

READING LAHIRI, TRETHERWEY AND DÍAZ THROUGH GUSTAVO PÉREZ FIRMAT'S
HYPHENATED LENS

by

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In *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994) Gustavo Pérez Firmat discusses what it means to be Cuban American in the latter half of the twentieth century and the culminating struggles Cuban immigrants encounter living a hyphenated existence in the United States. Pérez Firmat emphasizes that “it is one thing to be Cuban in America, and quite another to be Cuban American” (3). If one is Cuban in America, their experience is drastically different because they continue to practice native traditions and live their lives as if they were still living in Cuba. On the other hand, if one is Cuban American, they naturally experience the life of both cultures—Cuban and American—and often feel conflicted, not belonging solely to one group or the other.

Pérez Firmat identifies three stages that Cuban immigrants experience as they attempt to adapt to a new home in America. The first stage he calls “‘substitutive,’ which consists of an effort to create substitutes or copies of the home culture” (7). These efforts soon begin to fade, however, and “destitution” takes over. He defines destitution as “not having a place to stand on” (10). Pérez Firmat expands upon this term: “This is what second-stage exiles feel: that the ground has been taken out from under them, that they no longer know their place, that they have in fact lost their place” (10). From this second stage evolves hurt, pain, and a sense of loss. Pérez Firmat’s third stage, “institution,” establishes “a new relation between person and place. To institute is to stand one’s ground, to dig in and endure” (11).

Pérez Firmat then explains a substantial part of his theory—the “1.5” or “one-and-a-half” generation. These individuals spent their childhood or adolescence abroad, in another country, but ultimately grew up as adults in America. “Life on the hyphen can be anyone’s prerogative,” Pérez Firmat writes early in his book, “but it is the one-and-a-half’s destiny” (4). This generation epitomizes what it means to live a hyphenated life, or to experience a double cultural

identity. They have lived their early years with one set of traditions and grown older in an oftentimes drastically different one. Pérez Firmat is aware of the difficulties the one-and-a-half generation faces, not only within their own families but also with their parents:

One-and-a-halfers are translation artists. Tradition bound but translation bent, they are sufficiently immersed in each culture to give both ends of the hyphen their due...it does not seem unusual that hyphenated cultures should emerge from a sensibility that is not universally shared within an immigrant group. Only those immigrants who arrived here between infancy and adulthood share both the atavism of their parents and the Americanness of their children. (5)

Life on the hyphen, in other words, is attributed mainly to those individuals who struggle in the balance of two cultures.

Anthropologists have coined two terms to help describe this cultural blending: “acculturation” and “transculturation” (5). Acculturation “stresses the acquisition of culture,” while transculturation “calls attention to the passage from one culture to another” (5). Pérez Firmat combines these two terms to create his own “biculturation,” which he uses to define the one-and-a-half generation. The pressure that accompanies multiple cultural identities is immense, and with it comes the feeling of never fully belonging. Pérez Firmat understands this concept well, being Cuban American himself. Having moved to the United States with his family shortly after Fidel Castro came to power, he explains this phenomenon: “One-and-a-halfers are no more American than they are Cuban - and vice versa. Their hyphen is a seesaw: it tilts first one way, then the other” (6). For Pérez Firmat, Cubans who live a hyphenated existence are in a constant battle between their opposing identities, never fully feeling as though there is an equilibrium between the two.

In *Life on the Hyphen* Pérez Firmat uses pop culture references, including the long-running television show *I Love Lucy*, the mambo, and the work of Cuban novelist Oscar Hijuelos to illustrate the hyphenated existence lived by Cuban immigrants. For Pérez Firmat, Desi Arnaz, who played the Ricky Ricardo character in the popular television show that first aired in October 1951, is the most prominent pop cultural icon representing Cuban immigrants in the United States (25). In the series Pérez Firmat recognizes the typical conflicts that occur between a husband and a wife as well as the problems that rise between diverging cultures. Lucy (starring American-born actress Lucille Ball) plays an American female, Ricky, a Cuban male. As husband and wife, the two characters' cultures clash in almost every *I Love Lucy* episode. Pérez Firmat analyzes a handful of shows that emphasize how Ricky's Cuban cultural identity and Lucy's strictly American culture battle one another, which often leads to confusion, anger, and dissent.

In the episode "Lucy Hires an English Tutor" (December 29, 1952), a pregnant Lucy argues with Ricky about the preferred sex of their soon-to-be-born baby and whether the child will learn to speak English or Spanish. To guarantee that their offspring speaks English, Lucy decides that Ricky will also have to speak "perfect English." She subsequently hires an English tutor to improve his speech, which means eliminating Ricky's Cuban accent. In the end the tutor not only fails in his quest but actually adopts an accent similar to Ricky's. Ultimately, Lucy accepts defeat. Pérez Firmat recognizes that Lucy abandons her efforts to make Ricky "more American" because she loves her Cuban husband and all of their cultural differences (27).

