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Puberty and Possibility: Comics, Quinceaneras, and *Quince* as Visionary Fiction

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Latin American Studies

by

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The Thesis of Amelia Campbell is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Puberty and Possibility: Comics, Quinceaneras, and *Quince* as Visionary Fiction

by

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The transformative process of adolescence plays an enormous role in shaping personal identity and worldview. Cultural celebrations such as the quinceañera contribute to this transformation and provide a framework for understanding how the process of growing up is informed by ethnic heritage, socioeconomic status, and family relationships. In what follows, I examine Sebastian Kadlekic's, Emma Steinkelner's, and Kit Steinklener's comic book *Quince*, in which a fifteen-year-old girl receives superpowers at her quinceañera, as a representation of the transformative potential of the quinceañera. I suggest that it can and should be read as a piece of visionary fiction, as popularized by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne marie brown: it is work that creates a new reality and paves the way for the physical manifestation of such a reality. Using writings about quinceañeras as a guiding context for visual and textual analysis of the comic itself, I hope to demonstrate the significance of *Quince* as a hopeful vision of the future.

Introduction

In 2018, *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* introduced a cinematic first—a Black, Latinx (or Blatino) Spiderman. Miles Morales' cultural identity in the movie is somehow simultaneously almost incidental, as there is really no mention of race or ethnicity in relation to his role as Spiderman, and a crucial element of the plot, given that his family and his relationship with them are the main motivators of his actions. One reason this story is so compelling is the relationship between teenage Miles and the various Spidermen (and other Spider-entities) that he encounters, who have already been through the transformation process and are eager to offer him advice about the superhero lifestyle, as well as about his own personal development. As *Into the Spiderverse* poignantly demonstrates, adolescence as a whole is a time of transition, perhaps comparable to that of being bitten by a radioactive spider and developing superpowers: physically uncomfortable, disillusioning, and taxing, but also extremely exciting and potentially empowering.

Moments of transformation are crucial to both media about the teenage experience and to the real-life process of the transition from child to young adult and can also encompass other elements of identity building in cases when these transformative moments are culturally specific. One example is bar and bat mitzvahs, which carry cultural and religious significance. This tradition also involves community participation and spending money, and it hinges on a specific day: the transition from child to woman or man occurs on a timetable prescribed by the religious ceremony and the party that follows. A similar practice is found in many Latin American countries but will be specifically examined here in its U.S. context.: the tradition of the quinceañera, or celebration of the fifteenth birthday of a young woman. The quinceañera traditionally involves a religious ceremony but is more often than not centered on the celebration

that follows. The principle remains the same, however: by the end of that night, the adolescent being celebrated will be labeled as 'transformed.' But the question remains if the adolescent in question will feel that they have successfully completed this transition, purely through the process of being celebrated as such.

There is a great deal of media about quinceañeras, as it is a widely accepted and celebrated tradition. The convergence of the quinceañera as cultural tradition that is believed to be based in syncretism of indigenous practices with Spanish colonial customs and the process of migrant assimilation produces a wide variety of media products that investigate the quinceañera as it relates to identity, maturation, and self-expression.[1] The contemporary understanding of the quinceañera, as well as the media that represent it and the consumer culture that surrounds it, are influenced by the process of recreating and preserving ethnic heritage, while at the same time, assimilating to a consumer-driven, neoliberal culture.[2] Even the various rumored origins of the quinceañera—some say it comes from the Aztecs, others say it is from the Mayans, and still others claim the Austrian empress of Mexico as its originator (Salcedo xi)—reveal the multifaceted nature of this tradition as both fitting into the category of established tradition, while carving out a new space for itself and those it celebrates.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to adequately explore the contemporary quinceañera without acknowledging the way this tradition has been shaped by shifting cultural context, particularly the convergence of Latin American identity and heritage with the U.S. economic landscape. My assertion that the quinceañera demonstrates a combination of established tradition with the act of carving out a new space for the tradition's celebrants is

[1] Some of these media products are academic studies of the quinceañera which will be discussed shortly, like Rachel Valentina González's *Quinceañera Style: Social Belonging and Latinx Consumer Identities* and Julia Alvarez's *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA*. See footnote 4 for more examples of quinceañera stories.
[2] See Rachel González-Martin's "Barrio Ritual and Pop Rite: Quinceañeras in the Folklore–Popular Culture Borderlands" in the *Routledge Companion to Latino/a Popular Culture* for a thorough investigation of this question.

supported by Rachel Valentina González's statement in Chapter 1 of her book *Quinceañera Style: Social Belonging and Latinx Consumer Identities* that "Quinceañeras use personal style within tradition to change their environments rather than change themselves." Creating space within tradition requires effort on behalf of the celebrant as well as her family–and this means that the celebration is inherently dependent on economic status, evidenced as González continues that "Quinceañera style comes with an aura of upscale Latinidad" (29).

Though not all quinceañeras are created equal in terms of cost,[3] the very nature of the celebration–a large party in which an essential part of the ritual itself–requires at least some spending. The quinceañera then becomes a way to demonstrate a family's economic success, which, in many Latinx experiences, has ties to immigration to the U.S. Norma Cantú writes in "Chicana Life-Cycle Rituals" that the quinceañera "has changed as it evolves in immigrant communities in the United States" (25), a phenomenon which can perhaps be attributed to an observation by novelist Julia Alvarez comments in her book *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA:* "Rock bottom, the U.S. quinceañera is powered by that age-old immigrant dream of giving the children what their parents had never been able to afford back where they came from" (4). She later states that "while the quinceañera is touted as a marker of ethnicity, it is in many ways an ethnicity with a label that reads MADE IN THE USA" (116). While the quinceañera pays homage to a specific cultural background, in some ways it only became what it is known as today when it began to manifest in the U.S. as a result of Latin American immigrants incorporating their cultural heritage with a new socio-economic landscape.

In light of this dynamic, and for the sake of specificity, my investigation of the quinceañera tradition and its representation will focus on media produced in the United States. I will also rely on the term 'Latinx' to capture the cultural scope of my investigation of this

[3] See p. 23 for further discussion of quinceañera economics.

cultural tradition, while recognizing that such terms can become overgeneralizations of identities that deserve more careful attention and specificity. In her entry on the term 'Latinx' in *Keywords for Comic Studies*, Isabel Millán defines Latinx as referring to "individuals born or residing within the United States of Latin American dissent regardless of gender expression, or more specifically…gender-non-conforming individuals born or residing within the United States of Latin American descent" (134). Being that many of my sources examine a wide range of ethnic contexts for their information about quinceañeras, this term is the simplest way to convey the conclusions I hope to draw about quinceañeras as a cultural institution. Folklorist and scholar Rachel Gonzalez states at the beginning of her book *Quinceañera Style: Social Belonging and Latinx Consumer Identities* (2019) that "the use of the 'x' holds space for defiance and reminds the reader to critically consider how audiences interpret public markers of race, class, and gender subject formation" (1). I will emulate this approach in my investigation, while acknowledging the danger of reinforcing a false homogeneity–one that, at times, can be useful for creating a sense of cultural identity amidst the challenging neoliberal landscape of the U.S.

There is no shortage of visual media addressing the quinceañera tradition, ranging from heartfelt artistic films to glitzy reality television episodes.[4] Given that a quinceañera is traditionally something of a spectacle—a large court of attendants, an enormous dress, and a long guest list—it makes for good entertainment. But it is also a unique and, for many, meaningful expression of ethnic heritage and maturation. In light of the prevalence of artistic media produced by teams of people, which more often than not include people who do not belong to a culture that includes the quinceañera, it is necessary to consider the ability of these media to fully communicate or effectively explore the importance of this cultural tradition.

[4]For example: the 2006 film *Quinceañera*; the 2017 Thalia-HBO series *15: A Quince Story*; episodes of *Wizards of Waverly Place*, *Superstore*, *Dora the Explorer*, and *My Super Sweet Sixteen*; and reality shows like MTV Tres' *Quiero Mis Quinces*.

From January to December 2017, Fanbase Press published fifteen issues of *Quince,* a comic series that tells the story of Lupe, a Latinx teenager who develops superpowers on the night of her fifteenth birthday after her quinceañera–powers which she has for the next year, until her sixteenth birthday. The series was conceived and creatively directed by Sebastian Kadlecik, who is Chicano, and written and illustrated respectively by sisters Kit and Emma Steinkellner, who are white. Certainly it is important for writers to include characters from ethnic backgrounds and cultural traditions different from their own, but Lupe's story is one that centers specifically on a unique experience: that of not only having a quinceañera, but *being* the quinceañera (as the girl who is being celebrated is traditionally referred to). Lupe's identity is the primary motivator for the main action of the story, not just an incidental background detail in the name of diversity. Kadlecik emphasizes that *Quince* was motivated by his desire "to create a story that focused on [his] family's heritage and that represented [their] culture in a positive way," and in reading the series, it is certainly clear that it attempts to achieve his goal of "portray[ing] a Latinx family in a favorable light" and "to show a young Latina as the hero of her own story" ("The Origin Story" 3). Each of the comic's creators can attest to an aspect of this situation: Kadlecik due to his own ethnic background, and the sisters for their own passage through female adolescence. But the comic's focus on the quinceañera must be examined: what is the value of a work based on a teenage Latinx girl's experience, produced from a collaborative viewpoint informed by distinct elements of that experience?

As is often the case, the medium is a considerable part of the message. The fact that *Quince* is a comic book cannot be overlooked in the conversation about its cultural relevance, because "[u]nlike cultural productions such as single-authored novels or paintings created by one artist, comics are often collaborations between multiple creators (e.g. authors, illustrators, inkers,

colorists, graphic designers). Each individual brings their unique style, perspective, and lived experiences to these collaborations" (Millán 135). *Quince*'s creator is Chicano, and the main character and many of the supporting characters are Latinx (since there is no clear ethnic heritage prescribed to them, but there is implied Latinidad—this question is treated in greater detail in chapter 3), so there is certainly lived experience and perspective presented in the comic. But the dynamic of white female creators collaborating with a man with relevant cultural experience adds a nuance that distinguishes *Quince* from other similar narratives. The unique cultural production is one of the principal reasons this comic presents a fruitful opportunity for analysis in relation to the topic of the quinceañera. The elements of assimilation and cultural conflict are very present in the quinceañera celebration as it has evolved in the U.S., and this work, which was created by a Chicano man and produced by two white women for a multicultural audience, necessarily deals with those elements in both the story itself and the way it is told.

Though there are many cultural products that examine the quinceañera tradition, my research focus is specifically informed by the presence of quinceañeras as a topic in U.S.-produced media. *Quince* represents a nuanced version of this trope: it pulls together the often commodity-driven world of superhero comics, a frequently underrepresented ethnic, age, and gender demographic, and the weighty cultural tradition of quinceañeras. *Quince* fits into many categories, and simultaneously defies them: in part due to its content, and because of its authorship. As a comic book, *Quince* relies on a creative team rather than a single author, which means it presents a more complex vision of the quinceañera and its cultural significance. The publication of the comic also provides another level of nuance: *Quince* was published by Fanbase Press, an independent comic book publisher, and was made available via Amazon's comics distribution platform, ComiXology. A compilation of all fifteen issues, in English and

Spanish, is available to purchase from Fanbase Press. The dynamic of independent comics publishers and their relationship with Latinx creators will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3, but it suffices to say here that the manner of *Quince'*s publication contributes to its cultural identity and role in a contemporary Latinx narrative by making it unique as well as accessible (if you have a device that can connect to the internet, you can read *Quince* on Amazon). The comic book medium also serves to emphasize a component of the quinceañera celebration, in that *Quince*, as a comic book, is a product in the comics marketplace, and the quinceañera tradition has sparked its own marketplace and economy. Even a visual and literary-based critical analysis of the comic requires a recognition of its place within a larger marketplace, and its status as a commodity.

Comic books have long been a source for social change and commentary. Ramzi Fawaz traces the development of socially conscious ideology espoused in comic books in *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, and points out that "the generation of writers, artists, and editors who helped forge the [comic book] industry in the late 1930s was deeply invested in liberal egalitarian values" (19). Though not always apparent in the content, the production and creation of comic books is rooted in a type of progressivism that became more apparent in the 1960s, as comic book creators began to incorporate 'diversity' into their narratives, including people of color from diverse ethnic backgrounds, people of varied physical abilities, and women. Fawaz tempers his presentation of this 'progress' by emphasizing the extent to which this increased diversity was the result of an economic push for comics to appeal to a wider audience, but still, the emerging diversity in comic books "was less about the mere visibility of minorities in comics and more an appeal to creators to develop stories and worlds that explored the cultural politics of identity" (20). In recent history, characters like Black

Panther and Captain Marvel from mainstream comic book film production companies demonstrate a push for stories that investigate 'cultural politics of identity.' This desire has resulted in characters that serve not just to tell stories, but to uphold specific social and political endeavors: gender equality, antiracism, anticapitalism, etc.[5]

I propose bringing the ideas of identity-driven narratives and the potential societal impact of comics together in the study of *Quince,* alongside other works of fiction and media narratives about quinceañeras. The significance of the quinceañera as the impetus for Lupe's superhuman abilities is a twist on the more 'traditional' superhero origin story—freak accidents, radioactive spiders, government experiments. Instead, Lupe's powers come from her family, the natural process of aging, and—as we learn at the end of the story—herself. I will explore the significance of Lupe receiving her powers at the age of fifteen, after experiencing the traditional rite of passage into womanhood that is prevalent in Latin American and especially in Latinx communities in the United States. The fact that the Lupe's superpowers come from her cultural heritage means that her identity serves to empower her, rather than marginalize her. In this way, *Quince* creates a hopeful kind of future where this cultural tradition is a positive force for those who observe it, and where power comes from this kind of source, rather than pain or trauma, as is the case in many comic book superhero narratives.

Lupe's story can be defined as a work of speculative fiction, given that it focuses on her possessing superhuman powers like the ability to fly, and this categorization is a key feature of my analysis of the comic. Scholars Walidah Imarisha and adrienne marie brown pioneered the term and category 'visionary fiction:' works of speculative fiction that "explores current social issues through the lens of sci-fi; is conscious of identity and intersecting identities; centers those

[5] Though it should be recognized that creating 'diverse' superheroes that represent marginalized identities doesn't necessarily accomplish any specific social and political endeavors–which is a question that needs closer attention than can be given here.

who have been marginalized; is aware of power inequalities; is realistic and hard but hopeful" (brown 280). Imarisha also proposes that "all organizing is science fiction" (3) in that when people use their energies and minds to back social movements, they participate in the hopeful creation of a new world—in other words, the creation of science fiction. *Quince* plays on the idea of 'transformation' inherent in the celebration of a quinceañera: Lupe transforms into a superhero, but her growth into adulthood is a longer process that involves her family, her community, and other interpersonal relationships. *Quince* explores what it means to pass through this 'transformative' process of a quinceañera by making the tradition the jumping off point of transformation, rather than the transformation itself. My hope is to demonstrate the importance of both young adult narratives and comics as a medium, using *Quince* as an example, as a source for the creation of a new society in the style of visionary fiction, in that Lupe's traditional framework—having a quinceañera—becomes the source of her heroism that empowers her and those around her to live happier, safer, and more generative lives.

I will also investigate the importance of the physical aspect of Lupe's representation and her body as a tool for empowerment and reshaping traditional superhero narratives into something that holds value for its young adult audience. Rather than the typical superhero narrative, where powers are often accompanied by physical trauma, emotional pain, or a combination of both, Lupe becomes a superhero simply because of who she is: a fifteen-year-old, of Latinx heritage. (Lupe's abuela mentions that she grew up in Mexico City, so we have a clue as to her specific ethnic background, but there may be other elements we aren't made aware of in the comic.) The temporary nature of her powers adds to the uniqueness of the narrative: she won't be super in the way she is now for her whole life, but the knowledge of and confidence in herself will remain. In essence, Lupe's story is the intersection of marginalization: she is a Latinx

teenage girl, a person whose voice and presence in the world would not normally be considered influential or even important. But it is from the combination of marginalized identities that Lupe takes her strength. By examining this work using literary theory from the visionary fiction genre, combined with comic book scholarship and Latinx feminist theory, I want to demonstrate how *Quince* creates a new future by offering a world where empowerment is the result of developing and embracing identity.

