfully rich stories to share about their friends, families, community experiences with Adelante, and their involvement with the Quinceañera Fashion Show. In this chapter I first craft a brief biography introducing each girl. Afterwards I present the emergent themes and categories and those stories that best articulated how the girls were negotiating their social realities. The first theme, school life, focuses on the ways in which the girls nurtured relationships with teachers and classmates and the strategies they developed to achieve intellectual success. The second theme, my community, addresses their experiences in Adelante, focusing on those girls who specifically identified themselves as budding leaders in the community. The third category, experiencing gender, includes those stories where femininity was being negotiated and challenged in different areas of the girls’ lives. The fourth theme focuses on the ways in which the girls were negotiating their racial and ethnic identities, as well as the ways they were being racialized by external forces. The final theme draws on the entire group of young women and includes those stories that centered how race and gender was being negotiated and at times challenged in one particular moment or setting.

LATINA GIRLS IN OHIO

Brenda. The daughter of Ohio born Mexican parents, Brenda, a seventeen year old Woodward High School student self identifies as Latina and Mexican. Having lived in Ohio her whole life she describes her ethnic background as something she is “proud of being” (11). A senior in high school, Brenda shares that she thoroughly enjoys math and science, particularly because her teachers do a great job at making the classes fun while still a bit challenging. With two sisters
and two brothers, Brenda recognizes how fortunate she is to be the first in her family on the road to graduating from high school and attending college, something that makes her father quite proud. Some of Brenda’s favorite past times in Toledo are attending bailes, Mexican dances, with her family and friends. Bailes are events where Latinos go to have fun, dance to Tejano music, cumbias, and other diverse Latino/a musical styles. Brenda decided to participate in the Quinceañera Fashion Show to “try something new” despite being nervous at the thought of being out “in front of a whole bunch of people modeling” (289-92). With the support of some of her friends she decided to not worry about her shy tendencies and instead go out there and “just do it” (295).

Sophia. A seventeen year old Waite High School student, Sophia identifies as being “blended” with her father hailing from Mexico and her mother from Nicaragua (8-9). Although born and raised in Ohio she has traveled extensively to Mexico and Texas to visit family throughout her lifetime. A senior in high school Sophia shares her love of English and her interest in writing poetry and interpreting stories. One of Sophia’s most prized past times is playing soccer, something she shares with her father, a former coach. She was six or seven years old when she was first initiated into the sport and has loved it since. Although this is her first year trying out for the Waite team, she has participated in the occasional “scrimmage at family reunions” (88). Sophia is incredibly focused on her education and looks forward to going to college this upcoming year. Sophia decided to participate in the Quinceañera Fashion Show after being invited by one of her close male friends who was already dancing in the program. In previous years she had wanted to participate, but would “always try and get in too late” (305).
Kaila. A fourteen year old from Perrysburg Ohio, Kaila identifies as half Puerto Rican and half Mexican. Born and primarily raised in Ohio, Kaila has lived in Cleveland and Perrysburg with a short residence in Puerto Rico for first and second grade. Perrysburg, an affluent suburb of Toledo is approximately ten minutes away from downtown. It is commonly identified as much more affluent than the city of Toledo. A ninth grader at Perrysburg High School, Kaila shares that art and math are her favorite subjects. Kaila mostly enjoys hanging out with friends where they joke around, laugh at serious movies and go to McDonald’s for dinner. When asked what other things she did besides making fun of serious movies, she laughed and offered that they also helped each other with homework and had an interest in artistic projects, a creative quality they all share. Along with her Perrysburg friends, Kaila is also close to many of the Adelante youth from Toledo. She met them while attending the Adelante summer program in the 5th grade and has been nurturing those friendships ever since. Kaila decided to participate in the Quinceañera Fashion Show after attending the program last year. She thought “it was really pretty and … wanted to be in it” (287). According to Kaila she and her friends were “old enough this year so [they] thought it would be something really cool… it was like another way to hang out with each other” (287-291). After having attended the Adelante summer program with some of her friends they all decided to continue hanging out and practice the dances for the Quinceañera Fashion Show.

Lisette. A thirteen year old of Puerto Rican heritage, Lisette was the only girl I interviewed who opted not to participate in the Quinceañera Fashion Show. An eighth grader at Perrysburg Junior High, Lisette has lived most of her life between Puerto Rico and Ohio. She appreciates the Perrysburg community because people are nice and “really…friendly” (29). She also likes the
junior high she attends because “it’s very calm. There’s really no violence… unless you get on somebody’s bad side” (32-33). A lover of sports, Lisette informed me rather pointedly that she is a huge supporter of Ohio teams and particularly likes the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Ohio State football team. One of the many things she shares with her friends is her love of sports. She loves it because it “keeps [her] active” (188). Family is also quite important to Lisette. She shares that her family is her biggest cheerleader at sporting events.

When asked to describe a quinceañera, Lisette thought it represented the “age a teen becomes a woman” or as she described it “something like that.” Lisette suspected that the girls who participated in the Fashion show did so because they liked “dancing and dressing up” (317). Lisette was certain she would not be celebrating her Quince with an extravagant dress and dancing. Although she did not participate in the fashion show, Lisette appreciates being “part of that culture” (419). So despite not participating, she still feels connected to what she understands as the overall goal to connect people of a common culture.

**SCHOOL LIFE**

T: You said you liked math, what do you like about math?

K: Uh, there’s always one right answer. It’s not like English where you have to write an essay and you like hope that’s what she’s talking about. In math you always get one right answer. (Kaila 42-4)

When asked to describe their school lives each girl framed her experiences as mostly positive. The importance of education was one thing they all shared and they drew detailed connections between their favorite teachers and classes and those steps they would need to take to achieve future academic successes. Kaila, a ninth grader at Perrysburg High School, thoroughly enjoyed
her art and math classes. She said the art class allowed her to demonstrate her creative personality in an environment where “the art teacher is really young…and can relate to the kids” (47). She describes math as one of her favorite subjects because she considers herself “pretty good at [it]” and also because the teacher is “really cool…fun and tells us stories related to math” (27). Like Kaila, all of the girls interviewed seemed most interested in subjects with nice, “cool,” and relatable teachers. These connections with their teachers made their intellectual experiences much more rewarding.

According to Kaila her experiences with teachers are different from student-teacher relationships represented in Hollywood movies, “The teachers are actually really cool. They like relate to you. They aren’t [like] in the movies where you see the teachers and [they] are really mean. They are actually really nice” (28-9). Despite this positive relationship she seemed to have with her teachers, when I asked Kaila whether she felt particularly close to any one teacher later in the interview, she said she would not feel comfortable seeking out a teacher or counselor’s assistance after school and described not being able to “really relate to…the teachers because it’s kind of weird” (52). According to her it was always unusual to “see them outside of school, at grocery stories” as if she could not see her teachers as a regular people (54). Although it was fine to have an academic relationship with her teachers, they were not the people she would seek out for assistance with personal situations. While Kaila may simply be expressing what many youth share when they describe seeing teachers outside of the school environment, perhaps she also felt that as a young Latina she could not relate culturally to her teachers. I can only speculate that teachers who are nice and relatable in one moment are not identified as sources of counsel, in another moment, because of particular factors that makes them different from Kaila.
In a similar fashion, Lisette also had positive things to share about her interactions with teachers. An 8th grader at Perrysburg Junior High, Lisette’s favorite classes are Orchestra, Math, and a media class which she referred to as WJH. As with Kaila, Lisette also enjoyed Math because she happened to be “good at it” (47). Of all of the interviewees, Lisette was the most reserved and difficult to get talking. I found it rather amusing that one of her favorite classes happened to be the media class where according to her, “[they] do interviews…ask kids questions in the halls…[serve] as live anchors and do the weather, sport and editorial reviews” (53-4). When I laughingly questioned how someone who does interviews for a media class had gotten away with never having been interviewed, Lisette simply laughed in response. I could not help and ask what it was like for her interviewing people and Lisette remarked that she had “only done one interview…but] it was pretty fun because I knew who she was so it was pretty easy” (60-2). That seemed to be her way of telling me that our interview was foreign for her because not only had she never been interviewed, but she did not know me all that well either.

One of Lisette’s favorite teachers happened to be her science teacher, although she did not seem particularly fond of the subject. One of the reasons she liked this teacher so much is because they share an interest in sports. The science teacher who also served as the 8th grade basketball coach is described by Lisette as being “really easy to talk to…really funny and cooperates a lot” (111-2). As some of the other girls, Lisette seemed to appreciate those teachers who treated her with the same amount of respect that she treated them.

Sophia, for example, also made that quite clear during the portion of our conversation where we discussed school and her teachers. When I asked her whether she felt particularly close to any of her teachers, Sophia responded that, “I respect them and they respect me. They help me when I need help and I tell them if they really need help they can just call me” (47-8). This
partnership she is describing is therefore a common thread across many of the interviews. Although the girls recognize that their teachers are still figures of authority, they learned the most from those who respected and acknowledged their opinions. These positive relationships the girls are thus far describing with their teachers provide evidence that suggests that Latina girls prefer special relationships with school officials. They valued developing relationships with their teachers. They connect the best to those teachers that challenge them academically and that treat them in a respectful manner.

While most of the other girls seemed most connected to their teachers, Brenda was the only girl who mentioned visiting her guidance counselor for advice. Although usually about some academic matter, Brenda felt most comfortable talking to the guidance counselor “because she knows [her] mom and she knows all [of her] sisters and brother” and she was “just more comfortable” with this person (47-8). The fact that the guidance counselor knew Brenda’s family allowed her to become a more reliable source of counsel at the school. While she did visit this guidance counselor frequently, for the most part it was to discuss academic matters such as the type of classes she was taking and to devise a plan for applying to colleges and securing financial aid. According to Brenda, the guidance counselor is someone she talks to “about classes, new classes, helping [her] do better…different programs, like applications for college” (50-1). Of the four girls I interviewed, Brenda was the one who seemed to have the most difficult time academically. She also happened to be attending one of the least challenging schools in Toledo with limited resources. Located in an impoverished area, Woodward High School is one of the schools serviced by Adelante because of their large Latino/a student body and need for tutoring and academic assistance. When asked how people would describe Woodward students, Brenda responded that they are “bad sometimes, crazy…they talk a lot. They gossip and stuff a lot.
Some of them are cool though” (78-80). After working with Adelante, it seems that the impression of the staff is that the students from this school are neither the smartest nor the best behaved of Toledo area students. This general impression of her school was having an effect on how Brenda was describing herself and her academic abilities. Brenda shared that she had decided to turn a new leaf and socialize less with friends because “[her] grades [were] low and [she had] just started bringing them up last year” (75-6). She was having a difficult time focusing and was getting quite “distracted” (75). In her senior year, grades were important to Brenda. She shared wanting “to go to Owens [Community College] for two years and then transfer[ing] to Bowling Green [State University]” so that she could eventually study nursing (53-5). Brenda had obvious academic goals and had decided she would search for scholarships that would offer her the opportunities she was searching for. She associated improving her grades during the last year with participating in Adelante tutoring. According to her a typical day at Adelante includes “do[ing] homework for maybe an hour and then hav[ing] a group discussion” (192). It seemed that this shift in her former habits had more to do with the Adelante After School Program than the guidance she was receiving at school.

**MY COMMUNITY: ADELANTE**

T: What would you say you like the most about [Adelante]?