Pérez Firmat also discusses the episode "Ricky Minds the Baby," which aired two years later. In the episode Ricky tells his recently born son the classic story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Pérez Firmat notes the aspects of this scene that differentiate it from others in the show. First,

while Ricky narrates the story in Spanish, he uses enough English words to make the story recognizable to an English-speaking, American audience. Second, the scene lasts for a comparatively long time—nearly five minutes—which emphasizes the story’s dynamics even more. Finally, the scene takes place in Ricky and Lucy’s apartment, “normally Lucy’s domain, but it is Ricky who occupies the spotlight” (28). Pérez Firmat concludes that Ricky has the ability to “use Spanish for purposes other than romance or remonstrance” (28), which helps enforce the idea that Ricky is not simply a stereotype for the pleasure of an American audience’s viewing. This episode highlights the struggle immigrant parents often face while raising kids on the hyphen.

Finally, Pérez Firmat analyzes the episode “Home Movies” from March 1, 1954 to illuminate the play on biculturalism. In this episode Ricky is filming a pilot television episode in a nightclub. When Lucy gets wind of Ricky’s plan to shoot the show, she decides to film her own pilot episode in their living room. When a producer comes to view Ricky’s film, Ricky realizes that Lucy has spliced together their footage. Although Ricky is angry, the producer thinks the film is “genius.” The new version represents the characters’ cultural differences, especially as expressed in their individual spaces: the nightclub for Ricky and the apartment for Lucy (30-31), which shows how their diverse relationship makes them a more fulfilled and ultimately stronger couple.

According to Pérez Firmat, these *I Love Lucy* episodes and others establish the concept of biculturation that highlights what it means to be Cuban in America. The episodes depict the concepts of the substitutive and institutive stages as well as the one-and-a-half generation. Ricky himself is part of the one-and-a-half generation, which makes him want to create substitutes of Cuba to keep that culture intact, while also making a home in America, especially for his son.

The juxtaposition of Ricky and Lucy emphasizes not only cultural difference, but also what it means to be a 20th-century American immigrant. The show, however, emphasizes exaggeration to portray how American-born citizens also view new immigrants. Pérez Firmat states, “There is no doubt that *I Love Lucy*’s portrayal of things Cuban is generally stereotypical and sometimes condescending” (28). Even so, the character of Ricky Ricardo establishes himself as both an American and a Cuban American icon whose status benefits his marriage in the long run.

Pérez Firmat also discusses the mambo, or music and dance that has one foot in Cuba and the other in America. He describes the mambo as the other great icon of Cuban-American culture opposite Ricky Ricardo (80). Although the dance hit its stride in the 1950s, the music dates back several decades before. The word “mambo” comes from the Congo religion of Africa and originally meant “conversation” or “message” (82), which can be described as “a musical séance” (84). Pérez Firmat defines the mambo as “a one-and-a-halfer, born in Cuba but made in the U.S.A.” (80). He notes that while the mambo does have Cuban roots, its contact with the United States allowed the sound to fully emerge (80). Pérez Firmat further develops the mambo’s hyphenated existence, stating, “Conceived in Cuba, nurtured in Mexico, and brought to maturity in the United States, the mambo is a child of the Cuban *monte* [mountain] that spent most of its life away from the island” (81). The sound of mambo is perfectly balanced and appeals to listeners around the world. Without the need to translate lyrics, the music is able to reach a wider audience. Pérez Firmat describes the mambo as “a balancing act. Articulate lyrics in Spanish would have tipped the scale toward the Hispanic strain; extended lyrics in English would have done the same in the opposite direction. Inarticulateness left it in the middle, with its Cuban and American components in precarious, taut balance” (88). Because it is rooted in both Cuba and America, the mambo exemplifies life on the hyphen.

Finally, Pérez Firmat discusses the writing of Oscar Hijuelos to illustrate his concept of life on the hyphen. A novelist, Hijuelos was born in New York in 1951 (136). He describes Hijuelos as “a cross-over artist” (136), which means that he writes about Cuba as a way to pay tribute to the culture but also to move away from Cuba toward the United States. Hijuelos creates characters who are American-born children with Cuban parents (136). The perspective of these characters exemplifies the hyphenated existence, as they are not fully Cuban or fully American. Pérez Firmat analyzes in great length Hijuelos’s first novel, *Our House in the Last World*, published in 1983. The novel follows the Santinios, an immigrant family on their journey from Cuba to the United States. The story begins with the parents meeting in Cuba, their subsequent marriage, their emigration to America, and the birth of their children. The novel focuses on Héctor, the second son, and his difficult upbringing (137). Héctor clashes with his “Cuban manhood - what it means, what it costs, how to achieve it” (138). Searching for a sense of self, he struggles to find a balance between his Cuban and American identities, which puts enormous pressure on his daily family life.

Hijuelos’s second novel, the 1989 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Mambo King Plays Songs of Love*, chronicles the life of two brothers, César and Néstor Castillo. They emigrate to New York from Cuba and start a band called the Mambo Kings. Ironically, the brothers find fame when they appear in an *I Love Lucy* episode, playing Ricky Ricardo’s cousins (146). The novel takes a twist, however, as Pérez Firmat points out that the first character we encounter is not César but Eugenio, the author of the fictional prologue and epilogue. Pérez Firmat states that the “prologue gives his account of seeing a rerun of the *I Love Lucy* episode, where César and Néstor appeared, an ‘item of eternity’ that will be replayed throughout the book,” while the epilogue “relates Eugenio’s visit to Desi Arnaz’s ranch in California after his uncle’s death” (147). The

inclusion of *I Love Lucy* and specifically Desi Arnaz illustrate the novel's telling hyphenated existence. While some readers categorize the novel as Hispanic, Pérez Firmat argues that it lives its life on the hyphen of Cuba and America. He writes, "*Mambo Kings* places itself in the line of descent of a whole spate of recent Spanish-American novels also inspired by popular music" and is made up of "English words and Cuban music" (149). Hijuelos's novels have made a space in literature that further empathizes characters who portray a life on the hyphen. Pérez Firmat uses these pop culture references to show the complexities of a hyphenated existence that often leave immigrants culturally alienated, confused, and alone.