Chapter 1: Quinceañera History

"Quinceañeras are the manifestations of possibility" (Gonzalez 1). This statement from UT Austin professor Rachel Gonzalez's book *Quinceañera Style: Social Belonging and Latinx Consumer Identities* (2019) succinctly captures the purpose of my investigation of *Quince* and its reading as a work of visionary fiction. Any statement about the quinceañera tradition tends to generalize, but Gonzalez's comment allows this multifaceted tradition to exist in a way that accounts for the wide diversity and complexity of the communities it belongs to. It is difficult, and perhaps inadvisable (as will be examined in this section) to try to capture 'the quinceañera' with a single definition, but at least for the purpose of clarity, I will borrow from Gonzalez again:

> The term "quinceañera" refers to both the fifteen-year-old Latinx birthday celebrant and her celebration, a rhetorical shorthand that collapses a young woman's personal identity with an elaborately styled and deeply rooted initiation ritual meant to spur social transitions into cultural womanhood. (1)

The ways that this celebration is manifest vary widely, and the specific cultural background isn't limited to a specific country or region.[6] This definition, as well as Gonzalez's previously cited statement, is useful in the context of my analysis of *Quince*. Gonzalez points out the double meaning of 'quinceañera' to refer both to the celebration of turning fifteen itself, as well as the person who is turning fifteen. The title of the comic book, *Quince,* has a similar double meaning, in that it literally translates to 'fifteen,' but also that 'quince' can be used as a shorthand to refer to the quinceañera. Additionally, Lupe takes on the moniker 'Q' as her superhero alias, in clear reference to quince/quinceañera, the age and event at which she gained her powers. The presence of these double meanings in both the comic and Gonzalez's definition gestures to the complex nature of this period in a young Latinx girl's life and the sometimes contradictory forces that

[6] Gonzalez uses the term Latinx, largely because this is the most flexible working term to allow for the wide range of experiences and backgrounds that may be part of a quinceañera. I will also employ this term, although my analysis of *Quince* will require some attention paid to Mexican and Chicanx issues more specifically.

influence her. Growing up means becoming more independent and discovering yourself, while the celebration of this tradition simultaneously reinforces prescribed roles and expectations hinted at by Gonzalez's use of the term 'cultural womanhood.' Certain elements like the changing of flats to high heels, the gifting of a ring from parents to daughter, and the celebration itself with a dress and cake, all carry connotations of traditional femininity and heterosexuality (Cantú 21-3)—although, as will be examined, the prescriptive nature of the quinceañera is perhaps becoming less dominant in different communities and in other cultural circumstances.

There is also often an element of tension in the way the quinceañera is presented and manifested between the Latinx identity and the U.S. culture (which is not to say that these are mutually exclusive). To return to Gonzalez's statement about quinceañeras being "manifestations of possibility," *Quince* interacts with the questions of independence, responsibility, and conflicting cultural identity through Lupe's own quinceañera celebration and what happens afterward. In fact, the quinceañera itself only comprises a brief moment in the comic book's plot, which instead uses the celebration as a vehicle for the beginning of Lupe's superhero transformation. Lupe's quinceañera is a moment of possibility—the possibilities of Lupe's life as an adult and as a superhero, and the possibilities of her abilities as an adult and as a superhero. She can and does become so many things she hadn't even imagined herself, and the rest of the comic book follows this process of becoming with the framework of the quinceañera as a cultural and ancestral institution supporting her personal development. In researching and presenting ideas about the history and significance of the quinceañera, I will create a backdrop for a critical analysis of *Quince,* which, in conversation with these ideas, will reveal how this comic is as a work of visionary fiction in that it creates a reality (which arguably may exist

already) where this tradition is, and is perceived as, a source of strength, empowerment, and self-knowledge.

Quinceañera Writings: Literature Review

The quinceañera tradition is generally oversimplified in both media representations and academic sources, meaning that my investigation of the historical origin and cultural significance of this tradition must be considered with a critical lens. It may even be an oversimplification to describe this as a singular tradition, given the many different iterations of the quinceañera in different time periods, countries, and even within the same country, in diverse ethnic traditions. As previously stated, because of the broadness of this topic, and in an attempt to avoid generalizing about something that is too often projected as a monolith, I will try to focus my historical and cultural sources about the quinceañera on Mexican and Chicanx traditions, although most sources I studied do not limit themselves to this cultural scope. Because *Quince* is set in the U.S., and authored by U.S. citizens, its message relies, at least in part, on the understanding of the cultural complexity of Latin American culture's simultaneous existence in and outside of the U.S. context, as do many sources about quinceañeras, given the development of particular styles of celebration adapted to a U.S. setting.

I will often rely on the term Latinx, a term defined in my introduction, to encompass the various identities and traditions present in both the sources I cite and the comic *Quince*. I used Isabel Millán's writing to define this term, and she also notes that

> Latinx encompasses specific communities within the U.S. such as Chicano/a/xs or Mexican Americans…While each designates a unique country of origin or ancestral descent, these are not homogenous categories…they should also be understood as the result of colonialism and struggles for independence with nuanced and often contentious relationships to Europe, slavery, and indigenous nations of the Americas (1).

There is a danger in using a term with such broad connotations as Latinx to discuss the quinceañera, particularly since, as several sources will note, the tradition itself already has some elements of colonialism and forced homogeneity and assimilation. But, as Millán points out, it seems that the term Latinx exists in part to be able to unite distinct categorizations and create a sense of community within the broader U.S. context. Still, it is necessary to acknowledge the fraught circumstances in which I present this study, and to recognize the gaps that are present in my research.

Another note about the research on the background of quinceañeras that is worth considering before delving into the history is the variety of sources that give information about the historical circumstances of the creation of the quince tradition. These sources seem to break down into two main categories: academic sources from the 20th century that tend to have some distance from the cultural context that they are writing about (meaning, written by non-Latinx authors who don't have first-hand experience having a quinceañera themselves or being part of one), and something of a hybrid between external research and personal experience, written usually by Latinx women who do have first-hand experience with the quinceañera process and write informed by that experience. This type of source is particularly relevant to this project because it reveals something about the importance of the quinceañera in both a larger cultural context, and on a personal, gender-based level. In reading these sources, I began to build a connection between the kind of story being told by these hybrid testimonial-historical texts and the message presented in *Quince*: there is something significant about telling your story about a tradition that spans history and cultures, to both find your place within a set community and carve out your own space in a social setting of your own creation. I will focus on the latter type of source because I want to give priority to the writing of those who are telling their own story,

but I will also use more distanced sources to contrast and compare the presentation of the history of the quinceañera. My aim is to not just examine the tradition itself, but also how it is perceived and studied by those who experience it personally and those who observe it.

Referring to the quinceañera as having a singular history is also perhaps an oversimplification, as there are a variety of sources that claim a myriad of cultural origins for this custom—and some these sources critique the tendency or desire to imbue the quinceañera with a more ancient, indigenous significance. Several of the sources I will cite in this section include some reference to the origin of the quinceañera as being a remnant of the debutante ball (Stavans ix) or the colonial presentation at a royal court (Alvarez 89). Other academic sources, and frequently girls and women who are interviewed for these sources about the quinceañera, cite indigenous civilizations, from the Maya to the Aztecs, as having coming-of-age rites for women that morphed into the quinceañera in conjunction with Spanish colonial customs established in Mexico and other Latin American countries with a colonial presence (Dávalos 16-17).

Most of these sources present these origin stories as potential cultural myths, and don't cite any specific sources other than hearsay, but it is worthwhile to note that one of the most confident manifestations of this idea I found in my research is located in a guidebook about quinceañeras, intended for mothers and daughters planning a quinceañera, rather than an academic tome about the practice overall. This guidebook, *Quinceañera! The Essential Guide to Planning the Perfect Sweet Fifteen Celebration* (1999), was written by Michele Salcedo, a journalist who has largely reported on Nicaragua and Mexico, and who is a second-generation Mexican-American herself. Most of the book is dedicated to the actual details of how to plan each component of the quinceañera, but the introduction addresses the origins of the tradition

framed as a way to help the reader (who is assumed to be a girl planning her own quince) understand the significance of the event. Salcedo writes:

> No less than Carlota, the Austrian empress of Mexico, and the Duchess of Alba are credited with cultivating rites of social passage to signal to everyone a more mature phase in a girl's life. But the beginnings go much further back, thousands of years back, to the indigenous people of our respective cultures. The Tainos and Arawaks, the Quechua and Toltecs, the Azteca and Mayas, to name but a few—all had rites of passage to mark the point in a child's life when she was a child no longer, but ready to make her contribution to society as an adult" (xi)

There is no source cited to back up this claim but given the certainty with which Salcedo presents this idea and even the specific historical figures she names, it is easy to see how the idea that the quinceañera has indigenous roots has become so mainstream.

It is also worth analyzing the purpose of 'ancient' origins, and specifically the invocation of indigenous peoples' involvement in the development of the quinceañera, being perpetuated both in official guides and within casual conversation. There has been tension between Catholic clergy and Latinx communities in the U.S. about the celebration of the quinceañera and the involvement of the church in such events, and Karen Mary Dávalos speculates that perhaps the tying of the quinceañera to indigenous traditions is a pointed attempt to legitimize it: "People who regard the *quinceañera* as historical or traditional are usually attempting to convince other clergy to celebrate the event. That is, they view the *quinceañera* as a legitimate 'tradition' from Mexico and part of a legitimate popular faith" (Dávalos 16). Giving the celebration this kind of origin story seems to increase the gravity of the event from a simple birthday celebration to something steeped in tradition and cultural significance, and perhaps even serves as a deterrent for critics of the tradition. It could also be argued that by claiming indigenous practice as the origin of the quinceañera, as Salcedo does in her quinceañera handbook, those organizing and celebrating these events are justifying them as being something more than just a party,

particularly as the quinceañera has evolved to become an event that typically involves a religious rite,[7] as well as a social celebration. As with the idea of the quinceañera in general, the aspect of its historicity and its presentation in academic and cultural sources is a relevant subject of study in and of itself, revealing that the quinceañera is shaped more by the people that celebrate it than by any other organizing factor. As such, it is most helpful to look at sources that use personal experiences and personal testimonies on the topic in order to better understand the quinceañera and its place in contemporary Chicanx culture.

One of the most often-cited texts about quinceañeras, their history, and their cultural presence is Karen Mary Dávalos' essay "*La Quinceañera*: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities," which first appeared in a 1996 issue of *Frontiers* and was republished in Ilan Stavans' *Quinceañera* (2010), a collection of academic essays and testimonials about the quinceañera tradition. Dávalos explores not only the tradition itself, but also the way that it is discussed by members of Latinx communities, the Catholic clergy, and the general media. In fact, she distances herself from the idea of a singular 'quinceañera tradition,' and instead "seek[s] to discuss 'tradition' as an open, and sometimes chaotic, terrain that is constantly reconfigured in everyday experience" (9). Her points are constructed of a combination of research and interviews, mostly with Mexican and Mexican-American girls and women in Chicago, and the way she presents her findings is also colored by what she describes as a "third-world feminist concern" with the way these interviewees perceive their own situation. She "argue[s] that what *mexicanas* have to say about the *quinceañera* can tell us how they construct themselves as historical and oppositional subjects…their agency is not a heroic response to oppression but a negotiation between various, often conflicting, views about women, family, and *mexicano*

[7] The expectation of a religious rite as part of the quinceañera celebration, and the attitude towards the religious aspect of the quinceañera, is examined more closely starting at the bottom of page 20.

culture" (9). In this investigation, I want to similarly investigate how the quinceañera is talked about and represented in the media, rather than making a judgment about what the quinceañera itself represents or its value to various cultures.

Julia Alvarez's *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA* (2007) is a quintessential example of a text that both informs using history and elaborates through personal narrative. Alvarez, who is a Dominican-American author best known for her novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), spent a year attending quinceañeras across the United States, and wrote about her experience interviewing members of the community involved with those celebrations. She interviews the many fifteen-year-old girls whose quinceañeras she attends, their families, dressmakers, party planners, and even Catholic clergy members, all in the name of understanding why the quinceañera "has become an even bigger deal stateside than it ever had been back home" (5). Interspersed throughout her interviews, her academic research, and her accounts of the quinceañeras she attends, Alvarez also tells her own story of growing up as an immigrant in Queens, what she saw of her parents' attempts to assimilate and adapt to U.S. culture, and her own journey in doing the same as she became a young adult. *Once Upon a Quinceañera* makes it clear that the quinceañera is not just an event that is planned, executed, and forgotten, and by including her own story alongside her research, Alvarez communicates to the reader that the quinceañera is part of identity formation—as a woman, and as a member of a cultural community that is in the process of being formed outside of its origin.

The subtitle of Alvarez's book, "Coming of Age in the USA," hints at the crucial role of immigration and the assimilation process in the formation of the quinceañera tradition, for, as previously cited, it is observed by many that the quinceañera has a much stronger foothold with Latinx communities in the U.S. than in most Latin American countries. In the introduction to her

book, Alvarez comments that "the U.S. quinceañera is powered by that age-old immigrant dream of giving the children what their parents had never been able to afford back where they came from" (4). She elaborates on this statement throughout the book about the relationship between immigrant and second-generation culture, consumerism and financial status, and the quinceañera tradition, and although there perhaps isn't a definitive statement that can encompass all quinceañeras and all cultures and families that celebrate them, the strong connection between immigrant communities and the quince tradition is worth noting.

Norma Cantú's "Chicana Life-Cycle Rituals" (2002) elaborates on this connection, and the author remarks that "[f]or Chicanas in the United States, the *quinceañera* affirms a cultural tradition from the root culture even as it may also be a site for increasing assimilation" (23). This comment comes in light of the progression of the quinceañera celebration that Cantú establishes that before the 1950s, what is thought of now as the 'typical' quince was reserved only for wealthy families and their daughters, then became more common into the 60s, and then in the following decades declined once again—only to pick up steam in the late 1990s and 2000s (17). She suggests that the decrease can perhaps be attributed to the increased popularity of high school proms, which offered the same opportunity for a transitional celebration that incorporated elements of increased autonomy and sexuality, along with dancing and the chance to wear a beautiful dress. The returned popularity of the quinceañera, then, serves a different purpose—to connect a generation back to their ethnic roots via tradition that is still somewhat accessible and desirable to them–both for parents/grandparents, who may have experienced life outside of the U.S., and for their children, whose worldview and understanding of their own heritage is shaped by their upbringing in the U.S.

In addition to academic and analytical sources about quinceañeras, there are many media representations of the tradition, varying from artistic films, to young adult novels, to reality television, a diversity which is appropriate for the phenomenon which it depicts. One previously mentioned example, the HBO series *15: A Quinceañera Story* (2017) follows the stories of five young women and their quinceañera experiences while tackling the complex socioeconomic, cultural, and personal circumstances of the celebration. Mexican singer Thalia served as a producer to the HBO series and starred in a much earlier television project called *Quinceañera* (1988), a telenovela that demonstrates the varying paths to adulthood that can accompany the celebration of the 15th birthday by addressing themes such as sexual assault, gangs, and substance abuse (Alvarez 151). Many TV shows that aren't specifically Latinx-focused feature special quinceañera episodes: *Wizards of Waverly Place*, *Superstore*, *Lizzie McGuire*, and even *Dora the Explorer*, as well as reality shows like *My Super Sweet 16* and *Quiero Mis Quinces*, produced by MTV Tres.

Along with visual media productions, the quinceañera is a popular topic in literature, especially young adult literature by or for Latinx girls. I have an early memory of finding and checking out Nancy Osa's *Cuba 15* from the public library, a book in which the protagonist's family forces her to have a quinceañera, despite her ambivalence about the celebration and its traditional components–in particular, the dress requirement, which the protagonist side-steps by having a jumpsuit made just for her. This novel encapsulates the value of young adult narratives, specifically in novels (and, I would argue, comics). Michael Cart, writing on behalf of the Young Adult Library Service Association, states the following:

> …[among the] chief values of young adult literature i[s] its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is, intrinsically, a period of tension. On the one hand young adults have an all-consuming need to belong. But on the other, they are also inherently solipsistic, regarding themselves as being

> unique, which – for them — is not cause for celebration but, rather, for despair. For to be unique is to be unlike one's peers, to be "other," in fact. And to be "other" is to not belong but, instead, to be outcast. Thus, to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity. ("The Value of Young Adult Literature")

Cart's description of the adolescent fear of being 'other,' and finding comfort within media addressing otherness, holds value for young adults and literature they consume generally, and it is particularly significant to the discussion of quinceañeras and their representation in media. In celebrating the quinceañera in a U.S. context, there is an essential feeling of otherness, or, as Valentina González expresses it, "belonging to neither community fully," and as a result, young Latinx women " find…themselves in a space of constant vacillation, transition, and transformation" (3). Transformation is not an inherently negative experience, as will be discussed further in Chapter 3, but it certainly reinforces feelings of alienation and difference. Therefore creating young adult narratives that not only engage with this specific experience and the feelings it brings, but actually make those narratives a source of empowerment, alleviate the feelings of not belonging to either community, and create a space for those who find themselves occupying the space between cultures and traditions.