B: Sometimes they take us out to like different conferences. Like teen conferences, summits and stuff. They’ll take us to Chicago. So they have different concerts and we’re like the only little Mexican group there. (Brenda 496-7)

Of the four girls, two, Brenda and Sophia were consistent members of Adelante’s youth after school program. During the time of my study Adelante sponsored two high school after school
programs, one at Brenda’s school, Woodward, and one at Sophia’s school, Waite. Both schools were chosen because of their high enrollment of Latino/a youth. As I mentioned earlier, Woodward was not the most academically challenging school and seemed to constantly grapple with high drop out rates and violence. Waite experienced similar issues but to a much lesser degree. This is reflected in the way I heard community members categorize each institution. The Latino/a segments of the student body in both of the schools were mainly composed of Mexican and Mexican American teenagers. Each school was surrounded by a working class neighborhood. Despite these similarities, Waite and Woodward are, for some reason I could not detect, described as two different kinds of institutions. Adelante staff enjoyed working with both, but identified Woodward students as a bit more rambunctious than Waite students. Academically, the students at Waite were described by Adelante staff as being a bit more advanced. Perhaps this is as a result of the resources afforded to each school. Nothing in my interviews explains why this difference exists. My intention is not to suggest that Woodward students are bad students while Waite kids are better behaved, but that this is the impression commonly held by community members. For some reason, the students at both schools are held to different standards. Nonetheless Adelante provides academic assistance to both communities. Since Waite was, within the last year, chosen as a new site for the After School Program, I was unable to obtain information regarding its progress during the course of my study.

While Brenda had clear aspirations and academic interests, she had difficult expressing herself during our interview. During segments of our conversation she was less verbal and forthcoming with stories than some of the other girls I interviewed. Throughout the interview she resorted to using “I don’t know” when I could tell she did know what she was talking about. This constant self-doubt made it rather difficult to learn more about her and her life. Adelante was a
source of support and strength for both Sophia and Brenda. Brenda particularly enjoyed attending Adelante because “it’s fun… [and] teaches a lot” and engaged students with issues such as “relationships, love, [and] drugs” (176-7). Brenda identified shortcomings in her education and with the support of Adelante staff members was able to become less distracted and significantly more motivated. Brenda’s father also appreciated Adelante’s help because according to Brenda he is “happy [that she] come[s] to Adelante because it helps [her] a lot” and appreciates the support of one of the Adelante “leaders from [her group who has been] helping [Brenda] with her research project” (274-5). One of the high school staff members at Adelante had wonderful things to say about Brenda and described her as a hard working student. Behaviorally she thought Brenda was strides ahead of her Adelante cohort and was a huge help in group settings. Academically she did not think Brenda applied herself to her fullest potential. Participating in Adelante has therefore helped Brenda become a stronger leader in her community. When I asked what her role was in the Adelante after school program she described herself as a “leader in that group” (307). According to Brenda,

Sometimes when the teachers are teaching us and nobody is paying attention and they’re trying to teach and everybody is just laughing and goofing around or not paying attention I get aggravated and say “shut up let her talk” or something. They’re going to teach you and you need to learn this…They’ll be like “man just shut up and sit down” [laughs]…they’ll laugh at me. Sometimes they’ll quit and I’ll be like I’m just trying to help (310-7).

Although the other students showed some resistance, they still respected Brenda enough to listen to her on occasion. Although Brenda considered herself extremely shy and often responded to my questions with the phrase “I don’t know,” through her experiences with Adelante she was
also able to see herself as a leader. I could tell she was extremely proud of being considered a leader within the Adelante group. It gave her a sense of purpose that was not as pronounced in her school life.

Sophia was also considered a leader in the Adelante group. Of all of the girls I interviewed her stories were the most elaborate and descriptive. During the course of the interview, the way she expressed herself reflected her intellectual potential. Sophia shared enjoying English classes where she was learning about “poems…interpreting them…[learning about] foreshadowing [and] appealing to the senses with sight, hearing and words” (42-4). While she described her classmates as “basically cool people” she did not think they were as “enthusiastic” as she was in her English classes (55-60). When asked what sort of career aspirations she had, Sophia had a difficult time pinning down one interest. According to her she has been considering “lots of stuff…cosmetology, dermatology…massage therapist…graphic design, [and] business and finance” (156-9). It is particularly notable that the first occupations she listed were more vocational. I was amazed to learn that she did not consider English a viable option of study. Given Sophia’s interest in English it would have been great to hear her discuss how she could translate that into a future profession. Sophia articulated herself in a much more advanced form than many graduate students I know. Her academic potential was quite evident.

Sophia was also being influenced by glamorized notions of fashion and celebrity life. As many young women, she is also interested in “the expensive clothes they wear, all the makeup” and playfully shared how she wanted to “style [them]” and get paid for it (168-9). Sophia’s interest in fashion and celebrity seemed to be at odds with her future plans, because she expected to go to either go to Bowling Green State University (BGSU) or the University of Toledo. Neither institution would be the most appropriate for someone interested in fashion and cosmetology.
BGSU, for example describes itself as “a dynamic, innovative academic environment that challenges you to open yourself to new ideas, learn in an integrated context and continually grow and achieve.”\textsuperscript{8} This description seems at odds with future plans in fashion and celebrity life.

Unlike Brenda, she did not expect to attend the local community college, but instead felt capable enough of being admitted to the higher ranking public universities in the area.

Therefore, in this section about Adelante the girls articulated their opportunities for intellectual growth and leadership potential. Both Sophia and Brenda credit Adelante as a significant source of support in their studies. Each girl has had the opportunity to develop her leadership qualities through assisting Adelante youth staff members during after school programming and other agency sponsored functions. In this section I also highlight the ways in which schools are constructed as different environments. In my example, the students of Waite and Woodward high schools were identified by Adelante staff and community members as different kinds of students. Each student population was socialized as more or less intellectually capable or evaluated through different behavioral standards. These examples suggest that Latino/a youth are not evaluated uniformly in each Toledo public school. While there is not evidence in my study to suggest that Woodward and Waite students are in fact different, I am more concerned with identifying those moments where community members and Adelante staff evaluate Latino/a youth within different standards of behavior, intellectual capabilities and leadership potential. In other words, these examples suggest that one can not assume the Latino/a youth community of Toledo is identical across the board.

\textsuperscript{8} This descriptor is included on the BGSU website as a fun fact about the university.
EXPERIENCING GENDER

When examining the transcripts of my interviews I actively sought out moments where the girls articulated experiencing moments where they were gendered. I was curious to learn how they described and experienced being a girl in different facets of their lives. Their stories were indicative of how gender is imposed by society and actively performed by girls.

T: What’s it like in a lunch room at your school?

L: Ours? Well it depends. Cuz when the guys are in it’s really loud, but when they leave for recess it gets quiet. And we…don’t start fights or anything.

(Lisette 165-8)

The youngest girl in my study, Lisette had one of the most telling stories to share about boys at her school. A separation of genders was occurring at the administrative level at her junior high. Lisette asserted that the guys at her school are “really loud and obnoxious” but once they were removed from the lunch hour “it g[ot] quiet and [people] did not start fights” (167-8). She remarked that school administrators separated young men and women during recess because they supposedly did not “know [everyone’s] last name,” but it was obvious that Lisette knew that the young men seemed to behave differently than the girls (178-9). School administrators at her junior high were separating boys and girls during lunch time and at recess to control the noise level and the interactions between both groups. While she could not articulate this difference, she did know there was a reason for boys and girls not being allowed in “one place together at one time” (177-8). Lisette implied that the boys were more annoying than the girls by calling them “obnoxious.” This is one way girls and boys are gendered differently. Good and proper behavior is expected of young women, while boys are expected to be loud and “start fights.” When asked whether she was friends with boys and girls, Lisette shared, “I’ve only got girl friends.” I had
expected that Lisette’s interest in sports would have led her to relate with the young men at her school because young men are more commonly associated with sports than are young women. Based on Lissette’s interview, her interest in sports had not contributed to co-ed friendships and interaction. It is also likely that age contributed to this sex segregation. Lisette’s interview suggests that she is aware that boys were evaluated on different terms than girls and that it was in her best interest to not be associated with them.

Kaila, 14 years old, on the other hand did not seem to share this interest in separating herself from boys at her school. When asked to describe her classmates she shared a very utopic description of high school life. According to Kaila,

I have a lot of friends. There is not really…there is like maybe one or two main people, but everybody else is like really nice. If there’s a new kid, everybody kind of has a competition…they’re like “oh no I want them to sit with me, no sit with me.” There aren’t really cliques or anything. Everybody is really nice. (57-60).

This description of her school makes sense when we think of how the Perrysburg community is different from Toledo urban areas. While Perrysburg is considered a more affluent community, with safer neighborhoods and a more suburban lifestyle, Toledo and specifically the areas where Waite and Woodward are located are often described as the “hood.” I highly doubt every Perrysburg High student would agree with Kaila, but I also think we can analyze her overly positive description as being associated with upper middle class articulations of suburban lifestyles. A very attractive young woman, one would speculate that she would not have a difficult time making friends and she did not hint at having this difficulty. One other difference between Perrysburg and Toledo is the racial make-up of the neighborhoods. Waite is located in an area with working class black, white and Latino/a people. On the other hand, Woodward is
located in an area with a mostly black and Latino/a working class community. Perrysburg differs dramatically as it is composed primarily of white middle class people. Even Kaila realizes she is the “only Spanish one in [her] group of friends” (84). These differing neighborhoods influence how these girls experience and articulate notions of safety and friendly environments.

Sophia for example, had a quite different impression of classmate dynamics at Waite. While she considered her peers “basically cool people” she does agree that she has “different types of friends [who are] very chill and social” (62-3). When I asked whether there were cliques at her school she said there were and proceeded to explain lunch room dynamics. She discussed two socially marginalized groups at her high school: the “emo” kids and pregnant girls. According to Sophia, in the lunch room “there is a senior table” and remarked that similar to Mean Girls there is also a “popular table [and an] emo [table]” (65-6). Never having heard of an “emo” category I asked her for further clarification. Sophia explained that “emo” stood for the emotional kids who she claimed cut themselves. According to her they were “emotional type of people…they got emotional [and] they cut themselves” (68). I asked whether this was what people called them or what they called themselves and she confirmed that it was what “other people tend to call them” (71). Afterwards, while reading through the transcripts I wondered who these “emo” kids might be and whether a similar group could have existed in the Perrysburg community. Could the “emo” students have also been the type of youth who do not fit the mold for an urban Toledo youth. Kaila spoke of her shared interest in Rock music with her Perrysburg friends, a genre that differed from the interest in hip hop which she shared with her Toledo Latino/a friends. Would Sophia have categorized Kaila’s Perrysburg friends as the “emotional type” because of their interest in rock and alternative bands? Furthermore I wondered whether this table of “emo” youth was primarily composed of white young men or young women.
Cutting is often depicted as a gendered and racialized mutilation, meaning mostly young white women are engaging in this behavior. While Sophia never clarified this point, she did not seem to relate to nor have friends at this “emo” table, but she was aware of differing levels of popularity and considered herself a more social person who “travel[s] around the cafeteria” (74). This group of students Sophia was referring to were obviously stigmatized as emotionally unstable.

On the other hand, a stigmatized group that Sophia seemed more protective of were pregnant high school girls. A segment of our interview focused rather passionately on this population. When I asked her what it felt like to be a youth in Toledo, Sophia responded,

I think a lot of people now aren’t really focused on the education part. Because I’ve seen a lot of girls get pregnant now, like last year and this year…a lot of youth in my community [are] getting so pregnant…like in my school there are at least 20 girls in my class that are pregnant. (110-114)

Sophia was so concerned about the ways in which young women in her age group were rapidly becoming pregnant. She had many close friends who were also dropping out of school or seeking alternative methods for completing their education after becoming pregnant. She shares that her best friend was initially “real[ly] excited to graduate and walk with her [cap] and gown and stuff” but after becoming pregnant she is much “more focused on the baby” (125-6). Sophia remarked how she “should’ve thought about that before” (127). Another best friend just found out she was having a boy and according to Sophia is “real excited about that,” and while she is amazed at yet another friend going down that path she remarks how “[she’s] going to be there no matter what” (144-5). In other words, Sophia expected to continue offering her friends moral support. Scholarship on Latina girls often focuses on high pregnancy rates. Sophia presents first
hand accounts for how common it is in her Toledo high school. While Sophia is much more concerned with education and going to college, she is still supportive of those friends who now happen to be pregnant. Sophia was associating pregnancy with an inability to successfully reach her future plans. In other words, while she was supportive of her friends, she believed that to have a successful future she would have to avoid being placed in a similar predicament.