Although Pérez Firmat focuses primarily on the post-revolution, Cuban-American existence with which he identifies, his ideas are applicable to 21st century American immigrants who invariably share two cultures—one from their native land, the other from this country that blends both American and native culture. In this thesis I will examine three recent Pulitzer Prize-winning books, from three different genres, that convey how Pérez Firmat's hyphenated existence forces individuals to question their identity and examine the various cultures to which they belong: Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Natasha Trethewey's book of poetry, *Native Guard* (2006), and Junot Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).

Jhumpa Lahiri is an acclaimed novelist and short story writer born in London. She is the daughter of Bengali parents from Calcutta, who moved to England, then settled in the United States in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Lahiri's father was a university librarian, her mother a school teacher. Her parents were committed to keeping their cultural traditions intact and ensuring that their children experience their East Indian culture as well as an American one. Lahiri earned her bachelor of art degree in English Literature from Barnard College, three

master's degrees in English, creative writing, and comparative literature and arts, and a doctorate in Renaissance studies from Boston University. Lahiri's work often reflects the experiences of Indian immigrants, particularly subjects of arranged marriage, alienation, dislocation, and loss of cultural identity.

Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning book of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* explores the lives of different characters who navigate their identity as Indians, Americans, and Indian-Americans. While some stories are based solely in India, others are set in the United States, where characters struggle with their identity and to find comfort in a place noticeably different from their home. Several characters strike a balance between their Indian culture and their new American lives, while others remain reluctant to assimilate. Lahiri uses her own experiences as an English, Indian-American woman to influence her work as well as to explore the difficulties of discovering one's own identity. *Interpreter of Maladies* explores Pérez Firmat's hyphenated existence of the Indian-American immigrant most prominently in three stories: "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Mrs. Sen's," and "The Third and Final Continent."

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is the second story in Lahiri's collection. A character named Lilia narrates it. She recalls a time when she was younger and a man named Mr. Pirzada used to come to eat dinner at her family's home. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca but is spending the year in New England writing a book on the data he has collected on local American foliage. Mr. Pirzada had to leave behind his family—a wife and seven daughters—to conduct his research, and spends most days worrying about their well-being. At the time Pakistan and India were fighting a bloody war, and Mr. Pirzada has no way of contacting his family to see about their safety. Although he sends letters home each day, they never reach Pakistan due to the postal service's shutdown.

Lilia and her parents represent characters who live life on the hyphen. Lilia has grown up in America and become accustomed to American traditions. Her parents, however, were born and raised in India and struggle to keep their customs intact while living in Boston. They complain that the “supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation” (Lahiri 24). Although they accept these cultural differences, they still maintain native traditions that are important to them in their own home. Lilia’s parents’ hyphenated existence differs in how Lilia experiences the world in a more Americanized way outside the home, particularly in regards to her education. One day her father asks, “What exactly do they teach you at school? Do you study history? Geography?” to which her mother replies, “Lilia has plenty to learn at school...We live here now, she was born here” (26). Her mother recognizes that Lilia is growing up in a completely different environment than the one she and her husband experienced in India, learning subjects in school that are more important to the history of the United States than the world at large: American history, American geography, the Revolutionary War, trips to Plymouth Rock and the Bunker Hill Monument. Lilia, in turn, recognizes the disparity in the family’s upbringings. She reflects, “I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had” (26). While Lilia and her parents’ experiences differ greatly, they each embody what it means to live a life on the hyphen.

Mr. Pirzada, on the other hand, represents a slightly different approach to the concept of a hyphenated life. While he resides in Boston for a short period of time, his home is in his native Dacca. However, he must still navigate American life while finding a way to continue practicing his traditions. In America, Mr. Pirzada is a different person than he is in Dacca. In her narration, Lilia points out some of these differences: “In Dacca Mr. Pirzada had a three-story home, a

lectureship in botany at the university, a wife of twenty years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A” (23). But in Boston, “Mr. Pirzada lived in a room in a graduate dormitory and did not own a proper stove or a television set” (24). There are also American traditions that Mr. Pirzada does not quite understand, particularly Halloween. One October night when Mr. Pirzada goes to Lilia’s house for dinner, he ponders, ““What are these large orange vegetables on people’s doorsteps? A type of squash”” (34). Lilia’s mother replies that they are pumpkins, to which Mr. Pirzada asks about their purpose. Lilia tells him that people carve pumpkins into jack-o’-lanterns to scare away ghosts and demons. Mr. Pirzada does not understand the tradition of children going from house to house by themselves under such conditions, then asking the household for candy. Although Mr. Pirzada has one foot back home in Dacca, he still encounters unfamiliar American customs that he must navigate.