The Louisville Free Public Library has a list of quinceañera books on their website, which range from planning guides, like *Favors with Flair: 75 Easy Designs for Weddings, Parties and Events* by Mary Lynn Maloney and *Celebrating a Quinceañera: A Latina's 15th Birthday Celebration* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith to novels, including *Estrella's Quinceanera* by Malín Alegría, *Sister Chicas* by Lisa Alvarado, and *Chasing the Jaguar* by Michele Dominguez Greene ("Hot Reads"). The list hasn't been updated since 2008, so there are a number of novels that have been published since that also deal with the topic, as recently as 2021's *Once Upon a Quinceañera* by Monica Gomez-Hira. The plots of these novels vary widely from mystery novel

(*Chasing the Jaguar*) to romance novels (*Once Upon a Quinceañera*). Some novels, like *Cuba 15*, address the challenge of celebrating a quinceañera as a person of mixed heritage (the protagonist's father is Cuban, while her mother is from the U.S.), while others tackle contentious politics surrounding immigration and racism, like Malín Alegría's 2012 *Border Town: Quince Clash*. No matter the context of the novel, the quinceañera, as either conflict, background, or motivation is consistently present, demonstrating its firm position in the fabric of the Latinx cultural experience.

Even from just the sources referenced in this brief investigation, it is clear that it is difficult to find any conclusion about the quinceañera as a historical object or cultural tradition. It is constantly evolving, as documented in Cantú's investigations, and every girl's experience with it is distinct, as revealed by Alvarez's year of interviews and quinceañera attendance. And perhaps this is the way it should be, as Dávalos asserts that "[t]he discourse and practice of the *quinceañera* encourage us to examine the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of 'tradition.' *The discourse and practice suggest that what we intend as 'cultural' is fluid, slippery, contradictory, spontaneous, and chaotic*" (26, emphasis added). While a clear historical and contextual definition of the quinceañera would perhaps make this concept more digestible to an outside audience, its ambiguity allows it to serve the purposes of those that celebrate it, whose purposes may be and are as diverse as the celebrants themselves. In making the above assertion, Dávalos also establishes a crucial component of any discussion of the quinceañera tradition, which is that as much as it is accepted and utilized for a variety of purposes, it is not without its critics.

Criticisms of the Quinceañera

With origins and manifestations as diverse as those of the quinceañera, it would be almost impossible to avoid finding some kind of negativity about the tradition as a whole. Even the

authors of texts specifically advocating for the quinceañera as a necessary, or at least positive, formative experiences for young women, such as Michele Salcedo's *Quinceañera* guidebook, don't shy away from acknowledging the diverse ways that the tradition has been criticized. The critiques come from both outside of those who celebrate the quince, such as Catholic priests and officials who feel frustrated by the seeming frivolity and spectacle of something that, to them, isn't an acknowledged religious ceremony, as well as from those who have had a quinceañera or been witness to many, like Julia Alvarez and Nora Cantú in their quinceañera-centric critical writing. These authors, among others, raise concerns about the quinceañera's reinforcement of prescribed gender roles, as well as cultural expectations: the celebration and its implications seem to entice, or even require, young women to conform to a specific vision of both womanhood and cultural identity, despite what their own feelings about either may be. There are also critiques by the families of girls who are having quinceañeras in the interviews conducted by Julia Alvarez, usually focusing on the excessive consumption and expense of the quince. The reasons to complain about the quinceañera are as wide and diverse as the ways that it is celebrated and its reported origins, and examining these critiques reveals almost as much about the cultural relevance of the quinceañera as an historical investigation.

The objections on religious grounds by (mostly) Catholic church leaders center around the fact that the quinceañera is divorced from any official sacraments, and these complaints also sometimes take on a possibly racist and/or classist overtone, or at least disgruntled attitude to a culture outside their control. Julia Alvarez interviews a priest who performs a blessing at a quinceañera in *Once Upon a Quinceañera,* describing him as less than enthusiastic about the endeavor: "a tall, lanky middle-aged priest in his vestments who looks, frankly, weary…[he] casts a glance at the lot of us, dressed up too fancy, and in some cases, too risqué to be entering a

place of worship" (87). Alvarez describes the religious ceremony as simple blessing without any specific comments referencing the specific circumstances of the quinceañera celebration, and later, when she asks him about it, he responds that "the church isn't going to get involved in that...We're taming the beast here" (89). The word "beast" carries connotations with savagery and primitiveness that may have not been that priest's intention, but regardless, this statement does seem to encapsulate a general feeling of antagonism some Catholic leadership have towards the Latinx celebration—it's too much, too gaudy, too expensive, too lavish, too 'other.'

In *Quinceañera!*, Michele Salcedo remarks that church officials "debate whether the celebration should be performed at all, or should be done in such a way to discourage lavish expenditures" (7), which seems to indicate that the real issue is with the spectacle of the quinceañera, rather than the meaning behind it. Still, Salcedo acknowledges that this criticism is backed up by church officials' objection that the Catholic church already has a series of sacraments that serve the same age-specific rite of passage as the quinceañera: baptism, reconciliation, communion, and confirmation (8). So the quinceañera is then made to carry a cultural weight, rather than just a religious one, in order to be taken seriously, and Karen Mary Dávalos suggests that the purpose of creating an indigenous origin for the quinceañera tradition is to convince critics, including and perhaps especially clergy members, that it is in fact a 'legitimate' tradition that deserves respect and reverence ("Making Gender and Ethnic Identities" 16), making the accompanying festivities justifiable in the eyes of man and God. There is much that could be said about the irony of the Catholic Church finding a complaint with a Latinx tradition when the connection between Catholicism and Latin America is a direct result of colonization and forced assimilation on behalf of European Catholics in the 16th century and onward, but that is a much deeper issue than can be treated here. But the concern with lavishness

and expense expressed by Catholic clergy is one that is found in other critics of the quinceañera tradition. Returning to Julia Alvarez's reluctant priest's description of the quinceañera as "the beast," she writes that, to her, "the beast...is Mammon, demon of money and riches and greed. In Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Mammon is the angel who before the fall is forever looking down at Heaven's golden pavement. He sounds familiar, like my papi, like so many immigrants who flee to el norte in search of that country whose streets are paved with gold" (*Once Upon a Quinceañera* 91). The thread connecting the criticisms from Catholic clergy to other critics of the quinceañera is the issue of excess and cost—something that is also inextricably linked to immigrant culture and U.S.-centered consumerism.

The cost of a quinceañera (including the venue, food, music, and clothing for the quinceañera herself and her court of honor) and its role as a cultural spectacle mean that it serves both to reinforce an ethnic difference and to prove assimilation to U.S. consumerist culture, and no matter the purpose, the cost is a point of criticism for a variety of parties. Like everything to do with the quinceañera, there is diversity: there is no one consistent budget or cost for a quinceañera celebration, as the celebrations themselves are varied in scope, length, and size, but the typical trend across most sources I consulted observed that the quinceañera is often an event intended as "a way for some people to show off their wealth, whether they have it or not" (Salcedo 6). This idea hearkens back to Alvarez's observation about "the beast" or Mammon—that there are people who immigrate to the U.S. from Latin American countries in search of financial prosperity, and then plan a quinceañera for one or more of their daughters to demonstrate their status as a product of the American Dream. Almost every source I consulted about quinceañeras included at least one statement about the cost involved in the celebration, as well as the celebration's tie to both countries/cultures of origin and the U.S.—so the issue of the

cost of the quinceañera is not solely an economic or budgeting concern, but a reflection on the cultural relevance of this celebration in a constantly developing heterogeneous society.

Though there is no mandated structure of a quinceañera, and therefore no set budget, the types of festivities and resulting cost necessarily involve the components of any party—food, music, venu—and can go far above and beyond these basics. Salcedo designates a section in the first chapter of *Quinceañera!* to unpack this issue, and she muses that a quinceañera can be as simple and cheap as "a...buffet dinner and party at home with a disc jockey, or [can be] an elaborate ball at the Ritz Carleton [sic] Hotel in Palm Beach, with a choreographed presentation, a sit-down dinner for 200, and dancing to a live band through the wee hours of the morning," and that the budget range for a quinceañera can be anywhere from $1,000 to $100,000[8] (23). She does acknowledge elsewhere in the book that because of the high costs, the tradition of 'padrinos,' or sponsors who take on some of the costs of the celebration, has become increasingly common (15). This cost may seem shocking, and in many cases, it is more than a family can necessarily afford—but the families make it work, as former Miss Dominican Republic and self-proclaimed quinceañera expert Isabella Martínez Wall, interviewed by Julia Alvarez, claims: "You might not have the money but you have a quinceañera for your daughter. The family is making that statement. We might not be rich but we value our daughter" (*Once Upon a Quinceañera* 31). Wall also ties the idea of a family's monetary expression of their daughter's value to the question of marriage, which reinforces the earlier stated criticism of the quinceañera's complicity in reinforcing gender expectations.

Alvarez muses on the question of the societal and gender implications of a quinceañera after a parent of one of the quinceañeras she is interviewing speculates that the quinceañera

[8] Considering that Salcedo's book was published in 1997, it's likely that the high end of the budget for a quinceañera has exceeded this amount in the last few decades.

serves to allow parents to experience a traditional parenting role, even without the daughter's conformity to it. The parent (and it may be relevant to note that it is the father, rather than the mother of the quinceañera) speculates that "It used to be that you could give your daughter a wedding. But you don't know anymore if she's going to get married or if she's going to live with her boyfriend first like they do here" (117). Taking into account the amount that any family, Latinx or not, tends to spend on their daughter's wedding, the $100,000 price tag of a quinceañera doesn't seem as shocking. Alvarez comments:

> So you throw her a quinceañera, a mini boda…*minus the groom in which Mami and Papi take the little lookalike bride home.* No wonder there is an air of leave-taking about the celebration. It's not just childhood that is being left behind. It's the old country as well, in a pageant proposed and paid for by Papi and Mami, whose own ties to their homelands are growing lax" (118, emphasis added).

The implications of a quinceañera being like a wedding in which the parents are in control and the daughter doesn't actually leave home after the fact are not entirely clear: on the one hand, it seems beneficial for there to be a recognition of a girl's growth into an adult without tying it to her legal marriage status—she gets all of the same attention, expressed in the form of a lavish celebration, and a cultural acknowledgement of her growth into a woman. But she is still not independent, as her status remains tied to her parents, and the performance of this celebration as a stand-in for marriage seems to still do the work of reinforcing a gender expectation—it establishes the girl's value in society, emphasizing the transition from one form of patriarchal supervision (her father and home of origin) to the next (her husband and the home he will lead).

Ultimately, there is inherently a connection between the coming-of-age celebration, the money spent, and society's expectations of gender, which connection is indicative of a possible conflict as expressed by Norma Cantú: "From a feminist perspective, the performance of the ritual is an act of womanist theology...However, one can also argue that in its socializing fervor the celebration is antifeminist in intent, for instead of acknowledging the young woman's

self-determination and potential, it can become a way of constricting and limiting her choices ("Chicana Life-Cycle Rituals" 19). It is this dichotomy of the quinceañera's simultaneous limiting and empowering potential that I argue makes *Quince* a work of visionary fiction, in that it engages with, and in some ways resolves, this dichotomy. This is not to say that it isn't possible for a real-life quinceañera to tackle this conflict in a way that is beneficial for the girl herself—rather, I want to show the need for works like *Quince* that take the stereotypes and complicated critiques surrounding the quinceañera tradition and its celebration in a U.S. context and make them work for the marginalized identity they celebrate, rather than against them.

The Quinceañera's Cultural Significance in a Latinx Context

Based on both the history and criticisms of the quinceañera, it is clear that the celebration holds the most significance, and has been the most closely examined, in a U.S. context. This truth reveals something previously expressed by writers such as Cantú, Dávalos, and Alvarez: the quinceañera as it is most commonly represented and imagined today is largely informed by the act of simultaneous assimilation and cultural preservation, particularly for first, second, and third generation Latinos in the U.S. The discussion of this idea brings into focus once again the difficulty of terminology: many of the sources I reference discuss the quinceañera in relation to Chicanas(os/x), which Miguel E. Gallardo's definition for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes as "[an] identifier for people of Mexican descent born in the United States…[which] came into popular use by Mexican Americans as a symbol of pride during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s" ("Chicano"). But many of the ideas expressed can also apply to a broader Latinx context, as the quinceañera is celebrated by individuals from all Latin American backgrounds: as Ilan Stavans points out in the introduction to his collection of works on the quinceañera, "it has become an important social occasion in the Latino community in the United States, especially

among Mexicans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans" ("Introduction" ix). There is certainly some issue in taking an analysis of specific cultural identity and applying it to a much broader context but given the difficulty of the term 'Latinx' as it is, as well as the rapidly changing demographics of the Latinx population of the U.S. in the last few decades, it is useful to integrate ideas about the quinceañera as represented by various cultural subgroups into the discussion of the quinceañera in a broader Latinx context.

A central element of the role quinceañeras play in a cultural context is that of concurrent assimilation and cultural preservation. The quinceañera is not the only example of this type of tradition: Cantú asserts that "[f]or the Chicano/mexicano community, the quinceañera as a festival of cultural affirmation enjoys, on a personal and familial level, the same popularity as secular celebrations, such as Cinco de Mayo and 16 de Septiembre" (16). In the same way, the quinceañera offers the chance for those who are turning fifteen to celebrate that which sets them apart, while remaining a part of the culture they inhabit.

Will Cain, the founder of the magazine *Quince Girl,* gives one perspective of this phenomenon to Julia Alvarez in *Once Upon a Quinceañera*:

> "Retroculturation…first generation comes to the United States, and they push to assimilate…Second generation, they want to be all-American. Many don't even speak Spanish. They aren't that familiar with the culture. By the third generation, they're born and bred here, but they have this special something that makes them unique, their Hispanic culture…They make a concerted effort to hold on to their traditions, to establish cultural ties with their past" (69-70)

The idea of 'establishing cultural ties' and 'holding on to traditions' is echoed in many of the interviews Alvarez conducts with parents and daughters in her investigation, as well as in other sources where interviews form a significant portion of the body of research, such as in Karen Mary Dávalos' "Making Gender and Ethnic Identities." Dávalos' presentation of the quinceañera focuses on girls of Mexican descent living in Chicago, so the perspective of her writing is even

more focused than other sources discussing Chicanx experiences, but her observation that "the quinceañera [is described as] 'something that has to be done because of who we are' and as a way of 'holding onto your roots.' I interpret these expressions as an imperative to practice one's ethnic culture in an event that makes a girl into a woman, but *more importantly makes her into a Mexican woman*" (18, emphasis added) rings true for other cultures as well. The quinceañera not only represents a passage into adulthood, nor does it only represent adherence to a cultural norm–it provides an intersection for a complex transition that may allow the quinceañera to create her own specific identity that allows for the complexities of her social standing.

While the quinceañera is in some ways an expression of cultural adherence, it is by nature dichotomous for some of the reasons previously mentioned–the U.S./Latinx assimilation/preservation–but also because by the performance of this ritual, some standards are challenged. This is in part due to the phenomenon of the quinceañera highlighting the physical, and by association sexual, maturation of a young woman. As some sources cite debutante balls as the inspiration for the quinceañera tradition (Arcaya 87), which served to present young women to the community as of marriageable age and status, it goes without saying that a celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday–an age where many girls have already started menstruating and experiencing body development as the result of puberty–presents the same message, even if such a message is not the primary intent of the event. One young woman that Dávalos interviews about her quinceañera experience characterizes it as "a physical placement of one's body [that] beg[a]n…the process of sexual awareness" (19). The quinceañera is not only a singular event marking a transformation, but also serves as a marker for many girls to be able to perform traditionally 'feminine' and/or sexual activities: shaving their legs, wearing makeup, dating, and even wearing high heels–something which is even incorporated into the quinceañera

celebration (Cantú 22). At the same time, the quinceañera is often also a religious event, and has symbolism reminiscent of marriage, as previously explored in this section. Citing again from Cantú, "patterns of resistance are embedded in the performance of the quinceañera even within the very sites of the subject's oppression, the church and the dance hall, symbolic social space that becomes a gendered space, the location where her sexual awakening and her new position in society becomes public" (16-17). The quinceañera thus at once encourages its celebrants to explore their independence and sexuality, while recreating patterns of monogamy and sexual purity.