When Sophia described knowing at least twenty pregnant young women at her school I was immediately surprised. She referenced this number matter-of-factly, as if it were a common occurrence. It made me think about my own high school experience and how pregnancy was neither tolerated nor openly discussed. While Sophia also recognized its danger, she was not as stunned by the high pregnancy rate. She did not think it was ideal, but having a number of friends currently pregnant made her quite compassionate about their experiences. Sophia’s comments suggest that one of the primary ways young women are both sexualized and gendered is through this experience of pregnancy. Conversations about sex were quite taboo. Although Adelante initiated conversations about relationships and love, Sophia mentioned feeling uncomfortable about discussing sex with her mother. When I asked her what sorts of things she discussed with her mother she answered that, “she’ll ask me about sex and I’ll be like no I’m ok on that subject” and laugh (196). This discomfort with having conversations with an adult about sexuality is interesting when we consider the high pregnancy rate Sophia is suggesting exists at Waite. Although Sophia was uncomfortable about discussing sexuality with her mother, she did expect to have those types of conversations later on in life. Her biggest worry was that her mother would think she was “having it,” meaning sex, now (198). Hence, Sophia’s story suggests that conversations about sexuality and pregnancy could be better dealt with and initiated if people would feel a bit more comfortable about the topics. Perhaps having these conversations
with groups like Adelante would later encourage similar dialogues between young people and their families. Furthermore, these experiences with pregnancy could be less distressing for young women and more empowering when conversations about sexuality and making healthy decisions become common among the circles they travel.

This conversation about pregnancy among young Latinas made me later reflect on how my visibly pregnant body played into the interviews. At the time of my interviews with the young women I was approximately six months pregnant. All of the girls were well aware of this, but only referenced it outside of our interviews. Off the record, they would ask how I was doing and whether I knew if it was a boy or girl. They seemed very interested in my pregnancy. As an Adelante staff member and someone in her late 20s Sophia did not seem to connect my pregnancy to those stories she was sharing about Latinas in her school. The seemed to make the assumption that I was married, older, and in a different category as the young women in their schools. The girls, therefore, as far as I could tell, did not use the same lens to evaluate me.

**Negotiating Race**

**T:** What do you think are other issues Latina girls have to deal with?

**K:** Being stereotyped by the guys. Oh she’s Latina she’s pretty so we like have to go out with her or something. (Kaila 501-2)

Most of the girls never discussed ethnicity or race, unless I was asking specific questions about their heritage or their knowledge of Latino/a experiences in the Toledo area. When they did talk about ethnicity, all of the girls articulated their ethnic backgrounds with much pride. On the other hand, some young women identified stereotypes associated with being Latino/a as did Kaila above. Kaila associated being pretty and available as a stereotype young Latinas need to
unfortunately negotiate. According to Kaila, boys were drawing connections between a young woman’s ethnicity and her sexual availability. Her comment suggests that young Latinas need to be aware of their suitors and the reasons behind the attention. According to Kaila, Latinas need to negotiate stereotypes that gender them as beautiful and racialize them as “exotic.” While she did not use the term exotic, I speculate that her comment had much to do with how Latinas are assumed to be attractive and available on the basis of race. Hence, the girls’ comments about race and ethnicity ranged from positive moments of pride to challenging moments where Latino/a-ness was threatened or defined in negative terms. Their stories demonstrate the terms they use to describe their ethnicities and the different ways they experienced being Latina.

Lisette is of Puerto Rican heritage, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, lived on the island when she was a child and attended first and second grade in Puerto Rican schools. When asked how she would describe her ethnic background Lisette hesitated and responded, “I’m Puerto Rican. From Puerto Rico, I guess” (8). This lack of confidence in identifying with the island is rather common for mainland born Puerto Rican people. Her hesitation could also be as a result of being more familiar with Ohio, her primary location of residence. When I asked her what it meant to her to be Puerto Rican she responded,

That I represent Puerto Rico. I am from Puerto Rico. I am Puerto Rican. My family is Puerto Rican. Like, even though it is small, we have… we are like even though it is small there are a lot of people living there, inside Puerto Rico and that is something that needs to be known. Our culture and…stuff like that.” (255-9).

While she was less descriptive about specific notions of Puerto Rican identity during her interview, she was quite certain that she belonged in that community. Lisette seemed to be associating the size of the population on the island to the invisibility of non-Mexican
American/Latino/as in Northwest Ohio. In other words, by suggesting the community is small, but still worthy of “being known” she is identifying it as a significant and important segment of the Ohio community and acknowledging the presence of her people and heritage. Interestingly, throughout the interview she never referenced her experiences in Cleveland, where she had lived most of her life before moving to Perrysburg. Northeast Ohio has the largest Puerto Rican population in the state, but when asked about her heritage she immediately referred to the island. This negotiation of identity, made it rather difficult for Lisette to fully explain what it meant to be of Puerto Rican descent in a place where she was obviously a minority.

Some of the other girls had an easier time answering this question. Perhaps it was an age difference that left Lisette at a loss of words, but it is notable that Lisette was also the only girl uninterested in having a quinceañera. Her disinterest does not mean she was any less Latina, but perhaps her disassociation with the celebration was in some way related to her difficulty articulating what it meant to be Latina in a city where Latino is almost always equated with Mexican. Sophia, on the other hand, referenced her family when I asked what it meant to be Latina. For example, Sophia spoke passionately about her Latino/a pride. A sixteen year old from what she describes as a “blended” family, when I asked how she thought her two sides of her family interacted with one another, Sophia shared,

I do see the cultural difference from the way my mom talks and the way that my dad talks. Some of the words are different. When it comes to holidays and stuff like Christmas, all of us just come together and we’ll have two different tamales, one with maíz and the other with hoja de platano. [The Nicaraguan tamales are called] nacatamales, and they have little raisins in them. There are some dishes that are different, but they’re still good…My mom had a cd and it had Nicaraguan music on it…It’s like an
upbeat type of music, like faster than salsa. There are a lot of drums, like bongos I think.

(230-46)

Sophia did not reference Mexican culture in too much detail during her interview. Perhaps she thought I was more knowledgeable of Mexican culture than Nicaraguan, but she obviously seemed to be in the process of learning more about the Nicaraguan part of her identity. When I asked whether she had Nicaraguan friends in Toledo, she said besides her family she really only knew one other young man. According to her, “he’s from Nicaragua, well not from, but his mom is. And he...was born Nicaraguense, so when he talks…you can tell. So I can relate sometimes more to him” (249-50). This segment of our interview exposes how Sophia articulates her ethnic identity, through an examination of food, music, and language, as well as issues of nationality. Sophia first acknowledges the language differences between her mother and father, an audible marker of ethnic identity. While they both spoke Spanish, Sophia was distinguishing different words and phrases used by each. Another common marker of ethnic identity is food and music. For a teen who is mostly interested in Mexican cumbias, of the sonidera type, and reggaeton, Sophia was learning more about what she refers to as her “mom’s nicaraguense music” (466-7). She seems to be hesitating to claim certain nicaraguense customs and traditions as her own. This is one way that Lisette and Sophia are similar. They both hesitate, to varying degrees, to claim their association with ethnic identities, defined in terms of national origin (i.e. Puerto Rican and nicaraguense). Sophia is still interested in learning more about her mother’s customs, but she has yet to begin defining herself through them.

My conversation with Sophia was also rich with stories about her experiences visiting Mexico and getting to know her father’s side of the family. When she was twelve years old she visited her grandmother in Cuernavaca Moreles. Immediately she began to notice the differences
between the resources available in the United States and those available in Mexico. Sophia explained,

It’s harder over there. You’ll see the difference, dirt roads and little ranchos and stuff, ranches. And they don’t have…my grandma didn’t have washing machines. So when I went down there I’d be like where can I wash my clothes and she’d say do it with your hands in lavaderos and stuff. I [would] scrub the clothes all neat. She’d be like no, keep cleaning. (282-6)

Here was a twelve year old girl from the city of Toledo visiting family in rural areas of Mexico. I am sure she never expected to not have the convenience of a washing machine. With that trip Sophia was able to understand where her family was living and where her father had come from. Her understanding of Mexican identity as she experienced in Toledo was quite different from what she was experiencing while visiting Mexico. Although people would suggest that being Latino/a and working class in Toledo is particularly challenging, Sophia instead believed life was “harder” over there. One of Sophia’s favorite things about her trips to Mexico was being able to stay home with her grandma and “talk with her about what life is like over here and life is over there” (279-80). This here and there that Sophia is articulating reflects her understanding of a movement from one world to another, both defining who she is. She is connecting with her grandmother while sharing a part of herself that her grandmother may not be familiar with.

Within this ethnic journey, Sophia is also witnessing a maternal connection between herself and her female family members. Hanging out with her grandmother occurred after choosing to enter the home and leave her boy cousins outside playing soccer. Sophia shares,

I grew up with a lot of boy cousins. So obviously going down there and I was like the only girl. They’ll play soccer on the pavement and I wasn’t used to it, so every time I
would fall and scrape my knee…it would hurt. And they’d be like no don’t cry, you big cry baby. And I’d be like whatever…I’d stay at home and get to know my grandma [instead]. (273-280)

While she may not have articulated it as such, her relationship with her boy cousins as well as using her grandmother’s home as a refuge were ways she was experiencing her gender identity. Being taunted as a cry baby gendered her differently from the boys. Boys were “supposed” to fall and pick themselves back up. Girls on the other hand were “supposed” to run home and seek refuge if they could not handle the outside “masculine” world. Perhaps Sophia’s cousins’ ed because girls were not “supposed” to play soccer in the first place. While she was taunted for being weak, her entrance into her grandmother’s home was a wonderful opportunity to explore her ethnic and gender identities. It is through entrance into this maternal network that Sophia began to understand what it meant to be a Mexican and/or Latina woman.

Kaila, born to a Puerto Rican mother and Mexican father, was more descriptive of her Puerto Rican heritage as opposed to her Mexican-ness. When asked what she liked about Puerto Rico, she, like Sophia, first referenced the food. She compared the weather in Ohio and Puerto Rico as an additional factor. According to Kaila, in Puerto Rico “there is nice weather all year long, [where in Ohio] it’s bad weather [and] you’re kind of forced to stay inside…[In Puerto Rico] it’s warm out there…you can go to the beach or go outside and go to the park…eat ice cream all year round” (212-4). While she enjoyed the idea of eating ice cream all year long, Kaila would still much rather live in Ohio because she would “rather be cold” (209). Although she simplistically defined a preference for Ohio on the basis of “wanting to be cold” I got the sense there were other factors motivating her response. She repeatedly mentioned having been little when she was in Puerto Rico and not “remember[ing] much,” but she seemed to be more
comfortable discussing her life in Ohio than any association to the island (202). While she seemed proud of being half Puerto Rican, she had very little connection to the island. It was more common for her to negotiate an ethnic identity through her interactions with friends. When I asked whether her Perrysburg friends had ever asked what it was like being Puerto Rican and Mexican, she explained that they had never really done so. Instead Kaila shares,

“They’ve come and eaten dinner with us a couple of times. And so they’ll ask me do you know how to cook and I’ll go yeah. They’re always really fascinated when I talk Spanish to my mom…They’ll go ‘I wish I could do that.’ And they’ll be like “I’m taking Spanish will you help me with it and tutor them and stuff (228-31).”

