Gustavo Pérez Firmat

Author and literary critic Gustavo Pérez Firmat was born in Cuba in 1949 and immigrated to the United States in 1960. He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he taught in Duke University's Department of Modern Languages from 1978 to 1999. Pérez Firmat has been the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1997, Newsweek *included him among "100 Americans to watch for in the next century," and* Hispanic Business Magazine *selected him as one of the "100 most influential Hispanics." He is currently the David Feinson Professor of Humanities at Columbia University in New York City.*

Pérez Firmat's work has had a profound impact on Cuban-American studies. His many nonfiction publications include Literature and Liminality: Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition *(1986);* The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature *(1989); and* Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way *(1994). He has also published four poetry collections, a novel, and most recently a memoir,* Scar Tissue *(2005), chronicling his bout with prostate cancer.*

Life on the Hyphen *is perhaps his most significant work, as it has helped guide the direction of Cuban-American literary studies. In it, Pérez Firmat builds on sociologist Rubén Rumbaut's labeling of children who were born abroad but educated and raised in the United States as the*

one-and-a-half generation. *Pérez Firmat applies the term to Cuban-born writers, such as himself, who left the island at an early age and were raised in the United States. In contrast to Rumbaut, Pérez Firmat focuses on this generation to emphasize its simultaneous adaptability to both cultures. He sees the members of this generation living* within *the hyphen, able to navigate either world with linguistic and cultural ease. Pérez Firmat's wit and intense interest in linguistic nuances is best revealed in his poetry, where often the speaker is living life "on the hyphen," grappling with the ambivalence of belonging to two seemingly disparate worlds.*

As I park in the driveway of his home in Chapel Hill, Pérez Firmat appears, dressed in shorts and a tee-shirt, having just returned from the gym. This energy and vitality, which echoes in his work, is evident during our conversation. His penchant for linguistic play is ever present, even when discussing such somber topics as cancer and the death of his father.

The date is June 20, 2006.

Works

Scar Tissue (2005)

Tongue Ties: Logo-Eroticism in Anglo-Hispanic Literature (2003)

Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio (2000)

Anything But Love (2000)

Vidas en vilo: La cultura cubanoamericana (2000)

My Own Private Cuba: Essays on Cuban Literature and Culture (1999)

Next Year in Cuba (1995)

Bilingual Blues (1995)

Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way (1994)

Do the Americans Have a Common Literature? (editor, 1990)

Equivocaciones (1989)

The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature (1989)

"Carolina Cuban" (in *Triple Crown*, 1987)

Literature and Liminality: Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition (1986)

Idle Fictions: The Hispanic Vanguard Novel, 1926–1934 (1982)

EDR: I'd like to start with your most recent effort, *Scar Tissue*. What made you want, or need, to write about your experience with cancer?

GPF: A couple of years ago, two things happened that changed my life, were my life changeable: my father passed away in Miami after waiting for forty years to return to some mysterious place he called Cuba, and I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, a disease that he also had. Because the two events occurred within a couple of months of each other, they bundled together in my mind and out came *Scar Tissue*, a sickly, sticky sequel to *Next Year in Cuba* and *Life on the Hyphen*, where I write about enduring illness in a foreign language, about coping with losses of various sorts (*de padre, de patria y de próstata*),[1] and generally about the hurt inside the hyphen. (It turns out that the hyphen was a scar all along!) In *Scar Tissue*—my informal title is "Knife on the Hyphen"—I write about prostate cancer, a common but unliterary disease, with the same candor and even ardor with which others have written about breast cancer or AIDS. Kafka says somewhere that a book should be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. After the surgeons took a scalpel to my belly, I took an axe to my *entrañas*.[2] What was left was *Scar Tissue*.

EDR: The final chapter of the book is titled "Beginning." Is this, ironically, a hopeful "fresh start"? If so, how does this sense of wholeness relate to the "confused" state of exile?

GPF: Yes, the last poem in *Scar Tissue* is called "Beginning," but the epilogue is called "Sutures." I don't believe in fresh starts. All fresh starts are really stale starts, and exile is the stalest start of all.

EDR: Your informal title, "Knife on the Hyphen," is an example of the linguistic wordplay your writing often contains. How did you manage to fuse your sense of play into this serious topic?

GPF: Well, *Scar Tissue* includes a manic medical glossary with definitions of such terms as "prostatic" (likes noise; doesn't like motion), "retropubic" (old fashioned pubic); "abdominal surgery" (gut wrenching); "X-ray" (king has-been), "incontinent" (where you are / when you are / not in Cuba), etc. Other parts, however, are dead serious (as it were). When I was recovering from what was, or could have been, or might still be a life-threatening illness, I went through many moods, from high anxiety to deep euphoria. *Scar Tissue* reflects that. Emotionally, the book is all over the place. It's a moods dictionary.

EDR: Can you speak to your use of this type of wordplay in your work in general.