Even though their experiences differ, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents share a lot in common. When Lilia’s father explains to her that Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian because of the new partition dividing India and Pakistan, Lilia becomes confused. She has noticed similarities between her parents and Mr. Pirzada: “Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same...Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol” (25). Similar to what Pérez Firmat articulates, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents face the same trouble wanting to hold onto their customs and finding people with whom they can relate. Although their experiences differ, they are still able to relate to one another. In other words, like Lilia, her parents and Mr. Pirzada exemplify what it means to live Pérez Firmat’s hyphenated existence.

Lahiri's story "Mrs. Sen's" chronicles the journey of a young boy named Eliot who stays after school at Mrs. Sen's home so that she can watch him while his mother works. Mr. and Mrs. Sen spent most of their lives in Calcutta before moving to the United States, where Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at a nearby university. Eliot spends his days after school watching Mrs. Sen cut up vegetables for dinner, sitting in the car as Mrs. Sen learns to drive, and going to the fish market.

Mrs. Sen represents someone who experiences the substitutive and destitution stages that Pérez Firmat proposes immigrants experience when moving to a new country. Beginning with the substitutive stage, or creating copies for one's home culture, Mrs. Sen recreates the comforts that she feels in India. For example, "she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship" (112). Also, the Sens do not wear shoes, finding pleasure instead in flip-flops and slippers. This ritual is a small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless. Mrs. Sen also maintains customs that she feels are polite, such as when Eliot's mother comes to pick him up. His mother calls "to Eliot to put on his sneakers and gather his things, but Mrs. Sen would not allow it. Each evening she insisted that his mother sit on the sofa, where she was served something to eat" (116). Mrs. Sen is sure to treat her guests with the same respect that she was used to displaying in India. She also has to make due with getting a limited supply of fish from the local market. She says, "It is very frustrating...To live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish." Mrs. Sen said "she had grown up eating fish twice a day" and added that "in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky" (121). To not have the abundance or quality of fish that she was used to eating in Calcutta frustrates her, but she finds a substitution for this important part of her life.

Mrs. Sen also experiences the destitution stage, which Pérez Firmat defines as no longer knowing one's place and not having ground to stand on. It seems as though she has one foot in India and one foot, reluctantly, in America. Mrs. Sen frequently mentions to Eliot the daily customs from India that she misses, and how different life is in America compared to back "home." One of the most obvious differences is that Mrs. Sen does not know how to drive. Mr. Sen tries to teach her, but she is hesitant to learn. As this inability is a concern for Eliot's mother, Mrs. Sen tells her, "Yes, I am learning...But I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver" (111). It is telling that Mrs. Sen refers to India as "home," which implies that she has not yet accepted her new life in the United States. She also talks about Calcutta in the present tense, stating that "we have a driver" rather than "we had a driver." This ongoing connection to the past shows her unwillingness to become acclimated in a new country and her desire to be back in a place that she considers her true home.

Mrs. Sen is not shy in hiding her feelings about being in the United States. She often reminisces about Calcutta: "Everything is there" (111). Lahiri also writes: "At home that is all you have to do... just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (114). Or again: "In India...the driver sat on the right side, not the left" (118). At one point she asks Eliot, "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (117). The reader feels Mrs. Sen's frustration about the small differences between home and living away from it. She also struggles with being distanced from her family in India and their perception of her new life. Mrs. Sen expresses this sentiment to Eliot: "They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot...They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace" (123). Mrs. Sen's experience as someone who lives her life

on the hyphen allows the reader to see how challenging it can be to leave the place one considers home and to try to adjust to a new life in the United States.

The last short story in Lahiri's book, "The Third and Final Continent," is a semi-autobiographical tale of Lahiri's mother and father. It is told from the perspective of an unnamed male narrator, who took a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology working in the library; his wife worked as a school teacher, just as Lahiri's parents did. The narrator presents a noticeable twist on living life on the hyphen. He left India in 1964 on a boat to London, and from there returned to India to attend his own wedding. Later he takes a plane to America to establish a new home. Rather than having to adjust from one culture to another, he has to adjust to three cultures, all significantly different from each other. "The Third and Final Continent" discusses not only the concept of living a hyphenated life, but also the subject of arranged marriage. We not only see how being Indian in America affects the narrator, but also how his wife Mala struggles to adjust to married life and leaving behind her parents to live in a foreign country on the other side of the world.

The narrator stays in touch with his Indian culture, while also picking up customs from his time in London, which makes for an unusual adjustment when he arrives in Boston. For example, on the plane he reads "The Student Guide to North America" in order to learn habits about the United States that he may not have otherwise known. He notes, "I learned that Americans drove on the right side of the road, not the left, and that they called a lift an elevator and an engaged phone busy" (170). These subtle differences show a willingness to engage in the third stage Pérez Firmat discusses, institution, or the establishment of a new relationship between person and place. The narrator has not even landed in the United States, yet he is already forming a relationship with and learning customs about his new home. Because he came into the country

with this mindset, it does not take him long to acclimate to new habits. In fact, he states that in “a week I had adjusted, more or less” (171). The narrator’s ability to adjust so quickly differs from how most of the other characters in Lahiri’s stories experience moving to a new country.