So the quinceañera encompasses a dichotomy of tradition and innovation. This is captured by Cantú's statement that "[t]he quinceañera allows Chicanas to perform their cultural identity outside the realm of mainstream U.S. culture. While it is accepted behavior, it often becomes a subversive performance even within the strict social behavior of the cultural group, as the honoree defies strict codes of conduct" (16). She specifies Chicanas in this statement, but I believe this assessment can also be applied to Latinx celebrants of the quinceañera overall: it is at once an affirmation of cultural identity–the general Latinx/Latin Americanness of the quinceañera's celebration, and the U.S.-based consumerism that allows for simultaneous assimilation and preservation of heterogeneity–while also being the site of contradictions and rebellions against both and each culture it affirms. Cantú describes the quinceañera, as an event and a cultural institution, as a liminal space (18), and the transitory nature of this space is precisely what makes it an ideal setting for change, innovation, and empowerment. Celebrants have the chance to take ownership of a cultural tradition and embrace their heritage, while the embracing of this heritage has implications about their expected place in society and behavior–both in a Latinx context and an outside (non-Latinx) one. Dávalos elaborates on the

liminality of the quinceañera: "Women [interviewed about the quinceañera] spoke of 'tradition' as a living practice *in which innovation and continuity are not mutually exclusive*" (21, emphasis added). It is precisely because of this coexistence of change and tradition that I propose a discussion of the quinceañera, and particularly Sebastian Kadleckic's *Quince*, as serving as an example of visionary fiction that allows for a future shaped by, rather than fraught with, contradiction.

Chapter 2: The *Quince* Story

This section will bring into conversation the history of the quinceañera and the rhetorical power of the comic book through an analysis of *Quince,* as a work of literature and as a cultural artifact. I will accomplish this first with a general plot synopsis of all fifteen issues of the comic, in order to demonstrate how the quinceañera fits into the larger narrative, and then with a series of closer scene analyses with respect to four aspects of what the comic accomplishes. These aspects are the presentation of the quinceañera tradition; Lupe's cultural identity, including her relationship with her family, and how this influences the quinceañera and the development of the story; Lupe's relationship to her body and the representation of both her body and the relationship she has with it; and the story over all as compared to other superhero narratives and the tropes they utilize, in order to analyze the cultural impact of *Quince* and the significance of this narrative being presented through the comic book medium.

Any discussion of a comic must also address the work's publication, and though this has been mentioned briefly thus far in this work, understanding the publisher and the possible intended audience will elevate this section of critical analysis. As has been mentioned, *Quince* was published by Fanbase Press, a company founded in 2010 under the name 'Fanboy Comics' and rebranded to Fanbase Press in 2016. The company's mission page states the following:

> Fanbase Press believes that #StoriesMatter…Universal communication through stories allows us to examine the essentials of human existence, to understand ourselves better and to grow and/or heal, to pass on important values, knowledge, and lessons to the next generation, and to connect with one another through empathy and compassion. ("About")

The emphasis placed on the value of stories not just as entertainment, but as tools that can shape a better world, illustrates that the authors of *Quince*, and its publisher, intended to communicate something deeper than just a superhero narrative with Lupe's story. Fanbase Press is distinct from mainstream publishers not only in its size and scope, but in its intentions–they don't want

to just sell comics, they want to change the world. Their mission statement also indicates that the material they publish may be intended, or at least is appropriate, for a younger audience: the idea that stories can "pass on important values, knowledge and lessons to the next generation" suggests that they hope the audiences of their comics include that 'next generation.' Though *Quince* doesn't specify a target audience, in light of the publisher of the comic itself, it seems plausible that Kadlekic and the Steinkelner sisters hope their work will reach an audience young enough to have their worldview be influenced by the 'empathy and compassion' present in their story, as well as others published by Fanbse Press.

Because *Quince* is a comic book, its meaning comes from its visuals, its text, and the interaction between the two. In *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics,* Luis Frederick Aldama gives us an idea of how to approach comic analysis:

> The geometric shaping of the story is one of the two main subsystems that make up comic book storytelling. The other is the verbal subsystem (narrator boxes, dialogue, and thoughts of characters, for instance). However, the visual subsystem...is dominant…The shape, color, and posture guide how we *make sense* of the character; how we understand the character *to be* in the world" (95).

Accordingly, my analysis will focus on the story of *Quince* as told through its dialogue and narration, and what is revealed by the colors, shapes, and other visual elements of the illustrations. Because *Quince* is a superhero story, the use of the comic medium is an essential part of its impact: utilizing the expected elements of superheroism—a costume, written sound effects, bright colors for our story's heroine, and darker ones to mark the story's villain—give this work the power it has, and allows it to carve out a new place for this type of narrative and world creation. Moving forward with this section, more emphasis will first be placed on the story, but visual analysis will form an integral part of revealing the central themes, strengths, and questions inspired by *Quince.*

A Plot Synopsis

The story begins with Lupe, a Latinx teenage girl (though she doesn't use this specific cultural identity to describe herself, a point which will be more carefully investigated later in this chapter) living in an unnamed city, remarking on the unexpected lack of attention she is receiving at school on the day before her quinceañera. She is shown walking through the hallway at school, with other kids around her telling her they can't wait for her party. One comments, "Mexican bar mitzvah for the win!" (5), suggesting that Lupe's community, or at least school population, is not predominantly Latinx. She doesn't correct him, and instead remarks that the attention she's getting today is just because "[she is] throwing all these people in [her] freshman class a DJ'd party with free food." But still, Lupe is excited for her quinceañera, and foreshadows the upcoming events: "I knew my life was probably going to go back to normal after Saturday night. But I had this tingly, sparkly, weird feeling at the bottom of my stomach that things WEREN'T going back to normal after my quince" (6). *Quince* already plays into a common superhero origin story trope with this opening to its first issue: like Peter Parker and Steve Rogers before their transformations, Lupe is your average social outcast, who typically goes unnoticed by those around her. What is significant and remarkable about her situation is that the transformation she is going to experience is something planned that comes from her cultural background, rather than a radioactive accident or a government experiment. The setup of her story both places *Quince* within a long tradition of superhero narratives and sets it apart.

Lupe gets home from school and settles into bed to watch TV. She describes herself as a "total nerd" (7) who loves fangirl shows and does little else besides watch them (another nod to the changes she is about to experience).[9] She also introduces her family: mom, dad, older brother,

[9] Lupe also comments that "the superheroes" in the shows she watches "are basically always white people" (7), another instance of foreshadowing that also does some of the work of placing Lupe into a larger social context, firmly establishing her as *not* white.

younger sister, and grandma. Her grandma, whom she calls Abuela (which is how this character typically will be referred to from this point on), is "different. She's always the best and never the worst" (8). Abuela helps Lupe try on her quinceañera dress, telling her that her own quince changed her life. Lupe replies, "Like, I'll become a mature and responsible adult and maybe finally have enough boobs to actually merit a bra?" (10) Perhaps this statement is a joke in reference to Lupe observing her own body as she tries on her dress, but it also speaks to the implications of the quinceañera tradition in relation to the maturation of the teenage female body that is passing from childhood into sexual maturity–Karen Mary Dávalos comments that the quinceañera "begins the process of sexual awareness," and the celebration's ties to celebrations like the debutante ball reinforce connotations with a girl entering sexual maturity (19). The closeness of the relationship between Lupe and Abuela is a critical element of Lupe's journey to becoming a superhero and navigating her new life and responsibilities after she receives her power, and this dynamic gestures to the generational and familial implications of the quinceañera. Like Lupe's loner origin story, it also references another superhero trope—the wise, older mentor, like Peter Parker's Uncle Ben, or Miles Morales' Uncle Aaron. Abuela doesn't die as part of Lupe's origin story, but the love Lupe has for her does serve as a motivator to her actions—another way that *Quince* simultaneously leans on traditional superhero tropes while adapting them to its specific circumstance and culture.

The next day, Lupe starts feeling sick in the bathroom at her quinceañera. She feels like she's "going to vomit and have diarrhea and [her] period all at the same time" (11). This kind of candid and specific bodily awareness is a recurring feature of Lupe's relationship with herself—whether it is questioning her lack of physical assets, or later, commenting on the excess thereof (she does occasionally complain about her big butt), Lupe is clearly experiencing life as a

teenager who is forced to be hyperaware of her physicality. Her body is changing, and she is fully aware of it, and that informs both her feelings about herself and her own actions. While still feeling sick in the bathroom, she has a surge of power that causes the objects around her to shatter. Abuela tells Lupe to close her eyes and envision the bathroom as it was before, and when she opens her eyes, everything is back to normal. The rest of the night plays out as Lupe had imagined it: "Like I was just having a regular quince like the billions I had been to before" (21). She steps outside to reflect on her sudden surge of powers, wondering if it was all in her imagination, when suddenly, she finds herself levitating—still wearing her pink, poofy quince dress.

The next section of the text reinforces one of the central dynamics of the comic, which is the role of Lupe's grandmother in her superhero transformation and the intergenerational connections in both her superpowers and the quinceañera tradition. Once she returns safely back to the ground, her abuela fills her in on the situation: Lupe now has superpowers, just like her abuela did when she turned fifteen—although Abuela herself didn't have a quinceañera, since in her day, "quinces were only for the wealthy" (30). Still, from this point on, Abuela adopts the role of Lupe's coach and mentor: they spend the summer getting up early every morning to train (including flying and pushing cars), preparing for some kind of imminent threat that neither of them can predict. Once school starts again in the fall—it's implied that Lupe's quinceañera happens in June, at the end of the school year—Lupe tries to balance being a superhero—stopping bank robberies, saving cats from burning buildings, catching her crush when he falls out of a window—with being a high school student, daughter, and friend. Her grades start to slip, and she's tired and hungry constantly, but she has her abuela's support (and the rest of her family, once they find out).

It seems that her powers are only going to be used for everyday emergencies, until another superpowered student, Garrett, who has been bullied throughout school, emerges as a self-described "antihero…Like the Dark Knight and Deadpool" (101). Garrett's backstory distinguishes his superhuman status from Lupe's, since he experimented with his late father's laboratory and a resulting accident granted him his abilities. Because of this history, he feels animosity towards Lupe's desire to use her powers for good–rather than using his superhuman status for good, he wants to use his powers to exact revenge on those who have wronged him.[10] Lupe and Garrett fight, and plan to have a final showdown, but Garrett unexpectedly disappears. Thinking that the threat is gone, Lupe makes plans to go to prom with her (now-requited) crush, but Garrett shows up at the last minute, threatening to kill all the students who have antagonized him for so long. They fight, but Lupe is already losing her powers, since the prom coincided with the night of her sixteenth birthday and end of her superhero stint. She manages to hold him off until the police arrive and is then called to the hospital because her abuela has fallen ill. Against Abuela's wishes, Lupe uses the last of her quince powers to restore her health and strength and must now face Garrett (who managed to escape from the police) as simply Lupe—sixteen years old and devoid of superpowers.

At their final showdown, Garrett reveals he has been struggling with the death of his father and feeling isolated and alone and threatens to kill both himself and Lupe. He throws her off a rooftop in a jarring cliffhanger at the end of the comic's fourteenth issue, but saves her right before she hits the ground, at the beginning of the fifteenth and final issue. Lupe then takes it upon herself to help him: she sits with him at lunch and walks him to his therapy appointments.

[10] Garrett's superhuman status introduces another intricacy of my reading of *Quince,* since he also has these abilities despite not having a quinceañera. A further study of his role in the comic might investigate the question of superhuman abilities as a representation of adolescence in general, rather than specifically Latinx female adolescence, and the power therein.

He starts to get better, and Lupe also begins to exercise her superpowers again—not flying and fighting, but serving and loving others. The comic closes with Lupe getting ready to leave for school, wearing the same strawberry-printed tunic she wore at the beginning of the series, on the day before her quinceañera. She reflects on the past year and her journey from normal girl to superhero and back again, and remarks, "I'm still trying to be a hero. Now, my costume is just whatever I'm wearing that day" (155). The final panel of the comic shows her Q costume and mask hanging on the back of her bedroom door, with text over it reading, "The End."

The Importance of the Quinceañera

Quince is not just a story about a girl and her quinceañera. The title of the comic suggests that the focus is much broader: although 'quince' is a frequent shorthand for quinceañera (which shorthand has been and will continue to be used throughout this body of work), it also has its own meaning in Spanish: the number fifteen. Obviously, the significance of fifteen as a number and as an age is partially tied up in the quinceañera tradition, but it should also be emphasized that the broadness of the title means that this is a story that can speak to the category of adolescents as a whole, not just young Latinx girls. Still, the quinceañera plays a large part in the development of both Lupe's character and her powers, and the first part of my analysis of the comic itself will focus on the representation of the quinceañera tradition in *Quince* and the significance therein. The description of Lupe's quinceañera is very brief—it spans a few pages of the first issue and most of the second issue. Although the impetus of the action of the comic is the occasion of the celebration of Lupe's fifteenth birthday, the quinceañera serves more as a vehicle to allow her to see that the one night isn't itself the transformation—rather, it is her growth into a fifteen-year-old, aided by her friends and family, that gives her these powers. To expand on the quinceañera as a motivator in the comic, I will analyze six scenes from various

issues of *Quince* and explain what both the written word and visual image say about this tradition in context.

The very beginning of the first issue of *Quince* establishes several things about Lupe as a person, her vision of herself, and the nature of the community she inhabits. The first two panels of the comic are two versions of the same scene: Lupe, surrounded by students at her school, during their mandatory nutrition break. In the first panel, she is in the middle of a school hallway, wearing a dark hoodie with her hair tied back, with a wary, shy expression on her face. The kids around her are all either looking or turned away from her. The text reads: "At my high school, nutrition break is from 9:50 to 10:05. This is what it's normally like…This is what it was like the day before my quinceañera" (5). The next panel shows the same hallway, with Lupe in the same position, but wearing a brightly printed dress and a smile, with her hair full and curly around her face. The students around her are not only looking at her but talking to her too! One girl, holding a pink envelope, says, "Excited for your quince, girl!" Another boy in the frame says, "Mexican bar mitzvah for the win!" (5).

This reference to the bat mitzvah perhaps gestures to a lack of awareness of this cultural tradition within Lupe's community, as the student has to rely on a Jewish cultural custom, adapted with another ethnic moniker, to express his excitement. This comment recurs again in the comic's second issue, at the quinceañera itself, when the same two students from the first page are on the dance floor, bathed in a rosy, pink haze and surrounded by balloons and musical notes. The second time he says it, however, his female companion corrects him, saying: "It's BAR for boys and BAT for girls." In reply, the student tries to rectify his mistake to Lupe: "Um, okay. Happy…wait, what was it again?" At this point in the night, Lupe has already experienced her unexpected burst of superpowers and is distracted enough, but perhaps her blasé reply—

"Okay, cool, you're welcome, thank you, yay" (20) also illustrates the frequency with which she has encountered this lack of understanding of the quince. The seeming cultural void in which Lupe is celebrating her passage from child to woman is how the reader is first introduced to the concept of the quinceañera, perhaps because the creative team, Kadlecik and the two Steinkellner sisters, wanted to demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling the marker of Latinx cultural heritage with mainstream U.S. teen culture. From the very first scene, the quinceañera is presented to the reader through a somewhat distanced lens, which is contrasted by Lupe's interior monologue and her home life.

In one of the very next scenes, still in the first issue, Lupe tries on her quinceañera dress, and this scene reorients the reader from the 'Mexican bar mitzvah' perspective to a slightly closer, more reverent view of the quince tradition. This scene also strikes an important aspect of the quinceañera, which is the familial, and particularly matriarchal involvement in this rite of passage. Lupe has already established her preference for her abuela over most other people in her family, and in this scene and in later issues of the comic, the relationship between her and her abuela proves to be a central motivating factor in her development as a superhero. In a scene that covers two pages of the first issue, Lupe tries on her quinceañera dress for the first time, made for her by her abuela–arguably, the first manifestation of her superhero costume. The dress is pink, with a sweetheart neckline, thin straps, and a full skirt, and as Lupe sees herself in it for the first time, she says, "This is the best dress ever. I feel like the President of the United States, plus the Queen of England, plus, like, God" (9). In the next panel, her abuela hugs her from behind, and they both look into the mirror, seeing their reflections. Abuela is also wearing pink, which deepens the reader's understanding of her and Lupe's connection, as well as perhaps

foreshadowing the later revelation of Abuela's own experience with the transformative nature of turning fifteen.