GPF: I like words. I like sentences. If you like something, you spend time with it. If you spend time with it, you get to know it. If you get to know it, it tells you little secrets. I don't make an effort to play with words. Sometimes I make an effort *not* to play with words, because when I'm playing with words I have the sneaking suspicion that the words are actually playing with me. But manipulating language is pleasurable, and it offers me a kind of release. No matter what I'm writing, I tend to write by ear. You come up with a phrase or a sentence that sounds good, and then you realize that it also conveys what you wanted to say—that what sounds good also rings true—or that it conveys something different but perhaps just as pertinent as what you wanted to say. Sense then follows sound. I'm hopelessly, helplessly phonocentric, perhaps because I come from a country where all the men sooner or later go deaf (while the women, on the other hand, get louder and louder, so that their deaf husbands can hear them).

EDR: Clearly, this sense of play often results in humor or is driven by it. Sometimes humor is satiric, such as the way Roberto Fernández[3] pokes fun at Cuban-American nostalgia. How would you characterize the nature and purpose of *your* use of humor?

GPF: I love Roberto's work because beneath the satire, there is a tremendous amount of affection. His novels make fun of Cuban Miami, but they also render homage to it. My humor is ill humor. It grows out of an unstable compound of anger and distress. I'm like a man flailing away in his sleep. He doesn't know what he is flailing at, but he keeps flailing. Wake him up and he doesn't remember flailing, but the next time he goes to sleep, he begins flailing all over again.

EDR: Is your penchant for linguistic play influenced by someone or something in particular?

GPF: Wordplay is much more frequent than one would think because it encompasses a lot more than wordplay. It includes phrase- and sentence- and paragraph-play. Ultimately, it's language-play, which is the same as language use. Take Nabokov's statement: "I'm as American as April in Arizona."[4] What is it about this sentence that makes it memorable? First, it's a variation on "as American as apple pie," a variation made pointed by the near homophony of "apple" and "April." Second, there's the alliteration of American/April/Arizona. Third, and best of all, "Arizona" is not even an "American" word because it sounds Spanish—a compound put together

from "zona árida"—but apparently is of Amerindian origin. So is this wordplay? To me it's just a good sentence: cunning rather than punning.

EDR: Why do you find it easier to use this type of play in English than in Spanish?

GPF: For one thing, Spanish has no homophones. For another—and this is the opposite phenomenon—it also has no "homographs." As Ricky Ricardo once pointed out, in Spanish, words that look the same sound the same, and words that sound the same look the same. In English, as he explains, "bough," "cough" and "through" look the same but sound different; and "bough" and "cow" look different but sound the same. Ricky's conclusion: "Crazy language!" The other reason may be personal. Perhaps I feel freer to fool around in, and with, English because it's not my mother or father's tongue. I don't mind writing English with an accent, but I work hard not to write Spanish with an accent. And yet in *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*, which is all in Spanish, there's a fair amount of what might be regarded as wordplay.

EDR: Do you believe that English is a necessary component of Cuban-American literature? There are members of the one-and-a-half generation[5] who write mostly in English. Others, like Roberto Fernández, have produced more in Spanish than English. Should they not be included in an anthology of Cuban-American literature?

GPF: Yes, of course. It would be interesting to put together an anthology of Cuban-American (or, for that matter, Latino) literature that does not discriminate between anglophone and hispanophone writing. Or an anthology of one writer, say Roberto Fernández, who writes in both languages: the Roberto Reader, which would mix selections in Spanish and English. The problem is [that] even publishers who publish in both languages tend not to want to mix them within the same book. I wonder, though, what makes a novel written in Spanish by Roberto Fernández "Cuban American" rather than "Cuban." A Mariel writer like Guillermo Rosales,[6] who in *Boarding Home* wrote in Spanish about his experiences in the United States, is usually not considered Cuban-American. However, José Miguel Oviedo,[7] in his history of Spanish American literature, says that Oscar Hijuelos,[8] whom I regard as an American ethnic writer, is the first Cuban writer to write exclusively in English.

The relation between language and nationality is tricky. And it's a mistake to identify literary nationality with civil nationality. Even though George Santayana[9] was not American, he said: "It is as an American writer that I am to be counted, if I'm to be counted at all." So, here was

a Spanish man who was an American writer; just as Conrad[10] was a Polish man who was an English novelist. As you know, my definition of a Cuban-American is a Cuban married to an American, and my definition of a Cuban-American writer is a Cuban who writes in English. And so I don't think of myself as a Cuban or American or Cuban-American writer, but rather as a Cuban who sometimes writes in English and, at other times, writes in Spanish. And it's always the language I'm not writing that is my home. I can't write in English without missing the Spanish that is missing. I can't write in Spanish without missing the English that is missing. These are the sorts of "tongue ties" I've tried to unravel in a recent book.

About the use of Spanish in Cuban-American literature: I think you'll agree that most one-and-a-halfers write mostly in English, for both practical and existential reasons. In fact, Latino literature has become an English-only zone. The use of Spanish in Latino fiction or poetry tends to be ornamental, a dash of spice or *un brochazo* [a brushstroke] of local color.