While speaking Spanish set her apart from her Perrysburg friends, she expressed excitement over being able to expose her peers to a different culture. As the main form of communication on the island, speaking Spanish tied her to her Puerto Rican identity. Their fascination with her ability to speak Spanish, made being different okay. Her friends connected cooking, a gendered activity, to an awareness of ethnic knowledge and customs. Knowing how to cook allowed Kaila the option of performing her racialized and gendered Latina identity. On the other hand, when I asked her what similarities exist between herself and the other Adelante youth, Kaila explained that, “our families are mostly the same…most of them are Mexican [and] our traditions are [similar]” (110-1). While Spanish set her apart from her Perrysburg friends, Latino/a traditions united her to her Toledo friends. When providing an example for how they experienced Latino/a traditions, Kaila shared that they would “laugh about the embarrassing stuff [their] families would do…[such as how during] Thanksgiving everybody would pig out and you’d go with your uncles and aunts that you haven’t seen in a long time and they’d be like ‘Oh my God you’re so big’ and they’d like embarrass you…” (114-5). Kaila therefore associated these embarrassing
moments as Latino/a and described them as a common experience between herself and other Adelante youth.

When asked to describe the commonalities and differences between her Perrysburg and Adelante friends, Kaila never suggested race as a factor. Instead the only difference she noticed was their taste in music. According to Kaila, “[her] Perrysburg friends are more into rock and the Toledo ones are more into Nelly and rap and stuff like that. But personality-wise everybody is just about the same…they like to have fun” (128-30). Perhaps she thought it was obvious, but I was perplexed as to why she would not address other differences. The most obvious one being their differing ethnicities, considering that most of the Adelante youth are of Mexican heritage and Kaila describes most of her Perrysburg friends as being from “France…Canada…and Hungary” (86-7). The musical difference Kaila was referring to, between rock and hip hop, can be her way of identifying and coding racial and ethnic differences. Despite these differences, Kaila felt most comfortable addressing their similarities. Aside from liking to have fun, according to her they all also shared an interest in art. While she enjoyed drawing pictures of flowers and nature in her Perrysburg art class, she compared that to the Adelante kids’ interest in drawing graffiti. Kaila was living in a suburban and fairly privileged reality, while attempting to juxtapose that with the more impoverished urban reality her Toledo friends were experiencing. Despite her privileged status, she was able to relate to the Adelante kids as a result of her shared ethnic experience.

While the girls valued being Latino/a and/or Hispanic, they were still quite aware of the stereotypes associated with their communities. When I asked Brenda what she thought people thought about Latinos, she responded that “some people look at us like we’re crazy” (550).
Latinos were crazy she explained that “some people think Latinos are all bad, [but] to be honest we all keep to ourselves” instead (552-3). She did not offer much clarification on that final comment of keeping to ourselves. I can speculate that she meant that Latinos/as were private people that mostly interacted with one another as a source of protection and comfort. Brenda obviously thought it was unfair that Latino/as were described as bad. Kaila was also frustrated by experiences of racism. She uses a recent trip to Texas as a means for explaining how racism affects Latinas. Kaila shared that,

When we went to Texas, we stopped at a gas station and they were like…we got like dirty looks from people there or something. So if [a Latina] were to go to college and they come across a racist professor…they might feel…their self-esteem might be put down like “Oh I could do this if only I wasn’t Spanish or something.” It would hurt their self-esteem not to do it. (538-541)

Although she does not suggest that it has occurred in her own school, one can speculate that Kaila recognized how racism could occur at any given moment and in different sorts of environments. While she had experienced it in a Texas gas station, she was aware that it could also occur when least expected in an academic environment. She was able to recognize how racism permeates different parts of our lives. This experience in Texas also made Kaila stronger. While it was unfortunate, Kaila realized that one must not allow it to affect one’s self-esteem, but instead needs to challenge and grow from those experiences.

INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND GENDER

While my general conversations with these young women offered evidence for how Latina girls negotiate race and ethnicity on a daily basis, it was through the Quinceañera Fashion Show and
their participation in the program that I learned the most about the intersections of race and gender.

T: So you don’t really try to wear many dresses at all?

L: No, I stay away from those. (Lisette 413-4)

I begin this section with Lisette’s story, precisely because it deviates the most from our typical impression of quinceañeras. Most studies on quinceañeras focus on the young women who are in the midst of planning their own celebration or at the very least are interested in the tradition. Lisette is neither planning a party, nor is she interested in the tradition in the very least. Lisette was also the only girl in my study who unapologetically had no interest in participating in the Quinceañera Fashion Show. It simply was not for her.

When I asked Lisette why she decided not to participate in the Quinceañera Fashion Show she explained that she was “not the dancing type, the dressing up type or like performing type. I just don’t…I’m not like that” (291). When I asked how she would describe herself she shared she was “an athletic person, that’s always outgoing and [doesn’t like dresses] so [she] would not like being in a dress” (293). Lisette is suggesting that she is not particularly interested in normative feminine expressions of gender. While she may not enjoy dancing or performing in public, she seemed most apprehensive about wearing a dress. A dress is one of the most distinguishing factors of femininity. The quinceañera dress is the defining feature of the ritual. The Adelante fashion show is primarily organized around the display of dresses and consequently the display of femininity. While there may have been male escorts, or chamberlanes, as they are called in Spanish, the young men occupied the peripheral space and the feminine became the focal point.
After asking Lisette to describe the purpose of the quinceañera and the fashion show, she responded that “[the quinceañera] is a traditional like Mexican 15th birthday. It’s like a sweet sixteen, but on your 15th birthday. [The fashion show] is when girls dress up and dance…and I think that’s it. They’ll dance and have a really nice dress to show off” (303-8). Lisette confirms that the dress becomes the focal point and a marker for performing femininity, but her comment also suggests that it becomes a marker for performing expressions of gender and ethnicity. As a Mexican tradition, the quinceañera racializes the young woman as Latina. She is performing her ethnic identity through a display of this Latino tradition. Lisette addresses this co-performance of gender and ethnicity when she shares what she understands as the importance of the celebration.

I think it represents instead of having a Sweet Sixteen they would really have a quinceañera. You get to show that’s the age that a teen becomes a woman. Or something like that…That it represents that they’re Mexican…that they’re Hispanic. And they’re representing the quinceañera. (310-5)

Even though she initially describes the tradition as Mexican, Lisette recognizes that it is actually a Latino/a custom. It is interesting that her initial impression of the quinceañera is a tradition of a specific nationality. Being a Puerto Rican teenager in a predominantly Mexican Northwest Ohio community, Lisette assumes the quinceañera has Mexican origins. During our interview she uses Mexican and Hispanic interchangeably. Perhaps this is another way for further separating herself from celebrating the tradition. While I think she recognizes that Puerto Ricans also celebrate the quinceañera, she still defines it as celebrated primarily by the Mexican community that surrounds her. When I asked Lisette how not participating in the Quinceañera Fashion Show has impacted her life she responded that, “it [made her] feel good a little bit, knowing [she was] part of that culture, but [she] just didn’t participate” (419). So, although I got the impression that she was
separating herself from the quinceañera by defining it as a Mexican tradition, her comment suggests, that to a degree, she did show some sort of affinity to the culture. According to Lisette, not participating makes “[her] feel different, [but] not everybody’s the same. Not all the Hispanics want to do a quinceañera” (421-2). While most quinceañera literature suggest economic factors hinder the planning of a quinceañera, Lisette is instead speaking on behalf of what is assumed to be a minority within the Latina community, but perhaps is not. Instead the factors influencing her disinterest in participating are precisely those that involve a performance of femininity. It is having to wear a dress and perform a traditional dance, that keeps Lisette from celebrating a quinceañera.

On the other hand, Lisette was the only girl in my study who decided she was not interested in the quinceañera. It was much easier to find young women who were fascinated with the tradition and did want to participate in the fashion show. My inability to find young women who were disinterested in the celebration, perhaps has more to do with the fact that I searched for participants in an environment organized around the quinceañera. Had I instead searched for participants in a girls’ soccer team, for example, I may have encountered more girls like Lisette. While I do not think my inability to find more young women like Lisette suggests that they do not exist, instead I put forward that perhaps there is a stigma attached to not wanting to celebrate this ethnic tradition. I believe there are ways young women are negotiating this stigma and I will discuss that further in the conclusion.

THE QUINCEAÑERA FASHION SHOW

T: Why is [the fashion show] important to [Latinas]?
B: I think they learn more from it what they are. To not be like everybody else…Because some girls they try to act[like] what they’re not. Some try to act white, some try to act black, but they’re not. I think it shows them that’s them and they should be who they are.

(Brenda 558-62)

Earlier, Lisette implied that the quinceañera was a means for performing gender expectations. Here, Brenda is suggesting that it can instead be a vehicle through which young women, Latinas specifically, define their ethnic identity. Brenda is apprehensive about young women who try to act like “what they’re not,” but she does not fully unpack what those differences are. Could not acting as a “proper” Latina mean not speaking Spanish, avoiding Latino/a foods and music, perhaps not dancing? Would Brenda go as far to suggest that Lisette was not acting as a proper Latina, because she was not interested in the custom? In the excerpt above Brenda is assuming racial categories are stable and mutually exclusive. She assumes there is only way to act like a Latino/a and that furthermore, that differs from what it means to act white and/or black.

Although I do not know what Brenda was referring to when she suggested that young women need to not act white or black, I speculate it had to do with behaviors and language styles often stereotypically associated with black/African American and white/Caucasian cultures. In an urban community where Caucasian, African American, and Latino/a youth express themselves similarly through music, vernacular and fashion, Brenda was concerned with marking what she thought was a significant difference between the communities. It seemed to have less to do with marking the difference between the communities than highlighting those qualities she felt made the Latino/a community unique.

Along with her apprehension about properly acting like a Latina, Brenda was also concerned with appropriately celebrating a quinceañera. Although Brenda was unable to
celebrate a quinceañera of her own, she explains this by saying she assumed that “it was only for Catholics” (364).

I’ve never really had a quinceañera before. I wanted one, but…I did not want it exactly…I’m Christian, and they told me you could still have one when you’re Christian, but at the time I didn’t know that. Like, if I had one I wanted everything-- like all the classes and getting the church and everything. But if I had one it would’ve just been the hall and the dance. And I wanted everything.” (353-361)

Brenda contradicts herself in this segment. Brenda chose not to have a quinceañera because she could not “do it right” and include “everything.” By everything I suspect she means all of the traditional elements associated with a quince celebration. On the other hand, this inability to “do it right” implies that one must “be like everybody else.” It implies there is only one way for “doing it right.” If one does not plan a quinceañera celebration, including all of the typical Latino/a elements, you run the risk of seeming less Latina. While she suggests it is dangerous to identify as a non-Latina, either African American or Caucasian, instead it is favorable to identify yourself solely in accordance with a Latina identity. This suggests that a young Latina should not want to be like African Americans and Caucasians, but should want to be like other Latinas.

Therefore, in the quote I reference at the beginning of this section, Brenda is suggesting that to be like non-Latinas is dangerous, because you stray from those factors that link you to your ethnic community. On the other hand, in this last quote to be associated with Latinas also involves a series of limitations. Being a “typical” Latina is not as accessible as she would have hoped. Brenda herself could not access the necessary connection to the Quince celebration and her ethnic identity precisely because she did not embody the religious qualities associated with the assumed standard Catholic celebration.
Although Brenda credits her inability to properly celebrate her quinceañera to being uninformed, I speculate that it also had a lot to do with economic factors. Quinceañeras are incredibly expensive, and while working at Adelante I witnessed first hand the sacrifices many parents made to organize these celebrations for their daughters. The closer a young woman is to reaching her fifteenth birthday, the more common it is for people to ask when and where it will be taking place, assuming all girls and their families will be and should be celebrating this occasion. Of course, this also carries the assumption that all families have the economic means to celebrate it. At 17, Brenda has already missed her chance to have her own personal celebration, but the Adelante fashion show allows her the opportunity to experience the splendor of a Quince.