Almost every source I consulted about quinceañeras mentioned the importance of the quince dress. Valentina González describes the dress as "a material representation of the individual wearer and the sociopolitical history of the event as well as a platform through which young women are allowed and expected to exert personal creativity" (53). These dresses are often expensive, occupy a large amount of physical (and emotional) space, and draw attention from all in the vicinity. The emphasis they place on the girl being celebrated, her body, and the amount of money they represent make them a significant, and even integral, part of the celebration of the quinceañera. They are usually pink, which aligns with the expectations about femininity placed on the quinceañera[11]–although the color expectations have evolved with time and distance. In the 1960s, Cuban girls living in Miami wore white to their quinceañeras, since the only formal dress shops they had access to were of the bridal variety; now, specialty shops in the U.S. "stock quinceañera gowns in every color imaginable, from bridal white to traditional pink to flaming red" (Alvarez 42). The evolving spectrum of quince dress color, in addition to its style (particularly how much skin it reveals), can perhaps serve as a barometer for the development of the quinceañera celebration and its allowance for the independence and empowerment of the teenage girl, as Valentina González describes.

The significance of the quinceañera dress can be attributed to many things, but in this instance, it is most pertinent to emphasize the embodied aspect of the quince as a transformation from child to adult, in that the girl being celebrated has her body in the dress noticed by all around her. It signals that society is now allowed to observe her, and even perhaps objectify her,

[11] See Jo B. Paoletti's investigation of the color pink as a symbol of femininity in *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America*, Indiana University Press, 2012, pp. 85–99.

and also hints (according to tradition) that the girl is now ready to be considered a prospect for marriage and childbearing: Valentina González notes that with the dress, "quinceañera girls and their families are re-creating the space around their community starting with the intimate boundaries of the body" (85). The pressure on the female adolescent body is not unique just due to the quinceañera tradition and Latinx culture generally—the body's development during puberty, and the attention it draws, is almost a universal experience for young women. Lupe gestures to this during this scene while, as she changes back into her t-shirt and sweats from her perfect, pink quince dress, she makes a joke about her quinceañera being life-changing because it means she'll finally have "enough boobs to actually merit a bra." Abuela, with a bemused and yet slightly nervous expression on her face replies, "…Something like that" (10). The audience will soon find out that Abuela knows more than she is admitting to Lupe about the literal transformative property of the quinceañera, given that she also developed superpowers when she turned fifteen.

But without the larger context, this exchange between grandmother and granddaughter points to a larger truth about the adolescent phase, which is that the experience of one's body becoming a good for public consumption and the obligation to fill a prescribed societal role is something Abuela experienced that she sees Lupe entering into as well. At the same time, there is a tenderness to this exchange, emphasized by the panel where the two women look at themselves and each other in the mirror, seeing past and future reflected along with the present. Though short, this scene has a gravity to it that emphasizes the nuanced perception of the quinceañera. Lupe feels strong, beautiful, and empowered in her dress, but at the same time, that dress represents a tradition that can also be critiqued for being prescriptive and patriarchal. That

doesn't mean that it should be dismissed, but it is certainly something to keep in mind—for the reader of the comic, and for Lupe within the narrative of the comic itself.

Despite all the buildup, the scenes depicting Lupe's quinceañera are short, and focus more on isolated actions rather than the event itself—a choice that illustrates the extent to which this tradition is more about an interior change, rather than an exterior, communal one. There are also a few omissions of expected elements of a quinceañera from Lupe's celebration, and no implication that these elements were present. According to Michele Salcedo's *Quinceañera!,* the typical components of a quinceañera are the escort, the court of honor, padrinos (financial sponsors), a religious celebration, and a reception, which is comprised of the introduction of the court of honor, the presentation of the quinceañera herself, a choreographed waltz by the court, a toast, a dinner, and a dance for all attendees (15-16). In *Quince,* however, most of the action at the party itself happens in the bathroom of the venue, where Lupe starts feeling sick, has a burst of power that destroys the room around her, and is coached into restoring the room to its original state. We don't see any of the religious aspects of the quince tradition, and in fact, we really only see the reception. The absence of religiosity from the quinceañera in *Quince* is something that will be more closely examined in a later section, but it is worth noting that the event is largely presented as a secular community celebration. There is one full page of the scene of her quinceañera, and every panel is tinted with a pink hue that is reminiscent of Lupe's dress and reminds the reader of the traditional femininity of the quinceañera tradition. The page shows Lupe seated, surrounded by people raising their glasses to toast her; dancing with her dad in front of a crowd of onlookers; a tiara being placed atop her curly head; and her dancing with two classmates with a backdrop of a formless crowd, balloons, and a big sign reading "Mis Quince Años" (21).

This vision of Lupe's quinceañera coincides almost perfectly with the description of the stereotypical quinceañera given in the introduction of Michele Salcedo's *Quinceañera!*. Salcedo writes: "High heels and lipstick. A beautiful ball gown. The dreamy rhythm of a waltz. A bejeweled crown sparkles in the spotlight as a proud father whirls his fifteen-year-old daughter out of childhood and into adolescence. Her family and friends applaud; her mother dabs a handkerchief to her eye" (xi). *Quince* captures almost all of these elements captured in a single page—the dress, the dance, the tiara. Even without dialogue, the emotion (the mother dabbing a handkerchief to her eye) is present in the way Lupe looks at the people around her, and her father as they dance, as well as the tiara being placed on her head. She has her eyes raised, looking up at the hands that crown her and the new accessory marking her transition into adulthood. The creative team behind *Quince* captures so many of the elements of a 'traditional' quince, perhaps in part because Sebastian Kadlecik, the creator, writes in his introductory letter to the published volume of comics, he got the idea for the comic while he was attending a quinceañera—one of many he had been to throughout his life (3). So there is definitely an element of tradition[12] in this section of the comic, which makes *Quince* a useful text to refer to in reading contemporary representations of quinceañeras, both the execution therein and the emotional significance to the quinceañera herself.

The normalcy of the quinceañera scene, which, as Lupe describes it, is like "the billions [of quinces] [she] had been to before" (21), creates a stark contrast with the end of her quinceañera, which arguably sets the tone for the rest of the comic. After the one page of 'normal' quince celebrating, Lupe excuses herself to get some fresh air and reflect on the night

[12] Though 'tradition' is a loaded word in this context, as Dávalos emphasizes that traditions are "paradoxical and ambiguous" (26), and that there may not be a "'real' or 'traditional' quinceañera," and instead, the quinceañera can be treated as "an open, and sometimes chaotic, terrain that is constantly reconfigured in everyday experience" (9).

she's had so far. She leaves the dance hall, holding the pink skirt of her quince dress in one hand, surrounded by pink balloons that follow her outside. Suddenly, there is a panel that zooms in on her eyes, looking down, and she says simply, "Whoa" (22). The next panel is a closeup of her feet in pantyhose, the crinoline of her fluffy dress gathered around her ankles, and her high heels falling off her feet onto the ground as she lifts into the hair. The final scene of the second issue of *Quince* shows Lupe, still in her coveted dress, flying above the squat, blocky buildings of the city skyline, surrounded by clouds, stars, and the moon. The text reads: "So…maybe I'm not crazy and I do have magical superpowers? Or maybe I'm crazy AND I have magical superpowers" (22). One panel in this sequence is especially notable: the image of Lupe's feet lifting out of her shoes. A common element of the quinceañera celebration is a ceremony where the quinceañera's father helps her change her shoes from a pair of flats to high heels, symbolizing her entrance into female adulthood (Cantú 22). Although this isn't depicted in *Quince,* a background understanding of the significance of Lupe's shoes (which are high heels) reveals more about this scene than is perceived at first glance. Despite Lupe's earlier description of her life being "so boring it hurts" (6), and the routine, expected nature of the majority of her quinceañera, the beginning and ending of the event serve to demonstrate how the celebration itself doesn't constitute her transformation. The imagery of her high heels, the representation of her transition to adulthood, falling off her feet as she is lifted into the sky—literally being untethered from reality and distanced from the party and all it represents—reinforces that Lupe has not yet transformed, and that much more confusion, change, and growth await her when she returns to the ground.

There is another sequence depicting a quinceañera in *Quince,* but it is more of a historical representation that adds not only to the understanding of the quinceañera as a whole, but also to

Lupe's own ethnic and cultural heritage. The cover of the third issue of the comic hints at this dynamic: under the title, there are three female figures. One is Lupe, looking disheveled and nervous, with her eyes wide in shock. Behind her, with her hands resting on Lupe's shoulders, is Abuela, still in her outfit from the quinceañera with a big smile on her face. Behind Abuela is the figure of a young girl who resembles the other two women, but who is depicted in a slightly more muted, sepia-toned coloring, wearing what looks like a maid's uniform with her arms up and hands spread out, covered in a bright, yellow glow. This glow also emanates from Abuela's hands from their resting position on Lupe's shoulders. I have already gestured to the importance of the grandmother-granddaughter relationship between Lupe and her abuela, but this cover reemphasizes the generational nature of the quinceañera tradition—the connotation is unavoidable, especially given the comic title, *Quince,* hovering over the three figures in bright, pastel letters. The issue begins with Lupe finally figuring out how to stop flying and return to her house, where she confronts Abuela about her sudden development of superpowers, and Abuela's seeming knowledge of the possibility of such a thing. After this conversation, we see a flashback sequence, where the illustrations are in the same sepia tone that the third, unidentified female figure was depicted in on the cover of the third issue.

This section of the comic demonstrates the importance of class and consumer identity in the quinceañera tradition and presents to the reader another way to conceptualize the tradition itself, in light of the contrasting experiences of Lupe and her grandmother. From this flashback, we learn that this girl is Abuela herself as a fifteen-year-old, who also developed superpowers at that age—though she did not have a quinceañera herself. The beginning of the flashback tells us that the sequence occurred in Mexico City in 1960—which is also the only place in the comic that we learn anything specific about Lupe's ethnic heritage (something that will be investigated

later in this section). Abuela is shown wearing a maid's uniform and working as a server at another girl's quinceañera. She stands at the back of the room with another girl dressed in an identical server's outfit, while in the foreground, a young woman in a dress with a tightly fitted bodice and sweeping skirt, pearls around her neck and gloves on her hands, smiles at another girl, dressed in a similar fashion, while taking the hand of a boy who is outside of the frame. The other girl is covering her face with her hands, and perhaps implying that the girl in the pearls is mocking her for not having someone to dance with. The younger Abuela observes this scene, holding a tray with a pitcher and glasses on it, and comments, "Of course I wanted a big, fancy party when I turned 15. Instead I hit the jackpot of consolation prizes…I turned fifteen and learned I could freeze time. I had other superpowers, but that was my best one" (30-31). Abuela also states that in her time, "quinces were only for the wealthy" (30), which is consistent with other sources that discuss the development of the quinces in mainstream culture, particularly what Norma Cantú says in "Chicana Life-Cycle Rituals" about the quince celebrations being largely limited to wealthy families through the 1950s, and increased popularity after the 1960s (17).

It is notable that although Abuela did not have a quinceañera celebration, and instead seems to have worked at these types of parties, she still developed superpowers. The contrast between the 1960s quince at which Abuela works as a server and Lupe's party suggests that the powers they receive aren't a result of the celebration itself, but instead, the heritage and age that the two share. As previously mentioned, this is the only scene that gives us an idea of what comprises Lupe's ethnic heritage and knowing that Abuela is from Mexico means that Lupe could and perhaps does identify as Chicana or Mexican-American. The significance of this will be discussed in further depth in the section pertaining to what *Quince* reveals about ethnic

identity, but it suffices to say here that the inclusion of this flashback to show Abuela's own experience attending a quinceañera as a worker makes a statement—intentional or not—about what it means for Lupe to have a quinceañera as a girl of Mexican descent growing up in the U.S. This scene also speaks to the power of being fifteen: this sequence suggests that you don't need to have a quinceañera celebration in order to be a quinceañera yourself. As Michele Salcedo says in the introduction to her quinceañera guide, "…one way or another, the passage is marked…the fifteenth birthday as a milestone, *a year where more privileges will be granted—and more responsibilities expected*" (xii, emphasis added). In this case, the privilege is superpowers, and the responsibilities just happen to include saving the world.

Another celebration acts as a bookend to the quinceañera that begins Lupe's transformation, which is the prom at the end of the comic right before her epic showdown with her archnemesis Garrett—which conveniently coincides with her sixteenth birthday, the last day she has her superpowers. As discussed in the section about the history of the quinceañera, the adaptation of this tradition to U.S. culture is in part influenced by the prom tradition, and in some ways, the two serve a similar purpose: there is a fancy dress, an element of romance (with the escort/date), food, music, dancing, and, perhaps most importantly, both are generally considered a kind of rite of passage that marks a transition into adulthood.

Although the prom Lupe attends doesn't hold the same importance as a senior prom, which more clearly marks a transition from adolescence to adulthood, the ritual still retains some formative power, especially as Lupe states that she's "dreamed all [her] life of a night as beautiful and romantic as prom" (125). There are some similarities to the quinceañera scene, namely that Lupe is wearing another pink dress—a lighter shade than her quince dress, with a sweetheart neckline and a darker pink sash around the waist—and there are a few panels with

dancing, and another banner adorning the wall (which reads 'Fly Me To The Moon,' indicating the prom's theme, accompanied by the decorations of dangling stars and moons). The lighting is darker and more cool-toned than the pink of the quinceañera scene, and Lupe dances with her new boyfriend Devin, rather than her father. The dialogue, the lighting, and her date make it clear that although she is in a similar position as she was at the beginning of the comic—at a fancy, dance-based gathering—Lupe is not the same girl she was a year ago. Her transformation is even more emphasized by what happens at the prom: her final fight with Garrett.

The fight with Garrett, although it actually isn't the last confrontation they have, stands in stark contrast to the discovery Lupe makes of her new powers at the beginning of the comic. Whereas she is alone, scared, and hesitant to acknowledge the reality of what just happened when she first experiences her powers and accidentally tears the bathroom apart at her quinceañera, she is ready and willing to confront Garrett in front of the whole school. She even does so in her prom dress since she neglected to listen to Abuela and bring her Q superhero outfit with her. Despite everyone watching her—and even some people recording her—she doesn't think twice about using her powers to protect those around her, including her classmates who have ignored and bullied her. Lupe has clearly come a long way from the timid girl who felt invisible even at her own quinceañera, and this is the real transformation that the reader observes from the beginning of her fifteenth year to its end. In this way, the prom scene acts as a bookend to demonstrate the transformative process of being fifteen, and that it is something Lupe can and has taken ownership of, rather than passively experiencing.

Quince's Cultural Identity

While Lupe's transformation from girl to woman is in some ways a universal experience, the focus of the action on her quinceañera means that her cultural identity is a crucial component

to the story and its meaning to its creators, its reception by its audience, and its place in a broader cultural context. Without Lupe's cultural heritage, the story wouldn't be the same—there could be a similar comic about an adolescent girl who receives superpowers at her sweet sixteen, but the value of Lupe's story comes from the celebration of a cultural tradition that has ties to her ancestry and close family members. Lupe wouldn't have become the superhero she did without the support of her family, especially her abuela. We know that Abuela is from Mexico from the flashback scene of her receiving her powers at fifteen, but other than this scene, there is no indication of Lupe's specific ethnic or cultural heritage.[13] For a comic whose core meaning comes from a culturally-specific celebration, there is a visible lack of specific identity markers—so much so, that this vagueness almost seems intentional. In the foreword to Luis Frederick Aldama's *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics,* John Jennings writes that "to not show something is just as powerful as showing something" (xiii), and through specific scene analyses from *Quince,* I will demonstrate how this statement proves true as Lupe remains largely unidentified ethnically, rather serving to represent the general Latinx female experience, and perhaps even a broader adolescent experience. Though there are benefits to this type of universality, I also suggest that in some ways, it undoes the work of representation that comics that center characters of color intend in the first place.