As we have seen, several characters have trouble striking a balance between the new place they have found themselves in and paying respect to the traditions that remain important to them. For this narrator, however, the adjustment comes easily because he has experienced other cultures than those found in his native India. In fact, he has adjusted so well that he sometimes forgets the traditions he used to practice in India, such as eating egg curry with his hands, while some customs continue to be second nature to him, like not wearing shoes in the house, a tradition that he still does not feel comfortable dismissing. The narrator has adjusted to his surroundings, while at the same time keeping in touch with his home country. While living a life on the hyphen can often be difficult, he has shown that it is possible to make Pérez Firmat's seesaw sit a bit more even.

Finally, arranged marriage is a prominent theme in “The Third and Final Continent.” The narrator had his marriage arranged by his brother and sister-in-law in 1969 when he was thirty-six years old. He feels extremely neutral about the situation, reflecting, “I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man” (177). His wife, on the other hand, is miserable about the situation. Not only is she destined to marry a man she hardly knows, but she is forced to move to a new country where its citizens do not fully understand Indian culture or the process of arranged marriages. The narrator recounts the first five nights he spent with his wife before he left for America. Before their departure “she turned from me and wept” (177). We can also see how little the couple knows about each other. Before Mala, the narrator’s wife, meets him in Boston, she

writes him a letter that shows the magnitude of her feelings. The narrator notes, “There was no salutation; addressing me by my name would have assumed an intimacy we had not yet discovered. It contained only a few lines. ‘I write in English in preparation for the journey. Here I am very much lonely. Is it very cold there? Is there snow? Yours, Mala’” (184-5). Her letter shows, once again, just how little they know about each other and how uncomfortable the arranged situation is for both characters. In preparation for her appearance, the narrator states, “In those six weeks I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month, or season - something inevitable, but meaningless at the time” (185). While he understands that Mala is part of his life now, it hardly affects him before they are physically together. Even though Mala and the narrator felt reluctant about their arranged marriage, the story shows how they learn to love each other and make a beautiful life together in a place far away from their original home.

While various components of hyphenated existence are evident throughout *Interpreter of Maladies*, these three stories best represent Pérez Firmat’s theory. Each tale explores various aspects of navigating a newly adopted American life while staying true to their Indian roots. Lahiri creates narratives that rely on her own personal experiences, which allows us to feel a more intimate connection with each respective fictional character. Moreover, each story shows that Pérez Firmat’s explanation of life on the hyphen aptly applies not only to Cuban Americans but to immigrants from India and their children born in a different land.

Natasha Trethewey is a former American poet laureate and the author of five collections of poetry. She was born in Gulfport, Mississippi, but also spent time in Atlanta and New Orleans after her parents’ divorce. She is the daughter of a mixed-race marriage, a subject that influences her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Native Guard*. Trethewey studied English at the University of Georgia, received a master’s degree in English and creative writing from Hollins University,

as well as a master of fine arts in poetry from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Trethewey's work often combines historical content with personal experience, as well as with race and identity.

Native Guard explores Trethewey's childhood, her relationship with her mother, and the racial legacy of the South. The book also examines the Louisiana Native Guard, one of the first black regiments called into service during the Civil War, to emphasize that history has a continuous effect on future generations, especially people of color. Although Trethewey's collection does not discuss immigration in the same way as *Interpreter of Maladies* or *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Native Guard* reflects Pérez Firmat's argument that a hyphenated existence makes a person feel that they do not wholly belong to one group or another with which they identify.

Divided into three sections, the book explores the heartbreak of the poet's mother's death, the impact of the Native Guards on black Americans and white Confederate soldiers, and how Trethewey navigated her childhood as the daughter of a white father and a black mother. I will focus on the poems that appear in section three of the collection, in particular "Miscegenation," "My Mother Dreams Another Country," "Southern History," "Blond," "Southern Gothic," and "Incident," as they provide the most accurate account of Trethewey's childhood as she grew up as a mixed-race girl in the Deep South.

"Miscegenation" describes the efforts her parents went through to get married, as well as the meaning behind Trethewey's name. Actually, the poem's title is inherently hyphenated, given that miscegenation refers to "the mixing or interbreeding of (people of) different races or ethnic groups, *esp.* the interbreeding or sexual union of whites and non-whites; marriage or cohabitation by members of different ethnic groups" (oed-com). From the start, Trethewey's

poem suggests that her parents' union initiated her hyphenated existence. Her parents, however, represent the concept of life on the hyphen in a slightly different way. From different races, the couple illustrates each side of the hyphen. Trethewey describes the difficulty her parents experienced as they traveled outside the state to marry:

In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi;
they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.
They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name
begins with a sound like *sin*, the sound of wrong (ll. 1-4)

It was illegal at the time for people of different races to marry in Mississippi, and her parents had to break state law and travel to Ohio to wed. Not only was their getting married illegal in Mississippi, but Trethewey insinuates that it was also a "sin." She also repeats the noun "Mississippi" to emphasize the poem's southern setting. "Miscegenation" is the first poem in the third section of Trethewey's collection, which allows her to set the scene for her parents, the notorious racism in the state, and the resulting circumstances surrounding her childhood.

