

Library Award for Undergraduate Research Application

Applicant: Sandra A. Shaker

Title: *The Phenomenon of the Neo-Quince in the United States, 1990s-2010s*

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I chose to write about *quinceañeras* because I am interested in how first and second-generation immigrant culture plays out in immigrant lands: what parts of one's culture an individual chooses to retain, and how they choose to express it. I was familiar with *quinceañeras* myself as I attended one in high school and came across a good novel in high school that used the planning and celebration of a young woman's *quince* as a way to trace her struggles with self-identification between multiple ethnic backgrounds. I also was interested in which ethnicities had coming-of-age ceremonies and which didn't; although I am Egyptian I had an American sweet 16 party, and sometimes found myself wishing I had a cultural rite of passage that I could go through before my wedding. All of this together led me to explore the idea of the *quince* and how it played out among Latinas in the United States. I knew I wanted to include personal interviews with some of my high school friends as well opinions of Latinas I had met on campus. I wanted to include the novel that had originally gotten me interested in the subject, as well as a book of a collection of personal experiences with quinces that I bought on a whim. I knew there was a film entitled *Quinceañera* that I wanted to incorporate, and this led me to keep an eye out on how the media portrays *quinces* and make a section in my paper about that. As I began doing research, I tried to let the information form how I was going to write my paper, and as a result I had several edits to my research question and thesis. Because I found so many ways to analyze the *quince* and why it was celebrated, I

chose organize my paper around multiple lenses, including gender, religion, economic class and social custom.

I found a rich variety of sources available to me, in the different media that I have already mentioned. The historiography regarding *quinceas* was also well developed, with many of the authors engaging in a dialogue with each other (such as Karal Ann Marling and Julia Alvarez). I remember specifically asking my instructor Reid, if he thought it would be the kind of project that needed archival research. He told me that I probably wouldn't find any useful material that way and I was content to search through the plethora of information that I already had. I know that if it hadn't been for Reid I would have wasted a lot of time looking for something that didn't exist, just because as a young historian I wasn't familiar with what kind of research archives include. I used McKeldin Library and Hornbake Library for my research, borrowing books by Ilan Stavans and Julia Alvarez from the first and the film *Quinceañera* from the latter. By being a member of the UMD Latin Dance Company and keeping in touch with high school classmates, I had a few Latinas that I could contact for personal interviews. I also drew on my personal knowledge of the ceremony and my own two novels, *Cuba 15* and *Fifteen Candles*. I did not specifically approach a librarian but I was put in touch with Patricia Herron, the library specialist for Latin American Studies, through my History 208B class. During that session I got an idea of how to look up related materials through the online catalogue that I found helpful in the months to come.

As I did my research, I realized there were many ways to classify the information I found, possibly too much for a 15-18-page paper. Julia Alvarez

emerged as the expert on the subject, weaving herself seamlessly into dialogue with other historians, speaking through a variety of lenses, including her personal experiences with the *quince*, and using a variety of sources including websites, magazines, personal interviews, personal journeys, and prior writing on the subject. I began to use her book for much of the context of my paper as well as for ideas on which specific subject areas surrounding the ceremony to probe into further.

Overall, writing this paper was a fantastic experience for me. I was interested in the subject the whole way through and really learned a lot from it, on both an academic and a personal level. By the end of the semester, although I felt that I was not done and had more to say—and therefore planned to expand up on it and edit it at a later date—I felt very proud of my writing and the compilation of information I had been able to do. One of the most useful things I learned was that sometimes there is too much research out there, and a good historian and writer has to be able to discern what is useful and usable from what is just good context or background information. I would have started reading earlier if I did, because I was unable to read all of my sources all the way through, and that additional information would have undoubtedly continued to shape my research. If I had had the means, it would have been great to interview a larger number of Latinas on their *quince* experiences, since I did not come across aggregate data on this subject. In terms of researching how the *quince* is reflected in the media, I could have read up on multiple Latino/a authors' own experiences with the *quince* and incorporated a compare/contrast section into my paper.

Nevertheless, I hope you find my paper to be as informative, interesting, and engaging as I found it to be while writing and researching about my topic. Thank you for taking the time out to consider my submission.