As in previous sections of this body of work that engage with specific cultural discourse, I will once again attempt to clarify the monikers I use to determine the audience and characters in this text, although there is always some inaccuracy in any terminology that can be applied. Though I have used Latinx in order to have consistent terminology throughout my own writing,

[13] There is another place where the ethnic marker 'Mexican' is used—by Lupe's classmate who congratulates her on the "Mexican bar mitzvah" (5). This comment won't be considered in the conversation about Lupe's ethnic heritage, as the comic implies that this boy doesn't know Lupe very well, and is likely not an expert on her identity, and is more so using 'Mexican' to denote a general kind of Latinidad to Lupe's party that he understands within the framework of a bar mitzvah.

the terms ‘Latina,’ ‘Latinx,’ and ‘Chicana/x’ are used in the sources I cite in this work, often with relative interchangeability. There are differences between all of these identifiers, and though they are all generally used to capture a wide cross section of cultural identity, perhaps none of these terms fully capture Lupe and her family’s identity. This is partly due to the fact that there is no instance in *Quince* where Lupe claims her own identity—she never calls herself Latinx, Chicanx, or any other specific ethnic identifier. Instead, the understanding the reader has of her ethnicity comes from contextual clues: first, there is the flashback scene of Abuela’s youth in Mexico City, giving us at least some understanding of Lupe’s background, but there’s no other information given about family history. We don’t know if Abuela immigrated to the U.S. as a young person, or if Lupe’s parents are immigrants, or if Lupe herself is an immigrant. Aside from the flashback scene, Lupe and her family establish their identity through their language and their traditions: they often speak a mix of Spanish and English, as indicated by the repeated identification of Lupe’s grandmother as simply ‘Abuela,’ and of course, the entire comic is based on the celebration of the quinceañera—which, though certainly generally associated with Latin America and Latinidad, doesn’t evoke any specific nationality or cultural connotation. Rather, the quinceañera itself seems to serve as a model for Lupe’s identity, being at once specific and universal.

The ambiguous identity of the main character in *Quince* universalizes the story and meaning of Lupe’s experience, and this level of generalization is both a strength and perhaps a downfall. In a way, it almost seems natural for *Quince* to avoid a specific alignment with a culture or ethnicity, because the tradition from which it derives its meaning also somewhat defies categorization. Ilan Stavans writes that the quinceañera “is celebrated in corners of the Spanish-speaking world, [and] it has become an important social occasion in the Latino

community in the United States, especially among Mexicans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans" (ix). In the prologue to *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics,* Frederick Luis Aldama states that within the U.S., Latinos are "18-plus percent" of the population, and of that statistic, there are "Spanish speakers, Spanish and English speakers, English speakers, [and people] of Cuban, Mexican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Central American, and South American descent…Latinos are…very varied in their experience and identities" (3). Given this wide range of possible experiences in origins, creating a character with an ambiguous cultural origin allows that story to be more accessible to a wider audience. Lupe celebrates her quinceañera, as do many other young girls from all the countries and communities mentioned above. Though we know she has some Mexican heritage, this is mentioned just once in passing—not even as a piece of dialogue spoken by a character, but as a text box to give context to a flashback scene.

Because of the lack of explicit cultural information, *Quince* requires its readers to rely on contextual clues, like dialogue and coloring, to understand Lupe's background—which makes the work's medium, as a comic, essential to its message. To return to Aldama, "the experience of reading/viewing comics involves our attending to both the visual *and* the verbal elements…[to] give shape to plot and character elements" (111). The dialogue between Lupe and her family and their skin color are the primary sources of information about their ethnicity, outside of the one scene of Abuela's youth in Mexico and Lupe's quinceañera. These elements are both necessary to give the reader an understanding of the family's Latinidad, illustrating (no pun intended) the necessity of Lupe's story being told as a comic.

The role of color in bringing excitement and appeal to a comic book is integral, but it can also reveal deeper information about the context of the characters, and this proves true in *Quince.*

Aldama comments on the use of skin color in creating the story-worlds that empower Latino characters in comics, stating that "the [comic book] artist integrates the ethnicity or Latinoness in his or her character. This includes brown coloring, hairstyle, [and] clothing" (111). Because there's no specific mention of ethnic identity aside from Abuela's adolescence in Mexico, the reader can and must infer from the relative appearance of Lupe, Abuela, and the rest of the family what their ethnic background could be. Lupe and Abuela are the two characters most often shown next to each other, because their relationship forms such a large part of Lupe's superhero journey. One series of panels shows their coloring in a particularly striking way: while Lupe tries on her quince dress for the first time, she looks in the mirror with tears in her eyes, and Abuela embraces her from behind (9). Lupe's skin is a much lighter shade of brown, while Abuela's is a deeper brown with an almost reddish tint. Lupe's hair is deeply brown, almost black, and Abuela's is gray with age. They both wear an almost identical shade of pink, which further emphasizes the difference in their skin color. On its own, this difference doesn't necessarily convey new information: genetics can often result in unpredictable changes in skin, hair, and eye color, and knowing that Abuela is from Mexico, which like many Latin American countries, was forcibly colonized, it is likely that her ancestry contains at least some European heritage. Still, the difference is apparent, and becomes even more telling when presented in comparison with the rest of the family.

There are a few places in the comic where we can see the entirety of Lupe's family together: in the first issue, when she introduces them, and on the cover of the eighth issue, which shows a family portrait. Lupe's family is first shown standing in their kitchen, smiling out at the reader, with text over each person explaining who they are, and something about their personality. We meet Lupe's parents, her older brother, and her younger sister, as well as Abuela

in a separate panel. Because of the warm lighting in the kitchen scene—presumably from overhead lighting, or perhaps sunshine—the family all seem to resemble one another closely. In the family portrait shown on the cover of the eighth issue, the differences become much more obvious: Lupe's mother, brother, and younger sister share a slightly darker, and warmer complexion, while Lupe and her father are slightly lighter and more cool-toned, and Abuela falls somewhere in the middle. The men in the family share a large nose, created by a bent curve that sweeps between their eyes, while Lupe's mother and Abuela have the same smaller, and more angular nose. Lupe and her sister have unique noses, but share dark, curly hair that mimics the curls on their father's head, while Lupe's brother's hair stands in straight peaks. No two characters share exactly the same features, including skin color—there are slight deviations in each character, from tone to depth of color. But the presence of brown skin effectively communicates an ethnic category, as Aldama states in the quote above—even if it doesn't necessarily offer specific cultural identity. This portrait both serves to affirm the general categorical Latinidad of Lupe's family via these visual markers, but also reaffirms *Quince*'s cultural ambiguity.

The dialogue throughout the comic also upholds this simultaneous identity and ambiguity, with Lupe and her family employing a mix of Spanish and English both inside the home and in Lupe's inner monologue. Though an idea of the family's heritage is conveyed through the visuals, as observed above, the written component of the comic is also necessary to form the reader's understanding of what they're seeing. Thomas Wartenberg emphasizes that the two components, visual and written, are essential to creating the world within comics: "Comics give images and text equal ontological priority in determining the story-world the comic creates and in providing reader-viewers with the enjoyment they get from the comic" (101). The written

components of *Quince* are critical to the story being told, obviously, as the images without text could convey some parts of the plot but would still leave the reader with questions. But the writing is also one of the biggest clues to understanding the cultural identity of *Quince*, for although the images of Lupe in her quinceañera dress, and the celebration as a whole, could tip off readers who already have a knowledge of this tradition and might also be familiar with its prevalence in Chicanx and Latin American families in the U.S., the Spanglish spoken by Lupe's family and Lupe's own inner monologue solidly place *Quince* in the specific cultural space it occupies—or more accurately, the cultural space*s*. Its cultural pluralism is further emphasized by the format of the comic's publishing in both English and Spanish.

Before addressing the dialogue in *Quince,* one of the first written elements that contributes to the reader's understanding of the comic's cultural identity are the characters' names—a feature which does a great deal of heavy lifting in orienting the reader to *Quince*'s world. The first name we learn isn't even of the main character, but that of her brother: in the first issue, Lupe introduces her family through a series of text boxes positioned over each family member's head as they stand together in the kitchen before dinner. We first meet her mother and then her father, who are just introduced as 'mom' and 'dad,' which doesn't give the reader much cultural insight. Then, we meet Lupe's brother, whose name is Carlos, her sister Sophia, and lastly, her 'abuela Emma' (8), a name which doesn't necessarily hold a specific cultural connotation, but with 'abuela' added, cements Lupe and her family firmly in the world of Spanish-speakers. The first time we hear Lupe's name is when Abuela calls her 'Lupita' a few pages after the initial introductions, and then we see a large banner with "Lupe!" splashed across it on the next page at the quinceañera celebration.

The main character's name holds even more significance beyond a connotation with Latinidad generally, and demonstrates the comic creators' awareness of the power names can hold–especially in the context of a story about a quinceañera, where (as previously mentioned), the dynamics of innocence, adulthood, and sexuality are prevalent. 'Lupe' is a nickname for Guadalupe, which evokes the Virgin of Guadalupe, "an indigenous or mestiza Marian figure," who is often contrasted with La Malinche, "the indigenous mistress of, and translator for, conqueror Hernan Cortes," to represent the Madonna/whore dichotomy as manifest in a specifically Latinx context (Lara 99). As a coming-of-age celebration, the quinceañera traditionally "signal[s] fertility as well as responsibility, the change from childhood to adulthood" (Cantú 16), and in a contemporary context where romantic and sexual relationships aren't necessarily controlled by a girl's family, the quinceañera introduces a time to negotiate "control over, and definition of, the female sexual body" (Napolitano 79). Lupe's relationships in the comic exist independently of her family, and this could be an attempt by the authors to subvert the Virgin of Guadalupe/Malinche dichotomy by allowing a character named after the Virgin to take control of her dating life and sexuality.[14] Regardless of the creators' intentions in relation to this wider question, it cannot be overlooked that Lupe's name carries weight within Latinx tradition, and by extension, the quinceañera experience.

While skin color on its own isn't enough to specifically signal a cultural identity, the addition of names like Carlos and Lupe to the family's skin tone works to clue in the reader to understand this family for who they are. Even Lupe's superhero name, Q, which is a reference to both quince (fifteen) and quinceañera, carries cultural weight, as Aldama states: "At the most basic level of meaning making, a given comic's verbal design *names* the characters and their

[14] This is a question that could be studied in an extension of this body of work, especially since Lupe's crush on and later relationship with 'Hot Devin' form an integral part of her story and personal development.

superhero alter egos. From Anya Corazon…to Hector Ayala…the names identify them as *Latino*" (Aldama 118). So from the very outset of being introduced to the characters in *Quince,* the reader starts to be able to form an understanding of what cultural space this comic and its characters occupy. Although true that these names could mean the family is Hispanic, but not necessarily Latino, the combination of contextual clues like skin color, names, and the later flashbacks to Abuela's quinceañera experience in Mexico City provide enough evidence for the reader to deduce a cultural identity, while still leaving some ambiguity that makes the comic somewhat more adaptable to a wider audience.

A key feature helping to identify Lupe's cultural identity as Latinx is the dialogue between her and her family, as well as her own inner dialogue. The use of a mix of Spanish and English–Spanglish–is an easy way to convey a specific categorical belonging of a character, without necessarily defining a particular ethnic origin. As Aldama describes it, "Bilingual play to identify generational contact with Latinoness" (119). Lupe frequently shifts between English and Spanish in her thoughts and in text panels that narrate the comic, and her family, particularly her abuela, do the same in their conversations with each other. Uses of phrases like "a pain in the nalgas" (29) and "You're the caracha, Abuela" (39) integrate a firm identity into Lupe's life and her family's, while also representing a kind of liminality–yes, they speak Spanish, but they speak English as easily, if not more so. Even Abuela, who grew up in Mexico City (according to the comic's flashback scenes), more frequently communicates with Lupe and her other family members in English than she does in Spanish. Much can be said about the significance of Spanglish as an established dialect in the U.S. (there is even an Adam Sandler movie from 2004 that uses the term as its title), but it suffices to say that the use of the seamless integration of English and Spanish in *Quince* shapes its cultural presence and its characters identities into both

specific categorizations, and broader application. Spanglish makes Lupe and her family appeal to a specific audience, while also making them relatable to a wider demographic.

Contributing to *Quince*'s pluricultural marketing and appeal is the publication of its official hardcover edition, which comes with all fifteen issues in both English AND Spanish. This edition, sold by Fanbase Press, is marketed as the "definitive bilingual edition:" it can be opened from either the front or the back, with one side in (mostly) English, and the other in Spanish. In between the two versions of the comic is concept art from the comic's production phase and essays about the cultural production and significance of the comic. Reading *Quince* in Spanish changes the reader's experience because it removes the aforementioned cultural clue of the use of Spanglish in Lupe's inner dialogue and in conversations with her family, while also firmly cementing the identity of the comic in the Latin American, Spanish-speaking world. The Spanish publication of the comic is only in Spanish—there is no English thrown in where in the original publication there were Spanish words and phrases punctuating the English dialogue. By removing this feature that reinforced *Quince*'s position in liminal space that Lupe herself also occupies—between the U.S. and Latin American societies, not fully belonging to either—*Quince* takes on a different tone that doesn't necessarily weaken its rhetorical capability, but certainly changes the way it can be approached by its readers.

Of course, having a translated version of *Quince* means that the story is accessible to readership from outside an English, U.S.-based context, meaning that Lupe's story takes on a more specific cultural context. But the published bilingual edition also has utility for readers either learning English, or who are growing up speaking both Spanish and English, giving children of families who speak Spanish but live in the U.S. the opportunity to continue to belong to a part of their own cultural heritage. There are many who grew up as children of

first-generation immigrants who didn't learn Spanish from an early age, or who are the children of second or even third-generation immigrants who can't communicate with members of their family because they didn't learn Spanish. The bilingual edition of *Quince* thus presents an opportunity for these readers to, as the quinceañera tradition itself attempts to do, assimilate to their nationality while keeping alive vestiges of their ethnic heritage.

The fact that the bilingual edition exists at all demonstrates Kadlecik's desire to produce a product that can reach a variety of experiences, based on his own positionality as a mixed-race person who strongly identifies with his Latinx heritage. In his introductory remarks to *Quince*, he writes that he "wanted to create a story that focused on [his] family's heritage…*Quince* was [his] chance to portray a Latinx family in a favorable light" ("The Origin Story" 3). He also discusses his own experiences growing up as a person of mixed ethnic heritage on several podcasts, including *Mis Primos Podcast* and *Comadres y Comics Podcast*. A recurring theme of Kadlekic's remarks in these interviews is a feeling of not belonging to any category: "I would get questions like, are you Italian, are you Greek…which was whatever, but you do start to think like, am I enough, am I enough of anything?" ("Quinceañeras and Penguins: A Conversation with Sebastian Kadlecik," 17:45). The discomfort of existing in a liminal space–between the U.S. and another culture–is one that appears in many of the sources I consulted about quinceañeras, and particularly sources about the consumerism and assimilation evident in the contemporary quinceañera celebration.

Gonzalez Valentina writes that the quinceañera is "mediated by affective economic relations in which memory and shared nostalgia are imbricated with the coordinated material practices of ritual to conjure dreams of material wealth and social success" (*Quinceañera Style* 3), contributing to other sources cited by Alvarez and Dávalos that position the quinceañera as an

effort to both establish ethnic difference and maintain tradition, while allowing assimilation. Kadlekic's assertion of feeling "not enough" of either culture differs slightly from many of my sources because he is describing the experience of being biracial, but at the same time, his sentiment captures a component of the quinceañera celebration that is evident in *Quince* as a published work: the bilingual nature of both the original comic and its mixed Spanish-English dialogue, and that of translated Spanish edition being published alongside the already multicultural original mean that *Quince* attempts to, and possibly succeeds in, bridging the gap between complex ethnic and cultural identities.

So Lupe's story takes on the ability to adapt and fit into a wide range of readers' worldviews and experiences, which means its message becomes more legible and easier to put into practice for more readers. Additionally, the title of the series, *Quince,* does make a specific reference to the quinceañera, but at the same time, its English meaning—fifteen—suggests that even readers from a non-Latinx background can identify with the experience of an adolescence full of evolution, challenges, and discomfort. Kadlecik and the Steinkellner sisters thus have created a cultural product that delivers diversity and cultural education as a digestible, clearly explained, and entertaining package. The significance of *Quince* as a story and as a comic finds further explanation when it is placed in conversation with other similar narratives—the comic book stories that inform our understanding of what it means to be a hero.