When asked how she would define the purpose of the Quinceañera Fashion Show Brenda responds,

to show people what Latinos, what we do, what we celebrate. Instead of a Sweet Sixteen, it’s a quinceañera. We celebrate the growth of a woman, of the young Latina, a Latina showing how they’re becoming a woman and like going up to the next step, the next level. It’s like explaining what we do. (324-7)

This movement upwards that Brenda is suggesting is crucial to understanding why parents make the sacrifices they do for their daughters. The quinceañera signifies a passage into adulthood, but for the Latina it also implies an honoring of her ability to succeed. Sophia, for example, compared her Quince celebration to that of her mother’s back in Nicaragua. According to Sophia, “I guess I’m more privileged…when I look at the pictures, it’s like I had more cause mom has only one cake, one tower thing, and for me I look back at my pictures and it’s like 3 towers” (404-6). In other words, class is one way this next step is articulated. Sophia is therefore
associating class privilege with upward mobility. Her family is able to succeed by demonstrating their economic growth and privilege from one generation to the next. The family’s financial ability to pay for and organize such an elaborate event demonstrates the family’s economic success.

As Brenda suggests, a Latina’s ability to convincingly “wear [a] white dress…[that] symbolizes [the] purity of a young woman” also contributes to a Latino family’s ability to move up the social ladder (330). In other words, a girl’s sexual propriety, or at least the impression of sexual propriety, contributes to a family’s social status as well. This suggests that there is a lot riding on the quinceañera as a means for social mobility. Not only must a Latina negotiate and perform her gender there is also an increased burden upon her shoulders to function as the vehicle through which her family and perhaps even her ethnic group reaches that “next level.”

It was interesting to me that Brenda defined the purity of a young woman through a white dress. Pink and white dresses are the most common among quinceañeras, but Adelante’s fashion show incorporated a diversity of colors. According to Brenda, “some people had pink, like a light pink, red, red and white, gold and white, silver and white…baby blue and white” but the ones she liked the most were “the gold and white ones” which her cousin got a chance to wear (408-11). When I asked her what color her dress was, she laughingly responded red, as if she were somewhat embarrassed that it was not the traditional white color. Afterwards, I wondered whether this diversity in dress color could metaphorically represent the contemporary Latina. Would it be farfetched to suggest that diverting from the typical white dress challenged normative expressions of femininity? A suit would have been the ultimate challenge, but I suggest that this introduction of bold colors signifies a movement toward re-articulating Latina
identity. This re-articulation is obviously restricted by normative expressions of femininity, but it is a movement in a new direction.

Sophia, for example, used the figure of La Virgen de Guadalupe to define her presence at a quinceañera. While her dress was pink, she chose it because “it had the Virgen de Guadalupe” and describes herself as “a believer in the Virgen…[because] it kind of separated [her] from all the other dresses [and] from the girls that previously had quinceañeras” (349-52). According to Sophia her dress was,

big and pink. It was like silk type it was really shiny. I got it in Detroit, at Delia’s, yeah. And it was like, like one of the novelas, ancient novelas, like renaissance. And it had sleeves, embroidered really pretty. It didn’t have any straps on the shoulders. Strapless almost…it had in the back, it had flowers with beads, and then at the bottom it was embroidered with a special lace, and it had la Virgen de Guadalupe in the back. It was pretty. (341-5)

Sophia was the young woman I saw wearing a T-shirt with the image of La Virgen on the back during one of the fashion show practices. Although she never fully explained her fascination with La Virgen, it did hold cultural and religious significance for her. Sophia was the only young woman I interviewed who had celebrated a quinceañera. According to Brenda’s definitions, Sophia’s celebration was inclusive of “everything,” meaning Sophia had the traditional church ceremony, the multi-tiered birthday cake, the pink gown, the limo, the waltz and the crown. While Sophia did not have the Quince court, of fourteen young women escorted by fourteen young men, to represent each year in the quinceañera’s life, she did have four chamberlanes who served as her male escorts during the various segments of the ceremony. Sophia explained that she “danced practically by [herself], but would take turns dancing with all the chamberlanes” at
the formal party (336). The dress was Sophia’s most fond memory of that day, because it allowed her to display her belief in La Virgen.

La Virgen de Guadalupe demonstrates the intersections of race and gender most vividly. Sophia brought to my attention how her interview for my study happened to fall on December 12th, the feast day for la Virgen de Guadalupe. It seemed too perfect of a coincidence. La Virgen, a cultural marker for Mexican Catholics, has been regarded as a means by which Chicanos distance themselves from dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Messmer 260). Despite popular depictions of la Virgen as a source of emancipation for Mexicans, this often occurs while still imposing the inferiority of women (Messmer 260). Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, suggests that the Spaniards and the Catholic Church desexed Guadalupe, known by her Indian name Coatlalopecuh, and rescripted her as Virgen Maria, a chaste virgin (49-50). Thus, it seems rather fitting that Sophia would, on the day of her quinceañera, wear the image of La Virgen on her body to symbolize the purity of a young woman. While for Sophia it is a source of strength, feminists such as Anzaldúa challenge the constraints the image imposes on the female body. A young Latina is assumed to be heterosexual and is expected to remain chaste until her wedding night. This is one of the critiques of the quinceañera, as another source for imposing patriarchal restrictions unto a young woman. For a young woman like Sophia, La Virgen seems most significant because of the image’s connection to her ethnicity. Sophia was not wearing the image of La Virgen as a testament to her purity, but instead as a testament to her Mexican identity.

Given this connection the girls were drawing between the quinceañera and their ethnic identities, I asked Brenda whether she thought folks from other communities or cultures should also participate in quinceañeras. While she responded yes, her answer included a story of her cousin who happened to be of mixed heritage. Brenda shares,
I know some people that are mixed that do. Like my cousin, she recently had one and she’s black and Mexican. And some people thought it was weird because she looks kind of more black, you know, in a way. When we went to get her dress, she was getting fitted [and] someone was like “you’re having a quinceañera? I thought that was just for Mexicans” and looked at her funny… [My cousin] laughed about it and said, “shoot, I’m Mexican too. I’m going to show my Mexican side.” (523-8)

In this story, Brenda’s cousin was primarily using the quinceañera as a means for accessing a Mexican identity that she is often denied, as opposed to a way to perform her gender identity. As a woman of mixed heritage who appeared “more black” as Brenda described, the quinceañera served as a way to authenticate her Latina experience. That does not mean it was fully successful. While some people suggest that quinceañeras are princesses for the day, perhaps some might claim that Brenda’s cousin can be “authentically” Mexican for one day. Thus the quinceañera has the ability to reinforce a girl’s femininity as well as her connection to a particular ethnic identity. The quinceañera allows a young woman to possess a Latina identity.

In this section I examined how the Quinceañera Fashion Show had the ability to both affirm and negate an ethnic identity for young women. Participating in Adelante, girls are able to learn more about those cultural elements associated as Latino/a and/or specifically Mexican, through the various programs and workshops Adelante sponsors as part of their youth program. Therefore, learning about one’s culture is a means for affirming said ethnicity. On the other hand, a young woman of mixed heritage or a young Latina who does not fit the “typical” mold for what a Latina should look like might experience a negation of her ethnicity through the fashion show. The fashion show is an incredibly public display of identities. For example, a young woman who is phenotypically black, but ethnically Latina, might have a hard time
“convincing” the crowd of her authenticity. As each young woman walks down the runway she is being evaluated on her beauty and her ability to perform her ethnic and gender identity appropriately.

In addition to phenotype a young woman may have a hard time convincing a crowd of her virginal status as a quinceañera if she happens to be pregnant. While she can obviously identify as a girl, the gendered implications of chastity are complicated by a girl marked by sexual behaviors. For example, when I asked Brenda whether she had friends who wanted to participate but were unable to do so, she mentioned one friend who “ended up getting pregnant. She was pregnant at the time and was kind of big” (539-40). This story made me wonder what type of girl would be allowed to participate. Would a young woman who was either pregnant at the time or perhaps had a child be allowed to participate in the fashion show? In what ways was Adelante policing gender expression? Could the fashion show be a place where all young women are celebrated, regardless of circumstances that prevent them from being morally coded as “good girls?” In this context good refers to conducting oneself in what society might deem an age appropriate manner, such as being well behaved, respectful and virginal. Brenda did not think it was possible for her visibly pregnant friend to participate in the fashion show. I suspect that Adelante would also have an issue with a young woman who is known to be pregnant and/or have children participating in the fashion show.

Therefore, in this section I examine the limits of appropriate gender expression as allowed in the Quinceañera Fashion Show. I also draw connections between the quinceañera and those symbolic references to chastity, through the examples of La Virgen de Guadalupe and pregnancy. In this section it also becomes rather apparent how the limitations of Latina identity are manifested through the fashion show in the ways the girls identify appropriate Latina
behaviors. For example, religion was one area where the girls could articulate the limitations of a Latina identity. In both the case of La Virgen and in Brenda’s description of her inability to plan a quinceañera devoid of Catholic influences we are made aware of the policing of Latina identity through the misconception that all Latinas are of one religious background. There exists the misconception that all Latinas are Catholic and therefore this serves as another way young girls are policed and experience the limitations of a quince celebration. Many young women feel the need to celebrate their quinceañera through a religious ceremony because tradition has often dictated this approach. Therefore, Brenda, in not identifying as Catholic, did not think she could plan an appropriate quinceañera celebration if she could not also include a religious Catholic ceremony.

I started off this chapter examining intellectual growth and those experiences the young women in my study identified as most important to their school lives. I identified those segments in the interviews that drew connections between academic potential and the support of teachers. Next, I examined how the girls were describing their experiences with Adelante and the ways in which they became invested as leaders in their community. Afterwards I presented and analyzed those stories where the girls exposed having experienced and negotiated race and gender. Finally, I concluded this section by examining the intersections of gender and race and the ways the Quinceañera Fashion Show was defined by the young women in my study. How they articulated their participation in the fashion show is crucial to understanding the political decisions they made regarding gender and ethnic performativity.
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

My analysis reveals that Latina girls in Toledo Ohio are negotiating race and gender on a daily basis. Participants’ descriptions of school life, their families, Adelante, and the fashion show demonstrate that Latina identity is neither uniform nor devoid of serious challenges. The girls explored what it means to be Latina, Mexican, Puerto Rican and of mixed heritage. They shared their appreciation for the cultural customs, where food, music and fellowship were at the core of their interactions with family and friends. Despite their appreciation for the positive aspects of their culture, they were cognizant of how society defines Latino/a-ness and type casts them as deficient. In mainstream settings, young girls often feel the effects of racism and those stereotypes that align Latino/a people as “crazy” or “bad” (Brenda 550-2). Girls also experience the effects of sexism when they are socialized to believe they are weaker than men and taunted as “big cry bab[ies]” (Sophia 275). These young women constructed their identities around hierarchical structures that defined the standards by which they could define their femininity and ethnicity. Young girls are held to specific moral standards that require them to embody qualities that define them as innocent and nonsexual. Despite my interest in challenging this notion, the quinceañera birthday celebration, and as a result the Quinceañera Fashion Show, are instances where these social norms are upheld, for the most part.