The next poem that highlights similar themes is "My Mother Dreams Another Country." The poem chronicles her mother's pregnancy and details the fear the mother has about the racism her child will endure. It begins with Trethewey reflecting on the evolution of racism in the United States. She writes, "Already the words are changing. She is changing/from *colored* to *negro*, *black* still years ahead" (ll. 1-2). Although native Mississippians use these words to describe the mother, the older Trethewey is more worried about how people will refer to her daughter. She knows that her daughter's hyphenated existence, magnified by her mixed-race heritage, will have a negative impact on her life. Trethewey reflects on her mother's realization of the adversity that her daughter will face: "This is 1966 - she is married to a white man -/and

there are more names for what grows inside her/It is enough to worry about words like *mongrel*” (ll. 3-5). Knowing the racist history of the state, her mother is obviously cognizant of the racism that her child will eventually encounter. Even though she has experienced bigotry herself, she is more concerned about the discrimination Trethewey will face and considers the circumstances of bringing a mixed-race child into the world. Trethewey further references this concern: “dolls winking down from every shelf - all of them/white” (ll. 10-11). This line indicates not only the lack of representation of people of color with children’s toys, but also reflects how the child will grow up in a society that emphasizes how white traits are “desirable.” “My Mother Dreams Another Country” represents the anxiety surrounding Trethewey’s mother regarding the hyphenated existence of her child, similar to the *I Love Lucy* episode “Ricky Minds the Baby” discussed earlier. The parents of children who live a hyphenated existence worry about how the children will navigate the world.

“Southern History” details an experience Trethewey had in her history class during her high school senior year. Her teacher presented the class with a distorted version of American history, especially slavery. Trethewey uses dialogue to portray how her teacher offers an inaccurate historical portrait, writing in the voice of the teacher: “*Before the war, they were happy.../The slaves were clothed, fed,/and better off under a master’s care*” (ll. 1-4). The teacher’s dishonesty and deception harm his students, especially Trethewey, whom we feel knows the real historical truth. The teacher’s words completely invalidate the experiences she has had as a person of color. Similarly, when the class watches the overly romantic, historically inaccurate film, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the teacher describes it as “*a true account of how things were back then*” (ll. 11). Again, he portrays slavery as if it was not a horrible, American tragedy, and that a fictional Civil War period drama depicts history accurately. Trethewey is

aware of her teacher's dishonesty, writing "a lie/my teacher guarded. Silent, so did I" (ll. 13-14). Her teacher silences Trethewey, who remains quiet because she knows that his authority permits him to discredit her objections. Her hyphenated existence allows her to know the truth, while at the same time oppressing her voice.

The next poem, "Blond," also depicts Trethewey's challenging childhood. Here the poet discusses body image and compares herself to white girls her age. She begins by discussing the possibility of having been born with different genes:

in my parents' genes the recessive traits
that might have given me a different look:
not attached earlobes...
but another hair color - gentlemen-preferred,
have-more-fun blond" (ll. 3-6)

From these lines the reader understands that from a young age, Trethewey's hyphenated existence affects both her body image and her confidence level. She recognizes that having blond hair is a more "desirable" American trait, especially for men. She also notices that her hyphenated existence allows her a certain aspect of privilege, in the sense of colorism within racism. For example, she states, "And with my skin color/like a good tan - an even mix of my parents' -/I could have passed for white" (ll. 6-8). The color of her skin allows her to project white-passing, again according to many Americans a more "desirable" trait than darker skin tones. In the next stanza Trethewey describes a Christmas gift she received one year—a blond wig, a pink tutu with sequins on it, and a blond ballerina doll. In hindsight she writes, "I didn't know to ask, nor that it mattered/if there'd been a brown version" (ll. 12-13). Her childhood innocence leaves her unaware of the lack of representation in the toys she plays with. As she

dances around the room in her new tutu and wig, her parents are “looking on/at their suddenly strange child” (ll. 18-19). Watching their child of color wearing a blond wig makes them worry that she is uncomfortable being herself, that she wishes to be white. The concluding sentence reads, “to the child that chance, the long odds, might have brought” (ll. 24-25). In this line Trethewey portrays the insecurities that the child and parents feel. Her life on the hyphen challenges her self-confidence and makes her wonder how her life would be altered if she had been born with different features.

In “Southern Gothic” Trethewey reminisces about her adolescence, particularly the years before her parents’ divorce and her mother’s death. Trethewey remembers a time when she came home from school:

I have come home
from the schoolyard with the words that shadow us
in this small Southern town - *peckerwood* and *nigger*
lover, half-breed and *zebra* - words that take shape outside us” (ll. 11-1)

The strong, offensive language used in this poem illuminates the impact that being mixed race has had on her childhood. The racist words that she and her parents have been called have shaped the way she sees the world, especially the people in her southern town. These words not only impact her that particular day on the playground, but continue to impact her in adulthood. Living life on the hyphen makes her realize discrimination in a severe way.

Lastly, in “Incident” Trethewey uses the pantoum form to tell the story of when Ku Klux Klan members burned a cross on her family’s lawn. She remembers the event by writing the poem from the point of view of her adolescent self. Although she does not explicitly state that

her family was the victim of a racist crime, she uses language that indicates the circumstances of the event:

We peered from the windows, shades drawn,
at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
the charred grass still green. Then
we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps (ll. 5-8)

This stanza conveys the poem's setting. Her family hides in their house, with the windows drawn and the lights off, watching the people light the cross in their yard. She then writes, "a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns" (ll. 10). Rather than stating straightforwardly that the men are wearing white robes associated with the Ku Klux Klan, in her childlike innocence she describes them as angels, a contradiction of who these men actually are. Finally, she states: "When they were done, they left quietly. No one came" (ll. 14). These lines further indicate the racism that her family suffered. No one offered to help them, silently condoning the behavior of the racist white men.