Quince and Superhero Tropes

Some reference has already been made to Lupe's story and how it compares to other superhero narratives, but this topic must be more closely investigated to fully demonstrate the work *Quince* does in creating a new kind of superhero, and even a new kind of reality. The components of a superhero's story: their origin, appearance, transformation, nemesis (or

nemeses), and personal relationships are all addressed in *Quince*, and almost all of these components make reference to traditional mainstays of the superhero lifestyle, while subverting them. The comic's self-awareness and breaking of the fourth wall, like when Lupe and other characters reference established superheroes and villains (101), is part of how it accomplishes the task of both setting up *Quince* as a superhero narrative, while flipping the script and presenting Lupe and her heroism as a hopeful future.

Quince is far from the first superhero comic that draws on Latinx culture. Frederick Luis Aldama's *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* gives something of a retrospective of Latinx superheroes through the 20th and 21st centuries, documenting the evolution of representation from a 1949 supervillain named El Papagayo, who is decked in South American-inspired clothing and has a parrot sidekick, and exclaims during a fight against Batman "Kill him! Kill the Bat-hombre!" (12) to 2011's reincarnation of Spider-Man as Blatino teen Miles Morales (83). Aldama's overview of Latinx representation in superhero comics is obviously an enormous undertaking, given both the sheer volume of comics in existence and the complicated definition of Latinx. As Isabel Millán asserts, "[Latinx] demarcates a multifaceted category including identities, histories, cultural productions, academic fields, and niche markets affecting how one might classify or characterize Latinx comics" ("Latinx" 134), and even though the category is even more specific because of its focus on superheroes, there is still a great deal of ground to cover.

This broadness is almost crucial to how the Latinx superhero is characterized, something that Aldama points out: "our demographic group has been orphaned within the United States' socioeconomic system. *This adds to the equally relatable dimension of Latino superheroes being self-constructed—built through physical and mental work*" (118-9, emphasis added). Rather than

being part of a military experiment, like Captain America, or building superheroic powers and technology through wealth accrued by participation in the U.S. military-industrial complex and economy, like Iron Man, most of the superheroes who fit into the Latinx category are self-constructed: Bane, Maya Lopez, Vibe, Miles Morales (118). Lupe is a clear example of this type of hero, in that her powers not only don't come from pain or trauma, but that she gets them from her family. She may have been orphaned by the U.S. socioeconomic system, but she certainly is reinforced by her own (and her family's) mental and physical work.

The self-constructed aspect of Lupe as a superhero is evident in her origin story and transformation, which use a cultural benchmark–the quinceañera–as a jumping off point. As described in the plot summary, Lupe's evolution into a superhero occurs in the bathroom at her quinceañera. She describes feeling physical discomfort, like she's "going to vomit and have diarrhea and [her] period all at the same time" (11). Rather than any of these natural, human processes occurring, Lupe instead suddenly finds that the mirror, sink, and all other parts of the bathroom around her have spontaneously shattered. Her abuela comes into the bathroom and surveys the scene, with an awareness of Lupe's situation–having been through the same transformation herself–and she then guides Lupe through the process of repairing everything she has just destroyed. There is then no permanent damage caused by her transformation, no public humiliation, or harm inflicted on others: it is a personal, intimate experience shared with a close and trusted family member.

The transformation Lupe experiences stands in sharp contrast to those of other superheroes: while she is experiencing physical discomfort and causes some unintentional destruction, she is largely the same as she was before–only emotionally unnerved. In the introduction to *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation,* Elizabeth McFarlane

captures the trope of the superhero's physical transformation via physical trauma: "The body is struck by lightning, submerged in nuclear waste, pierced by the fangs of a radioactive spider, submitted to laboratory procedures, cut apart and engineered, hybridised, and emerges stronger than ever, but forever after not quite human" (1). Most well-known superheroes experience some kind of horrific event in order to become the supernatural icons that make them worthy of a comic book or movie. But instead of causing Lupe bodily harm and pain, her powers simply make her more aware of her body and its power. From the inception of her superheroic journey, we already see a different way of being super–one that doesn't rely on pain or trauma. Even the response to her transformation is unique: Lupe's abuela comes to check on her, and upon seeing the scene of destruction, seems to know immediately what's going on and how to help. Rather than needing to hide the evidence of her transformation, like Peter Parker hides his webs from Aunt May, Lupe is able to rely on a support system who understands what she's going through. McFarlane continues describing the superhero body as "capable of amazing feats, incapable of belonging, finding community, or the comfort of anonymity" (1), but Lupe already belongs–her transformation even occurs at a community and cultural celebration. Even in just her origin story, she is already demonstrating a new kind of way to be a superhero.

Lupe's body is also a subject for study in relation to superhero tropes, and it is also a topic of conversation and commentary for many of the characters in *Quince*. Sebastian Kadlekic states in an interview on the *Mis Primos Podcast* that he wanted *Quince* to be "body positive," and that he told Emma Steinkellner, the comic's illustrator, "I want [Lupe] to look like, nothing special about her, just an average person like the rest of us trying to survive high school" ("Quinceañeras and Penguins"). Although the word 'average' has some baggage, since certainly there is a wide enough variety of body types that there truly isn't one that is 'normal' or

'average,' Kadlekic's point is made more relevant in the context of comic book superheroes, and especially female superheroes. Rebecca Burch and Laura Johnsen's 2019 study of Marvel superheroes and their physical proportions, "Captain Dorito and the Bombshell: Supernormal Stimuli in Comics and Film," reveals that female superheroes and supervillains tend to be "uniformly thin and hyperfeminine, with waist-to-hip ratios smaller than the most sought-after porn actresses'" (115). The superheroines in mainstream film that come to mind fit this model: Scarlett Johannsen as Black Widow, almost all iterations of Wonder Woman, and even though they may not have the expected 'hourglass' proportions, even Brie Larson as Captain Marvel and Elizabeth Olsen's Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch have the slim bodies referenced in Burch and Johnsen's study. So though there may not be an 'average' body type in general, Kadlekic's assertion that he wanted Lupe's body to have "nothing special about it" certainly challenges the expected appearance of female superheroes.

Throughout *Quince,* Lupe's appearance–both as her superhero identity Q and as herself–is frequently referenced by those around her and herself. In fact, several comments are made critiquing her for not looking like a superhero should: one of Lupe's classmates responds to a comment Lupe's crush Devin makes about Q (who is Lupe, unbeknownst to both of them), by saying "I thought superheroes were supposed to be skinny" (59). Even Lupe's own sister Sophia doubts that Lupe is Q when her family forces her to admit it: she says "this girl has a superhero butt, and you have a plain old regular butt" (78). Once she accepts Lupe's identity, however, she becomes enthusiastic about Lupe redesigning her Q costume. Sophia's preliminary sketches depict Lupe in a tiny skirt and boots with comically oversized breasts and buttocks, and prompt Lupe to assert "Sophia, I can't wear these. People would see my reproductive organs," to which Sophia responds, "That's like the POINT of fashion" (87).

The question of how much skin can and/or should be revealed is crucial both to the superhero costume and the quinceañera dress. To Sophia's point, Lupe's superhero costume covers more skin than is usually expected for a female superhero, as Burch and Johnsen comment: "Female costumes are also more likely to show more skin, with cutouts on the arms, thighs, and, in particular, on the chest to show cleavage" demonstrating "the irony of battle uniforms that serve no protective purpose" ("Captain Dorito" 118). Like the lack of protection afforded by stereotypical female superhero costumes, the coverage afforded by the quinceañera dress is often a subject of contention for contemporary quinceañeras. The more traditional style of quince dress tended to cover the chest and arms with a giant skirt that acted as "a kind of chastity device" but now, many dressmakers provide "plunging V halter tops and strapless gowns and bare backs and corset bodices…that suggest the intimacy of an undergarment (Alvarez 46). Lupe's quince dress walks a line between the two traditions, in that it has spaghetti straps that reveal her arms and decolletage, but it also has the full skirt and the pink hue expected of a traditional dress. So both in her physical appearance and in her presentation as a superhero, in her Q costume and her quinceañera dress, Lupe avoids the categorical stereotypes of the female superhero.[15]

There is one component of Lupe's superhero arc that fits the expectations of the comic book tropes, which is that she has a supervillain nemesis–but even this component is slightly reimagined to suggest that opposition need not be destroyed to be resolved but can be rehabilitated. In the foreword to *The Supervillain Reader,* Stephen Graham Jones writes that "Without supervillains, there can be no superheroes. This is an axiom in the world of capes and

[15] Though by her sister's judgment, Lupe doesn't fit the physical expectations of a female superhero, but it is worth noting that the emphasis placed on her butt fits within the recurring tropes of 'the Latina body,' as explored in the introduction to Myra Mendible's *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* ((2007). So although the comic intentionally avoids one stereotype, it may unintentionally reinforce another–which doesn't necessarily undercut the significance of Lupe's appearance in terms of body positivity, but shouldn't be overlooked, either.

tights—it's going to be a boring comic book if there's no one to fight—but it goes for the world at large, too, since forever" (xii). Lupe's nemesis Garrett provides necessary opposition for her development, both superheroic and personal, but also requires the reader to question their understanding of villainy. Garrett was bullied in school, lost his father at a young age, and got his powers when he found out his father "had a mad scientist lab" and "spend th[e] past fall doing experiments on [himself], then, one day, boom, superpowers" (100). He describes himself as an antihero, "like the Dark Knight and Deadpool," and insists that he's using his powers rightfully to give his bullies "a taste of their own medicine" (101). The combination of a traumatic childhood and social ostracism is what is responsible for Garrett's anger and resulting violence against his classmates, and though the reader certainly has a bias towards rooting for Lupe since she is the protagonist, Garrett's backstory pulls on both the reader and Lupe's heartstrings, allowing Garret to position himself as a sympathetic villain.

The sympathetic or tragic villain has been a storytelling staple for centuries, and it remains prevalent in contemporary film, television, and comic books. A tragic or sympathetic villain believes their harmful actions are either righteous, warranted, or both, and "has some measure of sympathy for the dissident protagonist, and…by virtue of [their] own tragic lost potential, receives more sympathy from the reader than a mindless drone ever could" (McGiveron 125). Shakespeare's tragic villains are some of the most commonly referenced early iterations of the trope: *The Merchant of Venice*'s Shylock, *Othello*'s Iago, even Caliban from *The Tempest*, are all characters whose actions within their storylines are objectively evil, but with context, backstory, and character development, their deviousness can be excused, or at the very least, explained. Through literary centuries, the trope persists, from Satan in *Paradise Lost* to Mrs. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* to Smeagol/Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings.* These characters force

the audience to confront the complexities present in war, rather than easily relying on the traditional good vs. evil perspective. They make the audience consider if the protagonist they're rooting for, be it Jane Eyre, Othello, or Iron Man, is truly the hero–or if the villain's expositional monologue about their motivations might have a ring of reason to it.

Superheroes and supervillains usually have more shared qualities than differences, which makes the imposition of a good vs. evil dynamic more complicated for the audience. Randy Duncan's afterword to *The Supervillain Reader* points out that readers tend to identify with villains because they break the rules, and "there is a part of each of us that wants to break rules imposed by civilization." But superheroes also break rules: "Supposedly what separates heroes from villains is the ethical, responsible use of power. Yet, superheroes have always abused power to some extent" ("Gloriously Flawed Saviors" 372). Superheroes and villains also usually experience similar origin stories wherein their powers result from physical and/or emotional trauma (*The Supervillain Reader* xxv), as well as social ostracism either because they have to keep their identity a secret, or because of their appearance/social status/other factor that may have driven them to become superpowered.

Between *Quince'*s superpowered characters, Lupe and Garrett, the similarities are discernible even in their few one-on-one interactions. Their superpowers came to them around the same time in their lives, they're generally keeping those powers to themselves, and they experience cruelty at the hands of their classmates. Lupe herself points this out to Garrett when they have a showdown at prom, as he is about to attack Jasmine–the popular girl who Garrett says has teased him constantly: "Jasmine is mean to everyone. She regularly says hurtful things about my body. That doesn't mean you're allowed to murder her at prom" (128). This statement ties into Peter Coogan's observation in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* that killing is

"generally regarded as a line that superheroes will not cross because it makes them too much like the criminals they fight" (110). There are likely examples in contemporary comics and comic book film adaptations that prove this statement wrong, but in *Quince,* the moral line of killing is one that informs Lupe and Garrett's relationships to each other, as well as their presentation to the audience and *Quince'*s status as a rule-breaking piece of visionary fiction.

During the final showdown, both Lupe and Garrett must confront their respective relationships to their powers and the lengths they will go to in order to create the vision of the world they see as being 'better.' While Lupe and Garrett both faced bullying and rejection from their classmates, Lupe's approach is to use her powers to make the world around her safer–including saving classmates who have been cruel to her from threats–while Garrett's plan is to impose justice by giving his classmates "a taste of their own medicine" (101). Again, the similarities between hero and villain demonstrate that this dichotomy is more complex than it tends to be presented as being, and also reinforces the idea that often, what distinguishes a superhero from a supervillain is perspective, and that "If we reversed focus and considered the story from the point of view of the villain, wouldn't the hero be the villain and the villain the hero?" (Peaslee xxix). Peaslee uses X-Men's villain Magneto as an example of this: "[Magneto] fights for mutant rights…with a much more militant stance than Professor X, who dreams of peaceful coexistence with the human community. Magneto can be seen as a Malcolm X type, while Xavier can be compared to Martin Luther King Jr." (xxviii). Extending the comparison, Lupe can be compared here to Professor X, while Garrett is more like Magneto: informed by their experiences as outcasts, they have a vision of equality and justice–but their methods differ drastically. From their encounter at prom, where Lupe uses her powers to defend her classmates, to their final showdown in the comic's penultimate issue and the events following, *Quince*

suggests that it is possible to rehabilitate and redirect the powers and instincts that make Garrett a threat.

If the action that separates superhero from supervillain is the ability to kill, then the final issue of *Quince* can even be read as suggesting that Garrett isn't even a villain. During his and Lupe's final battle on a rooftop near the end of the comic's penultimate issue, she attempts to appeal to his humanity by telling him that she knows he's suffering and wants to help him. He initially seems to soften, but then lashes out at her and knocks her off the roof…bringing the issue to a dramatic, inconclusive ending: the final frame shows Garrett standing with a look of shock on his face, his hands glowing green with his ill-gotten powers, and Lupe in her prom dress plummeting to the ground. But at the beginning of the fifteenth and final issue, Lupe's hand is caught by a glowing, green one–and Garrett saves her from the deadly fall. He tells Lupe, "you're really annoying, obviously, but, like, not annoying enough to die, I guess" (149). Though his words could be kinder, he ultimately fails the supervillain test, and instead, becomes Lupe's "kind-of friend" who she sits with at lunch, takes with him as moral support to talk to his mom about everything that's happened to him, and even lets her walk him to therapy. Lupe's friendship with Garrett, and her observation that "people in trouble don't always need a caped crusader…Sometimes, what someone needs most is a friend who will sit with them" (150) creates a reality where antiheroes and/or sympathetic villains can be redeemed, rather than defeated. In fact, this reality even allows the perspective to shift so that Garrett isn't a villain, but a victim in need of help, which, once received, allows him to begin to change.

The superhero and supervillain typically share characteristics that shape their interactions with each other as well as the world at large, as previously mentioned, but what distinguishes *Quince'*s villain is that the hero uses those similarities, combined with her own lived experience

and emotional resources, to turn the villain around. In his chapter of *The Supervillain Reader*, "The Supervillain," Peter Coogan notes that the supervillain's evil "most often emerges as a defense mechanism to make up for feelings of inferiority and inadequacy…they are…in love with the story of their wound, unable to get beyond whatever happened in their past and turn their energies towards healing or redemptive therapy" (49). It is well established in *Quince* that Garrett's reasons for using his powers against others are because of his past–his father's death, his mother's distance, and bullying. But Lupe offers him a way to "turn [his] energies towards healing [and] redemptive therapy" by physically being with him through the process. We saw how her abuela offered her emotional support in her early days of her superhero lifestyle, as well as her family offering her support once they were made aware of her status. Then, Lupe offers those emotional resources to Garrett to help him heal and change. She doesn't overcome him with physical and/or superpowers, but instead, offers him kindness and humanity.