PERFORMING GENDER

When I first began this study I was curious about the types of girls who were interested in a program like the fashion show. While the program focuses on the traditions associated with a quinceañera it automatically reproduces a normative performance of gender. The fashion show
displays young women who enjoy clothing, make-up and dancing. These are all normative qualities usually associated with girl culture. Of the three girls in my study who participated in the fashion show, Sophia was the only one that described a tension between being “girly” and a “tomboy.” When I asked Sophia why she chose her particular dress for the fashion show she answered, “[I chose pink.] Pink because I like a lot of pink. Sometimes I’m girly and sometimes I’m a tomboy. Pink because it stood out to me” (349). She was also the only other participant of the fashion show, in my study, who was interested in soccer. While she did not draw the connection between being a tomboy and liking sports, I suspect that had something to do with her comment. This tension between conflicting displays of girlhood are not presented in the fashion show, instead they are concealed. The fashion show simply reproduces the “girly” qualities and does not allow room for the expression of alternative performances of gender. The tension Sophia expresses is acceptable, as long as she ultimately aligns herself with the color pink, as she does.

In the introduction to this project I questioned how this newest incarnation of the quinceañera takes on a contemporary quality that positively influences the girls and their racial and gender identities. This example I highlight above, where Sophia is negotiating between appropriate and inappropriate gender roles for girls, demonstrates that the fashion show still reproduces normative performances of gender. The fashion show, by reproducing and associating typical “girly” elements with Latina young women, fails to fully challenge hegemonic structures. While the fashion show has many strengths, which I examine later in this section, one shortcoming is its inability to, as it currently stands, challenge normative codes of gender behavior and identification for girls. The fashion show became a display of femininity, precisely because of the importance of the quinceañera gown. While some of the girls
commented that they felt like princesses during the fashion show, it is this idea that a young woman must wear a beautiful gown to feel special that I think is problematic.

This notion of feeling like a princess made me wonder how the Latinas in my study saw the fashion show influencing little girls. When I asked the girls in my study who participated in the fashion show, what little girls might think after seeing them on stage, Brenda commented that it would encourage them to have a quinceañera because “of the dances [and the opportunity] to wear the pretty dresses and [be] together in a group of people” (480-1). Kaila thought young girls would probably see them “as role models” and “want to grow up and be like [them]” (440-1). She energetically responded that little girls would think “oh she’s pretty [and] must be important to be in something so big” (441-2). Both Kaila and Brenda are associating participation in the fashion show with popularity. This idea that a young Latina must wear something beautiful to feel special and to participate in the fashion show to be popular does not produce the empowerment I had hoped for the program. While I think it is incredibly important for Latina teens to want to become role models for the future generations, it would have been much more transformative if they could have defined themselves beyond a quinceañera gown and notions of beauty and popularity.

Lisette, on the other hand, was the only young woman, in my study, who decided not to participate because of her disinterest in these normative elements of girl culture. Lisette associated girl culture and the quinceañera with dancing and dressing up. According to Lisette, she is “not the dancing type, the dressing up type or performing type” instead, she describes herself as “an athletic person, that’s always outgoing and [doesn’t] like dresses” (291-3). She shared her disinterest in dresses in a very matter of fact way and was not apologetic in any way, which I appreciated. For Lisette, being an outgoing and athletic person does not equate well with
dancing and dressing up, the fundamentals of the fashion show. Lisette, unlike Sophia does not call herself a tomboy, but instead a girl who enjoys sports. Perhaps it is negative connotations associated with being a tomboy that prevent Lisette from aligning herself with the category. Being a tomboy is often looked down upon as it follows the gender roles typically associated with being a boy. On the other hand, perhaps Lisette is interested in transcending beyond typical ideas of gender for girls, and would instead like to embody those that seemed most important to her, regardless of societal impositions. In other words, by not identifying as a tomboy Lisette is defining her identity on her own terms.

Adelante did not purposefully develop a program like the fashion show to monitor the “appropriate” performance of gender for young women and men. On the other hand, the program was obviously influenced by societal definitions of femininity and masculinity. By reproducing displays of normative femininity and masculinity the fashion show does not challenge normative behaviors. The fashion show, while it encourages a sense of ethnic and pan-ethnic pride, does not successfully elicit pride in one’s articulation of gender, unless that gender performance meets normative expectations. Brenda, for example, thought the fashion show taught the girls how “to not be like everybody else,” but this did not make sense to me when the program was obviously defining what a typical quinceañera should and needs to look like (559). In other words, the fashion shown encouraged a young Latina to be proud of her ethnic and racial ties to the Latino/communities she is a part of, but none of my participants referenced how the fashion show might connect them to a community of girls or young women. Brenda encouraged young Latinas to “be yourself, have fun, live life,” but none of that involved direct suggestions for how a girl might re-envision her gender identity in empowering ways. And none of their stories
suggested that the fashion show had the ability to foster or allow for non-normative gender identities.

On the other hand, while the fashion show reproduced the performance of normative girl identity, there were elements that positively influenced Latina girls. The Adelante Quinceañera Fashion Show differs from the traditional quince celebration by showcasing a collective group of girls. The friendships nurtured through the girls’ participation in the fashion show encourage an appreciation for a collective group Latina identity. While the fashion show did not explicitly and purposefully encourage these relationships, they happened rather organically. Each young woman in this study enjoyed being part of a program that exposed the Latino/a presence in Toledo. They enjoyed being part of a youth community with Latino/a ties. They wanted to increase the visibility of the Latino/a community. An interest in representing Latino/a pride is one element all of the girls shared when asked to describe the purpose of the fashion show. While the traditional quinceañera celebration serves to introduce the birthday girl into society, albeit into her Latino/a community, the fashion show, on the other hand, serves to introduce the youth as members of a collective Latino/a population.

While my study suggests that the fashion show did not challenge hegemonic structures, as they define gender identity, it did challenge racial normativity, by centering Latino/a culture in the mainstream locations of a library and a mall. Adelante purposefully organized a fashion show in a public space where all types of people could learn about and enjoy quinceañera fashion. While it was a social event, the educational component that described the custom to the public and the incorporation of supposed “at-risk” Latino/a youth were both politically motivated components. When I asked Kaila what she thought motivated Adelante to organize the fashion show she shared,
I think it shows the good that Adelante does. If Adelante can take these kids and like keep them off the streets and keep them out of trouble in something like a fashion show that they could have fun with, then it shows that they care about the community and about the kids in the community. They probably want to promote people being proud of their culture and like just because you’re the only Spanish one in your group of friends or something it’s ok to show like your [pause] to still want [a quinceañera] because of the meaning of it. And just because your friends don’t have [one] you should still be proud of where you come from. (445-452)

According to Kaila, Adelante did not simply organize a social event, but was responding to the needs of the Latino/a youth community. This idea that Latino/a youth need to be kept off the streets and out of trouble is a legitimate concern that I heard expressed by staff members at Adelante and community members. While none of the girls in my study mentioned this, Adelante staff members have expressed concerns over gang life in Toledo. One of the reasons the Adelante after school programs exist is to offer youth an alternative social and educational outlet. The fashion show was part of that outlet. Thus, Adelante programs, including the fashion show work on challenging hegemonic structures by: (1) responding to the needs of the disenfranchised Latino/a community and (2) centering and honoring the values of those marginalized by hegemonic classes.

**Weaving Gender and Race**

My biggest critique of existing quinceañera literature is the lack of attention to the intersections of gender and race. Horowitz, for example, primarily focuses on ethnicity and those cultural elements in the quinceañera that further maintain “Mexicanness” (275). Davalos, on the other hand, does examine gender and ethnicity and those elements of the quinceañera that impose
ethnic and gender expectations upon young women. Yet once again, her study differs from mine by examining how young women experience their ethnic identity as Mexicanas and/or Mexican Americans, and not as Latinas. Alvarez incorporates a more pan-ethnic examination of Latina identities in quinceañeras, but does not thoroughly complicate how gender and race shapes Latina girls. Thus, in response, my study offers an examination of racialization and gendering as it affects Latina girls. While there is a prevailing Mexican American community in Toledo, I was fortunate to interview girls who identified as Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Nicaraguan, as well as of mixed backgrounds. Although my sample was small, with only four participants, their diverse backgrounds contributed to the richness of their stories and the various connections they developed to quinceañeras and the fashion show.

In order to surpass the shortcomings of other studies on quinceañeras, my approach utilized qualitative methods primarily because it offered me the option of centering the girls’ voices. I was also able to examine how girls shape and define their racial and gender identities, through a program that shapes and defines them according to normative displays of girlhood. My study differs from prior studies because it did not focus on a quinceañera birthday celebration, but instead the construction of a program with the goal of educating the public about a Latino/a custom. The fashion show’s primary goal is to display those quinceañera elements that define the Latino/a ritual. It shows the public what it means and looks like to perform a Latino/a identity. The fashion show’s focus on the public challenges the private and familial elements of the traditional quinceañera.

My study differs from other approaches to quinceañera literature because it examined various segments of the girls’ lives. I was most interested in learning how the girls connected their participation in the fashion show with those experiences at school, home, and in the
community. For example, two of the girls, Brenda and Sophia connected the fashion and experiences of gender with pregnancy. Brenda shared that one of her friends wanted to participate in the fashion show, but could not because “she was the pregnant at the time” (539). Sophia, dedicated a large segment of her interview to discussing all of the young women at her school who have recently come out as pregnant. Sophia remarked that she was “proud of [herself because she did not] want to get pregnant at this time” and instead wanted to “focus on [her] education” (151-3). Had I simply asked them to discuss their involvement in the fashion show I suspect I never would have gotten these rich stories about teen pregnancy. By exploring how the girls envision their family, school, and community lives I was able to craft a more complete picture about the effects of the Quinceañera Fashion Show and their experiences with gender and race.

While I had intended on examining how family life influenced the girls’ experiences with gender and race, I do not think my interview tactics were successful enough to encourage more elaborate stories along this theme. The girls mentioned their relationships to family members, but never fully discussed how this segment of their lives influenced their racial and gender identities. This is one focus of my study that got lost within my analysis. The limited data did not allow me to craft a thorough understanding about their experiences with family members.

One of my biggest interests was extending research about Latina girls beyond deficit models. Despite this, negative constructions of Latino/a identity were one of the most prevalent stories among my participants. The girls focused on pregnancy and inabilities to thrive academically. While three out of the four girls in my study excelled academically, this was not true of most of the fashion show participants. Adelante, primarily services disenfranchised youth, many of which have a difficult time academically. Hence, some of the concerns of the deficit
model that further stigmatizes Latino/a youth as intellectually challenged resurfaced in my study when Brenda shared her interest in improving academically. In a future study I would be interested in having a more mixed group of interviewees, in order to capture the experiences of the more academically challenged as well. Although academic challenges did surface in my analysis I do not think we should return to deficit models. Instead, I think we can talk about how Latina girls are: (1) defining the social problems that affect their communities and (2) finding ways for addressing and responding to these concerns in politically relevant ways. In other words, I do not think we should reproduce the idea that Latina girls are inferior and/or deficient in comparison to Caucasian girls, but instead, perhaps have different ways for articulating and responding to their lived experiences. For example, while teen pregnancy is often associated with Latina girls, perhaps a more worthwhile focus could be on how Latinas are negotiating their bodies, sexuality, and defining and responding to the needs of women and girls in their lives.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Consequently, my research can be useful to Adelante as they evaluate their designated goals and outcomes for servicing Latina girls, particularly as it relates to the Quinceañera Fashion Show. As it stands the Quinceañera Fashion Show primarily serves as a source of entertainment for its participants. The girl participants absolutely loved wearing the dresses and showcasing the styles to the public during the scheduled performances. Although each girl mentioned the requirement that each participant be involved with Adelante’s After School Program, none referenced academic success as a requirement of participation. None of the girls linked the academic component of the after school program to the fashion show. While the three girls that participated did reference an interest in academic success and did mention that all of the models
were required to attend Adelante after school programs they did not correlate their participation in the fashion show to a strengthening of academic skills. Instead, the fashion show served as an entry point to academic success. By becoming involved in the fashion show as a social outlet they, in turn, learned more about Adelante and its mission to empower Latino/a youth. One source of this empowerment is academic success. I think Adelante can do a better job at making those connections for the youth and have candid conversations about how teens see academic empowerment occurring as a result of their participation in the fashion show. If they do not see the connection, Adelante can work with the students to create more deliberate moments where academic success can be discussed in relation to the fashion show.