Trethewey's hyphenated, mixed-race existence conveyed through her poetry differs from the hyphenation of the characters in Lahiri's stories. She does not have to assimilate to life in a new country, but does have to navigate racism in the southern United States where she was born. The experiences outlined in *Native Guard* are traumatic, racially driven, and highly personal events that helped shape Trethewey's work and personal life. She exposes her vulnerable background in order to validate the experiences of people who share a similar racially-mixed, hyphenated existence.

Like the Caribbean-born Pérez Firmat, Junot Díaz exemplifies a hyphenated existence in his own personal life. A fiction writer, he was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in

the United States. His novels and short stories often reflect his own immigrant experiences, where he spent his adolescence in New Jersey assimilating and balancing two identities. Díaz earned his bachelor of arts degree from Rutgers University and a master of fine arts from Cornell. He is currently the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, his most celebrated work, centers around Oscar Wao, a nerdy, romantic writer who portrays the curse that has haunted his family for generations. Although Oscar is the main subject of the novel, Díaz tells the story of other members from Oscar's family: his sister Lola, his mother Beli, and his great grandfather Abelard, as well as the primary narrator, Yunior. The background of each character explains how the family's belief in fukú, "generally a curse of a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World," has surrounded and affected the de León family for decades (Díaz 1). The novel exemplifies Pérez Firmat's concept of life on the hyphen because it focuses on a Dominican family living in Paterson, New Jersey, who are also rooted in the Dominican Republic. The intertwining of two distinct cultures demonstrates the seesaw effect of Pérez Firmat's hyphenated existence.

Díaz's novel begins with a young Oscar in the prime of his romantic life. After two breakups with the two girls that he was dating simultaneously, Oscar is unlucky in love. As he grows up, his two male friends stop hanging out with him and he is left to his own devices. The novel then tells Oscar's sister Lola's story. Lola loves Oscar and worries about him. She fights with Beli, their mother constantly and ends up running away from home. When Beli finds her, she sends her on a plane to the Dominican Republic to live with her grandmother, La Inca. The story shifts again to tell Beli's story of how she came to the United States. She was an orphan

who was tortured by her “family” until La Inca, her biological father’s cousin, came to rescue her. In her teenage years, Beli was prone to fall in love. Unfortunately, she made the mistake of falling in love with a married man and was forced to leave the country. The reader also gets a glimpse into the life of Abelard, Beli’s biological father: a doctor who met his demise at the hands of the Cuban dictator, Trujillio. The father’s death made a new-born Beli an orphan. We then see Oscar, as an adult, travel to the Dominican Republic. He spends the summer there, ultimately finding love with a woman, Ybón, who also has a boyfriend. Her boyfriend sends hitmen to kill Oscar, but just like his mother he survives. He returns to New Jersey; however, he cannot get Ybón out of his mind and takes a flight back to Santo Domingo. Ybón’s boyfriend finds out and later two of the Captain’s henchmen shoot Oscar, the fukú finding its final victim in the de León family.

We begin with Beli as the matriarch of the family. She was born in the Dominican Republic and lived there into her teenage years. According to Pérez Firmat’s model, she exemplifies the one-and-a-half generation, spending her adolescence in Santo Domingo and her adulthood in America. Being part of the one-and-a-half generation, in turn, affects her children. Beli is forced to leave her native country to live as a hyphenated immigrant in the United States because she fell in love with a man who was married to the Dominican dictator’s sister. The affair, of course, angers the man’s wife. Being part of the powerful Trujillo family, she sends men to kill Beli. Although they are unsuccessful, the men come close to murdering her. If Beli does not want to die, she has to move to the United States. Her mother tells her, “You don’t understand hija. You have to leave *the country*. They’ll kill you if you don’t” (160). Neither Beli nor her children have a choice in their hyphenated existence.

The narrator Yunior also plays a critical role in shaping the hyphenated existence of the Dominican American characters in the novel. Yunior, who is also Dominican American, narrates the majority of the novel in English. However, he naturally interjects Spanish words and phrases throughout the narrative to indicate his biculturation. Because he also lives life on the hyphen, he presents himself as a reliable and empathetic narrator. Yunior relates to the struggles that the other characters face as well as provides context to a Dominican culture that others may not otherwise be privy to. For example, several comments that he makes indicates his biculturalism: “Dominican parents! You got to love them!” (30). Diaz also writes, “He was married. I’m sure you all guessed that. I mean, he was *dominicano*, after all” (138). And, “That’s the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child’s black complexion as an ill omen” (248).

Not only does Yunior know what it means to “be” Dominican, but he also knows what it is like to be Dominican male, which allows him to further relate to Oscar, his friend. He states, “but this is a Dominican kid we’re talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in bitches with both hands” (24). He also proclaims, “The Higher Power’s last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude” (283). According to the narrator there are certain expectations for how men are supposed to treat women, most prominently being assertive when it comes to sex, many of which Oscar worries he cannot live up to. For instance, when his family drops him off his freshman year of college, “his mother gave him a hundred dollars... his tío a box of condoms: Use them all, he said, and then added: on girls” (49). Whether or not Oscar planned on being sexually active in college, his uncle pressures him to have sex, insinuating with many different partners. Similarly, one night when Yunior and Oscar were roommates, Oscar, in a worried state,

turns to Yuniór and says, “I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin” (174). He wonders if this maxim is really true.