While *Quince* is not the first superhero comic that presents a villain redeemed, it is unique in that the villain's reformation is due to exterior influence, rather than a desire to change or a reluctance to villainy in the first place. Peter Coogan gives several examples of "supervillains who join the good guys–Hawkeye, the Black Widow, Quicksilver, the Scarlet Witch, and even Sandman." He also notes that these 'villains' often become so reluctantly, like Black Widow being coerced into becoming a spy by Soviet threat, or Hawkeye's mentor the Swordsman pushing him into violence. Coogan clarifies that all of these examples in which a villain changes teams and becomes good, "the supervillain's reformation is built on an ambivalence that is part of the villain's character" ("The Supervillain" 45). There is no ambivalence in Garrett's desire to do harm–not until Lupe suggests to him that he can change: "I know you think you're an antihero, Garrett, but if you just hold on, and, like, find the right

mental health professionals, I think you can turn it around and be a real superhero. I really believe that" (144). It is also crucial to note that in this showdown, Lupe no longer has her superpowers–she uses the last of them (since it is her sixteenth birthday, and she would be losing them anyway) to heal Abuela while she is in the hospital. So Lupe's victory over Garrett isn't even so much of a victory, and Garrett doesn't really experience defeat: rather, their final encounter results in a resolution of the two characters' shared journeys that leaves them both better off than they were before.

The conclusion of *Quince*, which reiterates the aforementioned result of being 'better off than before,' also presents an alternative to a traditional superhero trope. Lupe's powers themselves are nontraditional, as she receives them when she turns fifteen, and they only last for a single year. The terminal nature of these powers means that her relationship to her status as a superhero is unique from most–rather than being a burden or a curse that she must struggle with for her entire life, Lupe has a limited amount of time to make use of her abilities. There is no explanation given about why her powers only last for the year that she is fifteen, but it can be extrapolated that it is existence as a fifteen-year-old, with the implications that has from the culture Lupe and her family come from, that grant her superhuman status. Once she loses those powers upon her sixteenth birthday, she decides to continue to contribute to her community by using her other powers–like her ability to listen, to perform physical labor, and to be happy: "I'm still trying to be a hero. Now, my costume is just whatever I'm wearing that day" (155). There is no suggestion of a sequel, which most superhero narratives have since the comic medium allows for a relatively easy continuation of a story. Instead, Lupe takes her year-long superhero experience as part of her personal development journey and finds a way to apply the lessons she

learned to her life moving forward. She doesn't need to be a superhero in order to make the world a better place.

There is no denying that *Quince* is a superhero comic that draws inspiration and key components from established tropes in the superhero genre, but it also takes these tropes and presents them in a way that suggests a new kind of future is possible. From Lupe's transformation, which doesn't require physical or emotional trauma–and in fact, really draws on familial love and support–to her physical appearance and abilities to her antagonist and the story's resolution, *Quince* offers a new kind of superhero narrative that makes superheroism almost universal. She had her powers for a limited time, and then continues on living her life informed by her previous experiences. The presentation of such kind and hopeful heroism brings to mind the statement from Syndrome/Buddy Pine, the villain of Pixar's *The Incredibles* (who is also a compelling study of the sympathetic villain), that "When everyone [is] super, no one will be" (*The Incredibles*). Though Syndrome says this in a negative way, I want to present the inverse of this statement as the message of *Quince*'s use of superhero tropes: if no one is super, then everyone is–meaning, with or without superhuman powers, everyone has the capacity to affect change and positively impact those around them. In the same vein, I argue that *Quince* can and should be read as a piece of visionary fiction that offers an attainable vision of a kinder, better world.

Chapter 3: *Quince* as Visionary Fiction

Miles Morales is the first Blatino Spider-Man, and as such, his ethnic identity is a central component of his story. He would perhaps not be as remarkable, or at least, not as relevant in this particular context, if he were white, like the Spider-Men before him. But although he "is firmly situated within a loving African American (father) and Latina (mother) family who become integral parts of his total education as he moves from teenagehood to adulthood" (*Graphic Borders* 11), Miles' powers ultimately have no connection to his cultural makeup. He, like the other Spider-Men (and Spider-Entities) before him, was bitten by a radioactive spider–a physically traumatic incident that caused a permanent change in his body. This is the same type of transformation process experienced by most superheroes, although not necessarily the same method: physical trauma resulting in permanent change. While superhero stories can and are certainly inspiring, uplifting, and hopeful, there is still a necessary element of pain and loss attached to the genre. The loss can be of a family member, which Miles experiences, and also simply the loss of a previous way of life and identity. Regardless of what the changes are, they are permanent, or at least they seem to be in the context that is given to readers.

Both the introduction and conclusion of this work address Spider-Man, and Miles Morales and Peter Parker feature in various examples throughout my analysis. Aside from the obvious similarity–both the Spider-Man narratives and *Quince* explore unexpected superheroic transformations during teenage years–the male-dominated stories of Spider-Man provide a foil to *Quince* and its particular power as I have demonstrated here. Where male adolescence is certainly often presented as embarrassing and inconvenient, and Spider-Man mirrors this experience (the echo of unwanted ejaculation in Spider-Man's webs), it carries less, or at least a different kind of, societal baggage. Boys become men, but their physicality generally remains the

same. Through adolescence, the female body gains new abilities, starts new cycles, and becomes the subject of greater expectations and requirements. *Quince* allows readers to explore this change both literally and figuratively as represented through Lupe's superheroic transformation, and because of the centering of an accepted narrative (teen transformation) on an unexpected subject (a Latinx girl), the comparison between these two superhero stories provides a useful framework for recognizing the importance and uniqueness of *Quince.*[16]

Quince's primary topics are superpowers and the quinceañera, both of which are opportunities for transformation. Elizabeth McFarlane tells us that "The superhuman body is a site of possibility" (2), while Rachel Valentina Gonzalez says that "Quinceañeras are the manifestations of possibility" (1). The quinceañera occurs during female adolescence, a time of rapid change and development, physically, emotionally, and socially. Adolescence inherently holds possibility, and naturally, the celebration of such a time also includes the presence of possibility: in the celebrant herself, and, as has been explored, even in the components of the celebration.

In addition to commemorating adolescence, the quinceañera is a cultural landmark, and one that has developed over time and location to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of U.S. Latinidad. So it is doubly a site of possibility, with the adolescent girl also confronting the cultural heritage she has received and will continue to establish and make her own through the rest of her life as an adult. The superhero body presents a similar context: who knows what powers will develop from whatever transformative experience the superhero body has, and who can say what those powers and/or the superhero themselves will evolve into as a result of their

[16] Pixar's 2022 *Turning Red* is an example of another such work, and its treatment of cultural heritage, adolescence, and the power therein would make a compelling further study of this body of work, particularly as it examines a transformation trope within another cultural context (that of Asian-Americans), and the similarities and differences in the way powers are treated in *Quince* and *Turning Red* may offer more insight into the shifting landscape of representation and empowerment.

practicing of their powers and living within their new body. By combining these elements of transformation into one comic book, and one character, Sebastian Kadlekic and the Steinkelner sisters write a story that is both informed by the power of possibility, and, I argue, is a site of possibility itself.

The world in *Quince* is not one that is truly so far from our own, at least aesthetically–but the lives lived by the characters and the interactions between them are a world that as yet does not exist. While the technology, clothing, and environmental setting in *Quince* seem close to a typical, contemporary U.S.-based experience, the opportunity Lupe has to experience a transformation that is informed by her culture, and supported by family, rather than working against her marginalization and experiencing trauma, is a unique superhero narrative, and even a unique real-life one. Walidah Imarisha expresses in various contexts that "all organizing is science fiction," because the act of advocating for "a world free of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism" requires imagining "a world that doesn't currently exist. *But collectively dreaming up one that does means we can begin building it into existence*" ("Rewriting The Future: Using Science Fiction To Re-Envision Justice," emphasis added). The collective dreaming of a world such as the one Imarisha describes is markedly present in *Quince,* especially given the medium of the message. The comic book is a unique space for such ideas to be explored, given that "comics are often collaborations between multiple creators (e.g. authors, illustrators, inkers, colorists, graphic designers). Each individual brings their unique style, perspective, and lived experiences to these collaborations" (Millán 135). By definition, comics in general require a collective imagination of a new, or at least different world, and in *Quince*, that collective dreaming is done by creators who come from distinct backgrounds and life

experiences that inform their approach to world creation. The world they create is one that affords power to a marginalized group, rather than pain.

Many of the sources about quinceañeras I read emphasized the difficulties faced by young Latinx women in the U.S., and although I don't want to overemphasize these difficulties, it is pertinent to acknowledge the marginalized status of Latinx women in the U.S., which is even more difficult for adolescents who don't have as much control over their status as they might as adults. In "Chicana Life Cycle Rituals," Norma Cantú writes that the extravagance of quinceañera celebrations "baffles outsiders who do not understand the contradictions that it underscores in a community with excessively high dropout rates, high teen pregnancy, double-digit unemployment rates, and high levels of poverty" (16). Although this observation comes from an article that was published in 2002, the message it conveys is consistent with outsider beliefs about the quinceañera and its extravagance. This belief is also underscored by visible stereotypes about young Latinx women in general that still persist in contemporary media–for example, HBO and A24's *Euphoria* features a character named Maddy Perez (played by Latinx actor Alexa Demie) whose storyline is largely focused on her sex life, drug use, and complicated romantic decisions. Even a television show made by production companies that tend to present themselves as more progressive, like A24, still relies on stereotypes to inform a central character, illustrating the continued marginalization of Latinx adolescent women.

By making its main character and hero a Latinx teenage girl, *Quince* participates in creating a new kind of reality where identity is a source of power, rather than an impediment to it. Lupe is firmly an adolescent Latinx girl, and the celebration of her quinceañera as the impetus for her superhero journey solidifies this identity as not just part of her character, but the reason for her powers. The reader is even made aware that this isn't just a one-off thing, since Lupe's

abuela makes sure to describe her own experiences with receiving her powers at age fifteen, and that "this is something that happens in [their] family" (*Quince* 29). The powers Lupe receives, and the formative experiences she has while exercising them, come to her as a result of the things that traditionally would disempower, or at least disadvantage her in the U.S., Anglo-patriarchal society: her gender, her age, and her ethnic heritage. These are not attributes she has to overcome in order to be powerful, but the very reasons that she is–both in the superhero way, and the power she continues to exert on her community after she turns sixteen and is no longer 'super' in the same way. Imarisha states that "visionary fiction centers those who have been marginalized in larger society, especially those who live at the intersections of identities and oppressions" ("Rewriting the Future"), and Lupe's status as a fifteen-year-old Latinx female places her firmly at an 'intersection of identity and oppression.' Not only does *Quince* center such a character, but it uses the things that would normally oppress her as the sources of her power: envisioning a world where marginalized identities are sources of strength, rather than obstacles to overcome.

Part of *Quince*'s power is also a reasonable point of critique: although the celebration of the quinceañera identifies Lupe as having Latinx heritage, she never identifies herself as being Latinx, nor is there a clear indication of her ethnic heritage.[17] While this means that her story is accessible to a wider audience, it can also be perceived as a continuation of what Ramzi Fawaz describes as the "diversification of superhero comics…conditioned by economic demands to appeal to a more diverse readership" (20). Though Fawaz is referring to the post-war trends in comics in the late 1960s, the sentiment remains pertinent today as more mainstream businesses and even politicians become attuned to the economic advantages of presenting diversity and progress as part of their agenda: mainstream publishers DC and Marvel are not interested in innovation—unless it sells. For as long as the innovative comic sells, there is money backing its

[17] See Chapter 3 for more specific analysis of this point.

production and distribution…When it stops selling, resources are cut" (*Graphic Borders* 15). Because of the trend of larger publishers dropping comics when they are not successful, Aldama and Gonzalez emphasize that many Latino comic book creators opt to publish independently–something worth noting in this context, since *Quince* was published by indie publisher Fanbase Press. But regardless of publication, the fact remains that *Quince* is a comic that keeps its characters in ethnic limbo, opting out of having Lupe and her family members self-identify as a particular ethnicity, and even never having them identify themselves as Latino.

The ethnic ambiguity seems even more troubling in light of the authorship of the comic, which was actually written by Kit Steinkelner, who is white, though Kadlecik is the comic's creator. The host of the *Mis Primos Podcast* addresses this issue with Kadlecik: "...hold on, this was written by a white woman? What was that about?" Kadlecik has likely been asked this question before, as he is prepared with an answer that essentially conveys that, though Kit (and her sister Emma) produced the tangible components of the comic, it was his creative vision inspired by his own life experiences and heritage: "I had done character-building and world building…all this foundational stuff…they totally respected that I had a vision…and it was really about executing that vision." He even goes on to emphasize his co-creators' respect towards the project and its subject matter, stating that they both have expressed to him that they "wouldn't have walked into this world if [they] hadn't been invited" ("Quinceañeras and Penguins"). The fact that Kadlekic is prepared to answer this question, and that the question itself was even asked, makes it clear that there is some tension about the creation of such a culturally specific product by a team from outside of the culture. But his answer, and the comic itself, represent something hopeful: that diverse stories can be told regardless of who is writing them.

Given the comic's authorship, it is reasonable to question if it qualifies as 'a Latino comic,' or how it should be categorically perceived by readers and scholars. Millán states that "Who decides whether a comic is Latinx may include creators, editors, publicists, consumers, award selection committees or scholars," and gives the example of Gus Arriola's comic strip *Gordo*, as qualifying as a Latino comic despite the main character not being Latino: "[Gordo] was created through the U.S. Latino lens of the writer and illustrator for a primarily US audience" (135). According to this example, one factor in determining the Latinidad of a comic is the creator's experience and worldview, and since Kadlecik identifies himself as Latino (having a Mexican mother), *Quince* fits this criterion. Aldama and Gonzalez also grapple with the question of 'Latino comics,' ultimately stating that "there are different formulations on how to approach Latino comics. There are different statements about what comics (Latino, multi-ethnic, and otherwise) may or may not do. *Overall, there is the sense that comic books are a particularly good medium to overturn denigrating stereotypes*" (14, emphasis added). Since *Quince* takes a subject that itself is rife with contradictions and cultural ambiguity, the quinceañera, and uses it as a vehicle for self-exploration and personal growth, it seems fair to say that the comic can both defy and adhere to the categorization of 'Latino comic,' and in that ambiguity, accomplishes part of its purpose.

Quince serves myriad purposes, but two are the most critical in this context: one, it performs the difficult task of using speculative elements to make a statement about real-life issues and circumstances, and two, it presents this subject in a medium that makes this struggle accessible, appealing, and fun. The medium of the comic book makes this work possible, and *Quince*'s message would not be the same if presented otherwise. Citing again from Aldama and Gonzalez:

> The comic book storytelling medium…offers all variety of tensions and harmonies between its visual and verbal ingredients. It costs little to make. It offers the possibility of a grassroots-style distribution—through social media and word of mouth, for instance. It appeals to an assortment of readers: young and old, Latino and otherwise, females and males. Its consumption can take place in on-the-fly short bursts and in prolonged reading sessions. (1)

A preliminary reading of *Quince* might not tell you everything you need to know about the quinceañera tradition, the complexities of U.S.-Latinidad, superhero tropes, or the power of these elements combined. But it does tell you the story of a girl who gets superpowers at the celebration of her fifteenth birthday, where she is supported and coached by her family to use those powers to help those around her, as well as herself. That basic story is lifted up by the visual components, especially Lupe's physical appearance–her skin color, her body shape, her clothes–to allow readers to take whatever additional meaning from it they find. It makes the exploration of cultural identity, adulthood, and community accessible to readers of all ages, and it especially presents a new kind of world to younger readers whose worldview is still being shaped.

Kadlecik states in the introduction to *Quince* that he got the idea for the comic while watching his nieces play dress up as superheroes and realized that they didn't have a superhero that looked like them. That was the moment he decided to make a story they could look to, with "the hope…that [his] nieces would see themselves in *Quince* and, in turn, recognize themselves as heroes. And, hopefully, so would many others. All of the little girls I saw running around at comic conventions. And their moms. And my mom" (3). Although there have been various Latinx superheroes, even female ones, in comic books from the 20th century to now, Kadlecik's Lupe is one that takes the elements that could otherwise keep her from being powerful–age, gender, ethnic heritage–and makes them into the source of her strength. This is why *Quince* is a work of visionary fiction that offers a better future to its readers and those that come after them:

Walidah Imarisha states that visionary fiction "demand[s] that we see those who have been marginalized *not as victims but as leaders* and recognize that their ability to live outside acceptable systems is essential to creating new, just worlds" ("Rewriting the Future," emphasis added). Lupe is not a victim, despite her identity in this comic, and in her life, being centered around an event commemorating her womanhood, her adolescence, and her Latinidad. Rather, she is a leader, a superhero, who offers us a vision of a world where identity is power, and where the recognition of this truth makes the world a better place for everyone in it.

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