Another element the girls in my study did not reference were workshops catered to educating about Latino/a issues. While the event had the goal of educating the public about a Latino/a custom, I do not think there ever existed a moment where the youth could fully examine what takes place during a quinceañera and what social and political concerns one might have with its celebration. In other words, I do not think Adelante discussed, in detail, if at all, how class, race, gender, and sexuality are experienced and transformed through the fashion show. These are elements I believe will transform how the event is experienced by the youth. I suggest that the event needs to move beyond superficial articulations of fashion, style, and materialism to involve more complicated conversations about the state of Latino/as in Toledo and across the nation. Introducing these political elements will strengthen the program and perhaps motivate students to become better leaders in the community. Although the community service component contributes to this idea, I suggest Adelante initiate deliberate conversations about Latino/a affairs to further nurture this interest in the social and political factors influencing the Latino/a community. I think there is an extreme potential for engaging with young women and young men
around issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality. My research reflects the various ways young women are experiencing stereotypes, sexual identities, and expressions of Latina-ness in their daily lives. The Quinceañera Fashion Show provides a wonderful opportunity for engaging these girls in conversations with similar themes. It has the ability to strengthen gender and ethnic identities in a society that often stigmatizes young women. Unfortunately it does not fully realize its potential to celebrate diverse Latina identities by reproducing hegemonic expressions of normative gender performances.

One way Adelante could expand its contribution to Latina girls is by including alternative displays of Latina identity. This way, it would challenge young women to define their social realities, as opposed to meeting normative expectations. For example, a fashion show that would most totally challenge normative gender performances could include alternative clothing to be worn during the quinceañera celebration. As a staff member at Adelante I encountered many teens interested in planning the perfect quinceañera. I noticed that not all girls seemed interested in wearing gowns, but instead wanted the option of wearing a pants set or even a jogging outfit. Lisette, for example, remarked that during her fifteenth birthday she would like to instead wear “nice pants and a nice shirt” and then “change into nice jeans and a shirt” during the latter half of the party (349-50). Lisette’s story encouraged me to think outside of the traditional scope of the quinceañera, to envision how alternative articulations of Latina girl identity could be performed. What if instead of a group of young women modeling expensive and colorful quince gowns they could have the option of modeling alternative fashions and redefining how they encountered the quinceañera. I think the fashion show could provide an opening for girls to decide whether they want to wear pants, dresses or any other type of outfit. I do not mean that we should completely
do without the gown, but instead I would like the young women to decide and define how they would like to perform and present their gender and racial identity.

Another way Adelante could expand its contribution to different Latina identities is by offering behind the scenes opportunities for young people uninterested in modeling outfits. It could create a series of youth committees in charge of designing the production of the show as well as those cultural elements Adelante would like to present to the Toledo community. I think there are other ways Adelante could involve different types of youth, beyond simply participating in the fashion component and/or the dances. For example, as I mentioned in earlier chapters, one of the components of the fashion show were the resource tables at the library. One possibility is to have a couple of students involved with contacting local agencies interested in working with the Latino/a community in more deliberate ways. A couple of the girls mentioned an interest in community service, perhaps this is one segment of the planning that could involve young people interested in designing service projects as well as dialoging with local agencies,

Consequently, my goal in this study was to expose how young women were redefining their racial and gender identities. My findings suggest that the girls still have very little control over how they define themselves and negotiate their participation in events such as the fashion show. I found evidence for how the girls were being gendered and racialized by segments of society, but very few stories where the girls were gendering and racializing themselves in empowering ways. Exposing these conversations and developing events catered around girl agency and empowerment has the potential for transforming how Latina girls envision their intellectual potential and contributions to society. While I wanted to see how the fashion show transformed young women, the strongest element of growth actually took place outside of the event through the after school programming. Participating in the mentoring component
encouraged the girls to become more intellectually responsible and academically successful. Brenda, for example, felt like more of a leader, not because of her involvement with the fashion show, but as a result of her role in the after school program. Brenda described her role in the after school program as being “a leader in that group” and moments where nobody is paying attention she “gets aggravated” and informs her peers that they “need to learn this” (307-11).

Does the quince celebration and the Quinceañera Fashion Show strengthen Latina girl identities? Yes, but it mostly accomplished this by encouraging the girls to define and negotiate their ethnic and racial identities. In fact, it was not their experiences as young girls that strengthened their identity, but instead their experiences as young Latina girls that motivated them to have cultural pride. The girls often referenced this idea that their existed a “Latino/a voice.” For example, when I asked Sophia what the Toledo Latino/a community thought was important about the fashion show she remarked, “I think it means Latinos are still out there and representing. And just keeping their voice heard” (563-4). This cultural pride and interest in exposing the Latino/a voice is what offered the girls a chance to strengthen their identity as Latina girls. One aspect the ritual is lacking is a clear definition of gender performance beyond normative structures. Girls are conditioned to perform beauty and innocence. They are not being encouraged to define their own realities and formulate how they would like to present themselves to society as responsible and social human beings. Young women are not being afforded the opportunity to define what it means to be a girl and to challenge oppressive articulations of femininity. In other words, I think girls would benefit from being encouraged to define both their ethnic and gender identities and the intersections of the two. Girls should have more control over how they define their racial and gender identities and be afforded the opportunity to challenge those hegemonic structures that impose normative expectations.
I argue that the quinceañera can do those things. It can challenge a young woman to nurture her identity as a Latina, it simply needs to be re-envisioned to do so. In the future I would enjoy seeing a quince celebration where girls are discussing how gender influences every aspect of their lives. I would love to see girls challenge oppressive notions of beauty and chastity that do not recognize the importance of healthy associations between their bodies and their social worlds. I would love to see girls thoroughly examine how a healthy mind and body encourages a healthy community. A young woman could also choose to disassociate herself from the quinceañera and develop different ways for articulating her ethnic and gender identity. I think choosing not to participate in the quinceañera is also one way young women can define their connections to Latina identity. I do not think everyone needs to celebrate it to nurture a positive Latina identity. Instead, it might be an option for some young women to find other ways for expressing their Latina-ness, whether it is participation in a soccer league or their role as a musician. My purpose for examining the fashion show specifically was to explore how the quinceañera could transform Latina experiences with race and gender. That does not mean it is the only or the best way to do so. Overall, I think girls need to be afforded the opportunity to celebrate those components of their identity that are most important to them, therefore becoming producers of their own realities and capable of defining what that reality should and needs to look like.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A. CONSENT LETTER FOR PARENTS: SPANISH

Hoja de Consentimiento para Padres

Mi nombre es Tamara Serrano y soy un estudiante de maestría en el programa del Estudio de la Cultura Americana en la Universidad de Bowling Green State. Estoy invitando a que su hija participe en un estudio académico que documentara las experiencias de niñas latinas en Toledo, Ohio. El propósito de mi investigación es examinar el rol de Quinceañeras en las vidas y experiencias de niñas Latinas.

La participación de su hija es completamente voluntario y consiste de su participación en un entrevista que durara 1 ½ horas. La entrevista se realizara en un lugar mutuamente decidido. La entrevista estará enfocada en las experiencias de su niña en la escuela, en el hogar y en la comunidad. También examinare sus experiencias con el Quinceañera Fashion show de Adelante. La entrevista será grabada con una cinta de audio digital. Adicionalmente, hay la posibilidad que contacte a su niña después de la entrevista para pedir que ella clarifique o elabore sus respuestas.

La participación de su hija en esta investigación me ayudara mejor entender las experiencias de niñas Latinas y como sus escuelas, hogares y comunidades ejercen influencia sobre sus vidas. Entendiendo mejor las experiencias de su niña también me ayudara entender el rol de actividades como el Quinceañera Fashion show en la vida de su niña. Los riesgos en participar en esta investigación son mínimas, no más grande que aquellas experiencias que su niña suele tener en su vida diaria.

La confidencialidad de la identidad de su niña será cuidadosamente protegida y cualquier mención de su nombre o algunas otras cualidades específicas serán removidas o codificadas en la transcripción escrita de la entrevista o de alguna presentación de materiales. Cuando citando textualmente las respuestas de su niña reemplazaré su nombre con un pseudónimo. Grabaciones de la entrevista serán guardadas en mi computadora privada. La transcripción escrita de la entrevista será asegurada, y solamente la investigadora y la consejera de la maestría podrán tener acceso directo. Les voy a facilitar una copia de esta hoja de consentimiento para usted y su niña.

En cualquier momento durante la entrevista su niña tiene el derecho no contestar alguna pregunta. Su niña tiene el derecho de irse en cualquier momento durante la entrevista. Dejando la entrevista no resultara en ninguna penalidad o pérdida de beneficios al cual su niña tiene el derecho. Su decisión al participar o no participar en este estudio no afectara la relación su niña tiene con Adelante o con el Quinceañera Fashion show.

Preguntas o preocupaciones sobre este estudio pueden ser dirigido a Tamara Serrano (tserran@bgnet.bgsu.edu) o la consejera de la tesis Susana Peña (419-372-7117, susanap@bgnet.bgsu.edu). Si tiene alguna pregunta sobre la conducta de este estudio o su derecho como padre de un participante de la investigación, podrá contactar al Director del Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).
Su firma indica que usted a sido informado sobre lo de esperarse de la participación de su niña en esta investigación, que todas sus preguntas o preocupaciones han sido contestadas y que su niña participa de manera completamente voluntaria. Su firma también indica que usted le da permiso a que su niña participe en este estudio.

______________________________  ________________________________
Firma                                             Nombre con letra de molde

______________________________
Fecha
APPENDIX B. CONSENT LETTER FOR PARENTS: ENGLISH

Parental Informed Consent Form

My name is Tamara Serrano and I am an American Culture Studies graduate student at Bowling Green State University. Your daughter has been invited to be in a research study that will document the experiences of Latina girls in Toledo, Ohio. This study is being conducted as a thesis project for my Masters graduate program. The purpose of my study is to examine the role of Quinceañeras in the lives and experiences of Latina girls.

Your daughter’s participation in this study is voluntary and will involve participation in an interview that will last about 1½ hours. The interview will take place in an agreed upon location. The interview will focus on your daughter’s experiences as a Latina in school, at home and in her community, and her level of involvement with the Adelante, Inc. Quinceañera Fashion show. The interview will be audiotaped. Additionally, I may contact your daughter after the interview to ask for clarification or elaboration on her responses.

Your daughter’s participation in this study will help me further understand the experiences of Latina girls and how their schools, homes and communities influence their lives. Understanding your daughter’s experiences also may help me understand the role of activities such as the Quinceañera Fashion show in your daughter’s life as a Latina girl. The risks of participating in this study are minimal, no greater than those your daughter may come across in normal daily life.

The confidentiality of your daughter’s identity will be carefully protected and any mention of her name or any other identifying features will be removed or coded in the written transcripts of the interview and any presentation materials. When using a quote from your daughter’s interview I will replace her name with a pseudonym. Recordings of the interview will be stored in my private computer. The interview transcripts will be secured so that only the researcher and the thesis advisor will see them. The audiotapes will be erased once the study is completed. You and your daughter will be provided with a copy of your respective consent documents for your records.

At any time during the interview, your daughter can choose not to answer any question asked. Your daughter has the right to leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which your daughter is entitled. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your daughter’s relationship with Adelante, Inc. or the Quinceañera Fashion show.

Additional questions or concerns about this study may be directed to Tamara Serrano (tserran@bgnet.bgsu.edu) or the thesis advisor Susana Peña (419-372-7117, susanap@bgnet.bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a parent of a research participant, you may contact, the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have been informed about what is expected of your daughter as a participant in this study, that all of your questions and concerns have been
answered, that your daughter’s participation is entirely voluntary and that you agree to allow your daughter to participate in the study.