If Dominican males are defined by certain expectations, so too are Dominican women expected to live by a set of standards. However, the difference between how women and men should behave is significant. The narrator states, “La Inca assumed that because Beli had of late not shown any enthusiasm for the bakery or school or for cleaning that she’d devolved into a *zángana* [drone/lazy]” (104). Rather than expected to have sex, women are relegated to work, to learn, and to clean. Similarly, when Beli drops out of school and stops working at her mother’s bakery, La Inca prays for “a miracle that would transform Beli back into a dutiful daughter” (107). For women, their role is to act as the dutiful daughter who works, cleans, and studies. For men, it is to have relations with women. Lola also feels like an outcast when she goes to live with La Inca in Santo Domingo. Because she had lived in the United States most of her life, in the Dominican Republic she is not considered fully Dominican. She reflects, “Rosío has me dressing up like a ‘real Dominican girl’” (71). Lola’s hyphenated existence not only affects her life in America, but also her time living in the Dominican Republic. The effort of the characters to live up to the expectations of Dominican culture while in America reflects the substitutive stage outlined in Pérez Firmat’s text. These characters make copies of both homes to keep the balance between their American and Dominican cultures.

At the end of the novel, Oscar travels to the Dominican Republic to spend the summer with his family. His journey back to the Dominican Republic demonstrates how much his hyphenated existence impacted his life. First, when Oscar announces that he will be flying to Santo Domingo with his mother, the narrator notes, “Oscar hadn’t been home in years” (270). Even though he has lived in the United States his entire life, the narrator’s reference to the

Dominican Republic as Oscar's "home" indicates that Oscar has a deep connection to Santo Domingo. Although he acknowledges Santo Domingo as his home, there are many things about the country that he is unable to recall. "It really was astonishing how much he'd forgotten about the DR" (274), Yunion tells us. Oscar's hyphenated existence, like Lola's, affects his life in both countries in which he resides. He struggles with being Dominican American in the Dominican Republic, as seen when Yunion states: "After he'd gotten somewhat used to the scorching weather and the surprise of waking up to the roosters and being called Huáscar by everybody (that was his Dominican name, something else he'd forgotten), after he refused to succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not belong*" (276). Oscar feels like he does not specifically belong in the Dominican Republic, nor in Paterson, where his love of Dungeons and Dragons and *Lord of the Rings* keep him on the bottom of the social pyramid. As Yunion writes, "Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens" (21). Another example perpetuated by his life on the hyphen is when Oscar and Ybón spend time together and she "called him an idiot americano for spilling his beer" (288). Calling him American shows that he is not seen as Dominican by locals, even though he identifies as such.

The main characters in Díaz's novel represent multiple aspects of life on the hyphen. Beli is a member of the one-and-a-half generation, and Oscar, Lola, and Yunion represent first-generation Dominican Americans navigating two cultures. The novel highlights the pressure of expectations from the characters' Dominican relatives, as well as struggling to fit into American culture as Dominican Americans.

In today's political climate it is important to recognize that certain communities resent the label of a hyphenated identity. Scholars, grammarians, and political and social activists have

begun to omit the hyphen as a way of defining one's existence, urging others to do the same. (bpr.berkeley.edu) The term "hyphenated American" originated as a way to encourage assimilation within immigrant groups, condemning those who identified as non-American. Specifically, the Japanese American Citizens League debated the use of the hyphen. They discussed how "'Japanese' acted as a noun with the hyphen between 'Japanese-American,' perpetuating the notion of divided Japanese American loyalty during World War II, which rationalized internment" (bpr.berkeley.edu). Despite Pérez Firmat's argument, certain ethnic and racial groups reject the hyphen because of its association with historical belittlement of specific immigrant communities (bpr.berkeley.edu).

While it is crucial to understand the history and politics associated with the hyphen, I am not debating for or against the use of this punctuation. My goal is to introduce Pérez Firmat's concept of life on the hyphen and to argue that it can be applied to different races and ethnicities as well as to genres in select pieces of literature. Although Pérez Firmat's focus is on the Cuban American's hyphenated existence, his theory can also apply to the immigrant experience of Indian and Dominican Americans, as demonstrated in the Lahiri and Díaz texts analyzed above. As Trethewey shows us in *Native Guard*, certain ideas associated with biculturation, one-and-a-half generation, and other aspects of Pérez Firmat's hyphenated existence are also applicable to African Americans, given their forced removal from the African continent, subsequent enslavement, and having to face miscegenation laws and racist practices of white Americans. While Pérez Firmat introduces his concepts in the form of a scholarly memoir, the hyphen spans the genres, including books of short stories, collections of poetry, and novels. Lahiri, Trethewey, and Díaz have created works that embody their own lives while simultaneously validating the experiences of fictional immigrants with similar stories. One's engagement with their texts

allows for a deeper understanding of the way immigrants are still treated in the United States, which creates an empathetic outlook on the process of assimilation. Although immensely complicated, living life on the hyphen can also be seen as a celebration of the cultures that often make up one's racial or ethnic identity.

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