_________________________________________  ____________________________________________
Signature                                      Printed Name

_________________________________________
Date
APPENDIX C. CONSENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS: SPANISH

Hoja de Consentimiento para Participante

Mi nombre es Tamara Serrano y soy un estudiante de maestría en el programa del Estudio de la Cultura Americana en la Universidad de Bowling Green State. Te estoy invitando a que participes en un estudio académico que documentará las experiencias de niñas Latinas en Toledo, Ohio. El propósito de mi investigación es examinar el rol de Quinceañeras en las vidas y experiencias de niñas Latinas.

Tu participación es completamente voluntario y consiste de tu participación en un entrevista que durara 1 ½ horas. La entrevista se realizará en un lugar mutuamente decidido. La entrevista estará enfocada en tus experiencias en la escuela, en el hogar y en la comunidad. También te preguntare sobre tus experiencias con el Quinceañera Fashion show de Adelante. La entrevista será grabada con una cinta de audio digital. Adicionalmente, hay la posibilidad que te contacte después de la entrevista para pedir que clarifiques o elabores tus respuestas.

Tu participación en esta investigación me ayudara mejor entender las experiencias de niñas Latinas y como sus escuelas, hogares y comunidades afectan sus vidas. Entendiendo mejor tus experiencias también me ayudara entender el rol de actividades como el Quinceañera Fashion show en tu vida. Los riesgos en participar en esta investigación son mínimas, no más grande que aquellas experiencias que sueles tener en tu vida diaria.

No usare tu nombre en este estudio. En otras palabras, la confidencialidad de tu identidad será cuidadosamente protegida y cualquier mención de tu nombre o algunas otras cualidades específicas serán removidas o codificadas en la transcripción escrita de la entrevista o de alguna presentación de materiales. Cuando citando tus respuestas reemplazaré tu nombre con un pseudónimo. Grabaciones de la entrevista serán guardadas en mi computadora privada. La transcripción escrita de la entrevista será asegurada, y solamente la investigadora y la consejera de la maestría podrán tener acceso directo. Les voy a facilitar una copia de esta hoja de consentimiento para ti y para tu padre o madre.

En cualquier momento durante la entrevista tienes el derecho no contestar alguna pregunta. Tienes el derecho de irte en cualquier momento durante la entrevista. Dejando la entrevista no resultara en ninguna penalidad o pérdida de beneficios al cual tienes el derecho. Tu decisión al participar o no participar en este estudio no afectara tu relación con Adelante o con el Quinceañera Fashion show.

Preguntas o preocupaciones sobre este estudio pueden ser dirigido a Tamara Serrano (tserran@bgnet.bgsu.edu) o la consejera de la tesis Susana Peña (419-372-7117, susanap@bgnet.bgsu.edu). Si tiene alguna pregunta sobre la conducta de este estudio o tu derecho como participante de la investigación, podrá contactar al director del “Human Subjects Review Board,” de la universidad de Bowling Green State (419-372-7716, hsr@bgnet.bgsu.edu).
Su firma indica que usted a sido informada sobre lo de esperarse de tu participación en esta investigación, que todas tus preguntas o preocupaciones han sido contestadas y que tu participación es voluntaria. Tu firma también indica que consientes participar en este estudio.

______________________________  ______________________________
Firma                                   Nombre con letra de molde

______________________________
Fecha
APPENDIX D: CONSENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS: ENGLISH

Participant Informed Consent Form

My name is Tamara Serrano and I am an American Culture Studies graduate student at Bowling Green State University. You are invited to be in a research study that will document the experiences of Latina girls in Toledo, Ohio. This study is being conducted as a thesis project for my graduate program. The purpose of my study is to examine the role of Quinceañeras in the lives and experiences of Latina girls.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will involve participation in an interview that will last about 1½ hours. The interview will take place in location place we both agree upon. The interview will focus on your experiences as a Latina in school, at home and in your community, and your level of involvement with the Adelante, Inc. Quinceañera Fashion show. The interview will be audiotaped. Additionally, I may contact you after the interview to ask for clarification or elaboration on your responses.

Your participation in this study will help me further understand the experiences of Latina girls and how their schools, homes and communities influence their lives. Understanding your experiences also may help me understand the role of activities such as the Quinceañera Fashion show in your life as a Latina girl. The risks of participating in this study are minimal, no greater than those you come across in normal daily life.

I will not use your name in any part of this study. I will protect the confidentiality of your identity. Your name or any other information that would identify you will NOT be used in any written materials or presentations. If I quote you in my study, I will use a pseudonym. I will store recordings of the interview on my personal computer. Only my advisor and I will have access to the transcripts of the interview. I will erase the recordings once the study is complete. I will provide you a copy of this consent document for your records.

If at any time during the interview, you do not want to answer any question asked or you want to stop participating in the study, that is OK. You have the right to leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Adelante, Inc. or the Quinceañera Fashion show.

Additional questions or concerns about this study may be directed to me, Tamara Serrano (tserran@bgnet.bgsu.edu) or my thesis advisor Susana Peña (419-372-7117, susanap@bgnet.bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact, the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have been informed about what is expected of you as a participant in this study, that all of your questions and concerns have been answered, and that your participation is entirely voluntary and that you agree to participate in the study.
APPENDIX E. OBSERVATION PROTOCOLS

Observation Protocols

Observations sites: Quinceañera Fashion show dance practices and public Quinceañera Fashion show events at the Main branch of the Toledo Library and Westfield Toledo Mall, respectively.

1. Researcher will not participate, in a formal capacity, in the development of the Adelante, Inc. Quinceañera Fashion show. Tasks performed while observing participants will be limited to minimal non-partisan assistance (i.e. general set-up and clean-up tasks).

2. Researcher expects to engage in a friendly manner with participants and organizers, while still limiting any possible voiced judgment or personal opinion that might drastically affect the naturally occurring events.

3. Researcher will respectfully observe one-on-one and group interactions between the girls, the organizers, their families and the public.

4. Researcher will carry around a pen and notebook and periodically jot down the necessary field notes for later analysis.
APPENDIX F. RESEARCHER SCRIPT

Researcher Script

Soliciting Participants in person-

**Researcher:** Hi (girl’s name). My name is Tamara Serrano. I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University, where I am working on my Master’s thesis. For my final graduate project, I am interested in interviewing Latina girls about their lives. Since Adelante sponsors a Quinceañera Fashion show every year, I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn about your experiences participating (or not participating in this program).

Isaac Ohertman and Ann Pasquanelly, the staff organizers for the Quinceañera Fashion show suggested I contact you and see whether you would be interested in talking to me about your experiences. The interview will take approximately 1 ½ hours and will focus on your experiences as a Latina girl in school, at home, and in your community. The interview will also focus on your involvement with the Adelante, Inc. Quinceañera Fashion show. I will be interviewing anywhere from 10 to 15 girls who have decided to participate or not participate in the Quinceañera Fashion show.

Here is a flyer with more information about my project. If you are interested in participating, I will need to have you and your parent/legal guardian consent to your participation in my study. Here is a copy of the participant informed consent document and the parental informed consent document in both Spanish and English. If you are interested in participating, you can email me at tserran@bgsu.edu or leave me a message at Adelante at 419-244-8440. If you would like me to talk to your parent/legal guardian directly so that I can explain the project and review the consent form I can do that as well. If you would like to provide me with a phone number and contact information I can use to reach your parent/legal guardian directly that would be helpful.

I look forward to hearing back from you!
APPENDIX G. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Guide

Objective

The purpose of my study is to examine the role of Quinceañeras in the lives and experiences of Latina girls from Toledo, Ohio. The interview will focus on the participant’s experiences as Latina girls in school, at home and in her community, and their level of involvement with the Adelante, Inc. Quinceañera Fashion show.

Interview Procedure

1. Introduce myself, the project and my objectives of study
2. Receive parental consent to participate
3. Provide procedural guidelines for the interview
4. Discuss confidentiality and establish informed consent to participate in study
5. Answer any questions participants may have about the study
6. Establish rapport with participant
7. Begin asking interview and follow-up questions

Semi-structured Interview Questions (including follow-up questions)

A. General Biographical Questions
   1. What is your name?
   2. How old are you?
   3. How would you describe your ethnic or racial background?
   4. What school do you attend and what grade are you in?
   5. How long have you lived in Toledo, OH?

B. Family Questions
   1. Has your family always lived in Toledo, OH?
   2. How would you describe your family?
   3. Follow-up: Are you closest to any specific family member? If so, how would you describe your relationship with that person or persons?
   4. How is your family involved in different aspects of your life?

C. School Questions
   1. How would you describe your school life?
   2. How would you describe your teachers?
   3. Follow-up: Are there any teachers or counselors you are closest to? If so, how would you describe your relationship with that person or persons? If you are not close to anyone, why do you think that is?
   4. How would you describe your classmates at school?
   5. Are any of your classmates also your friends? What is your relationship like with these people?
   6. Do you see and/or hang out with your school friends outside of school?
7. Do you have any favorite subjects or subjects you do not really like? Why is that? Describe them.
8. Have you completed any projects in your favorite subjects that are most memorable?

D. Community Questions
1. What has your experience been like as a teen in Toledo, OH?
2. What communities are you a part of?
3. Are family members or friends also a part of these communities?
4. What kind of activities are you involved in as part of this community?
5. Are you involved in cultural activities? If so, describe some of them.

E. Quinceañera Questions
1. Are you participating in the Quinceañera Fashion show? If yes, why did you decide to participate? If no, why did you decide not to participate?
   i. Participant
      1. How did you decide to get involved?
      2. What is your role in the program?
      3. What is the Quinceañera Fashion show about?
      4. What does it mean to you to participate in the Quinceañera Fashion show?
      5. Do you think it means the same thing to all of the participants? In what ways?
      6. Are any of your friends, school friends or siblings also participating?
      7. Follow-up: Would you have gotten involved if none of your friends had been participating?
      8. Are there any requirements for participation in the Quinceañera Fashion show?
      9. Where will you be performing/Where did you perform?
     10. What do you think the community thinks about this program?
     11. If other teens saw the program what do you think they would think?
     12. If little girls saw the program what do you think they would think?
     13. What do you think Adelante, Inc. thinks about this program?
     14. How, if in any way, would you change or modify this program?
     15. What did you like the most about this program? What did you like the least about this program?
     16. Would you encourage more friends to participate in future years?
     17. What does your family think about you participating in this program?
     18. Do you think this program is important for the Latino community?
     19. Do you think it is important for Latina girls? Do you think it is important for other girls like you?
     20. What programs do you think are important to the Latino community?
     21. What programs do you think are important for Latina girls and/or girls like you?
   ii. Non-participant
      1. What is the Quinceañera Fashion show about?
2. How would you describe your reasons for not participating?
3. How would you describe what it means to be in the Quinceañera Fashion show?
4. Do you think it means the same thing to all of the participants? In what ways?
5. Are any of your friends, school friends or siblings participating?
6. Are there any requirements for participation in the Quinceañera Fashion show?
7. What do you think the community thinks about this program?
8. If other teens saw the program what do you think they would think?
9. If little girls saw the program what do you think they would think?
10. What do you think Adelante, Inc. thinks about this program?
11. How, if in any way, would you change or modify this program?
12. Do you think this program is important for the Latino community?
13. Do you think it is important for Latina girls? Do you think it is important for other girls like you?
14. What programs do you think are important to the Latino community?
15. What programs do you think are important for Latina girls and/or girls like you?

F. Concluding Questions
1. How has participating in the Quinceañera Fashion show impacted your life?
2. How has not participating in the Quinceañera Fashion show impacted your life?
3. Based on your experiences participating or not participating in the Quinceañera Fashion show what final words would you share with Latina girls everywhere?