EDR: Since we're talking about other writers, are there any, particularly Cuban ones, that influenced you?

GPF: Since I teach literature, I have to read for my classes, and some of the literature that I teach finds its way into what I write, even if I'm not aware of it. A few years ago I published a novel called *Anything But Love*. Some time later, I was teaching *El túnel*, a book by Ernesto Sábato, that I had taught many times before, and was surprised by all the echoes of *Anything But Love* in *El túnel* (actually the other way around). But I'm not really an avid reader. Growing up in Miami—a boutique rather than a book city—I read hardly at all. The nuns in the parochial school I attended used to punish me by making me come in on Saturday mornings to read. I had to sit in the library for two hours. But the only thing I remember reading was a biography of American patriot John Paul Jones. Some of the writers whose work I have admired, envied, and (perhaps) learned from throughout the years: Jorge Mañach,[11] John Updike, A. E. Housman, Borges,[12] Jane Austen, Scott Fitzgerald, Lezama Lima,[13] Cabrera Infante[14] (the nonfiction more than the fiction), Alejandra Pizarnik,[15] Christopher Morley (the Mandarin poems), Henry James (the novellas), Roberto Fernández, Virgil Suárez. As I recite the names that pop into my head, I realize what an arbitrary, chaotic list this is. Even more chaotic if you add the nonliterary influences: American song lyricists from the 1930s and 1940s; Cuban and American comedians, like

Leopoldo Fernández, Guillermo Álvarez Guedes, Henny Youngman, Alan King; and many other people I remember and don't remember. I'm the sum total of my influences—plus the 5 percent that belongs only to me.

EDR: Let's talk a bit about your childhood. You left Cuba at eleven years old. Can you talk a bit about your early life in the U.S., and what that process of assimilation, or "biculturation" as you've called it, was like.

GPF: I came to the U.S. when I was on the cusp of adolescence. I have fuzzy fond memories of Cuba and sharp fond memories of our early years in Miami. Cuba seemed so close then. The only people in my family who weren't alive were those who hadn't been born yet. Now things are different. Most of the people in my family who are still alive are those who hadn't been born when we came to the United States. And Cuba seems far, far away. To the extent that assimilation happened, it happened imperceptibly and had already begun even before we came to the United States. As I mention in *Next Year in Cuba*, I was raised for exile: I learned English in grade school, watched American movies, ate American breakfasts, rode around in American cars, rooted for the New York Yankees. American culture was foreign but familiar, and even familial, since my mother was born in Norfolk, Virginia, when my grandfather was a member of the Cuban consulate there. And yet, although America is a part of me, it's not the most important part of me. No matter how assimilated I may act or look, there is always an unassimilable remainder, a Cuban core, which only seems to get larger with the years.

EDR: How does memory, especially memories of Cuba, shape your work, and the work of other Cuban-American writers?

GPF: In younger writers, Ana Menéndez[16] or Richard Blanco,[17] for example, memories of Cuba tend to be reported rather than remembered. They are something they write about rather than something they write with. Even Virgil Suárez or Roberto Fernández or Ricardo Pau-Llosa,[18] who are somewhat older, write to some extent about the second-handedness of their memories. As for me, when I grow nostalgic, it's not for the Havana of my childhood, but for the Miami of my adolescence. Still, I do feel some sort of responsibility—more as a father than as a writer—not to let my children forget their grandparents and great-grandparents and other Cuban relatives, and I take it upon myself to perpetuate their stories, which are the stories of Cuba. It's a responsibility that I'm not crazy about. A couple of years ago, during our

Nochebuena[19] celebration, I realized that I was the oldest Cuban in the house. This sent me into a depression that hasn't quite lifted yet.

EDR: Another component of Cuban-American literature is exile. Would you say it's the key component?

GPF: I don't know whether it's the key component, but it's certainly a component. It explains something you mentioned before: why Cuban-American writers still write in Spanish, even though some of them have lived here for more than forty years. But what I find most peculiar is exile literature written in English that pines for the homeland in a language that makes that homeland more distant. Longing for Cuba in the language of Cuba makes sense; longing for Cuba in the language of America is a little strange, and yet I and others do it all the time. Odder still, often the nostalgia is directed at the Spanish language itself. This longing for Spanish in English is one of the features that Cuban-American literature has in common with Puerto Rican or Chicano literature. Latino literature, whatever its ethnicity, is full of English-language love songs to Spanish, love songs that happen also to be valedictories. The Latino writer carries a torch he or she can't lose for Spanish, the language she or he has lost. Sandra Cisneros has a poem that begins, "Make love to me in Spanish, / not with that other tongue."[20] Okay, fine, but if we both know Spanish, why are you telling me this in English?

EDR: Because of your wordplay, you've been compared to the Metaphysical Poets.[21] One of the things the Metaphysicals did was juxtapose the sacred and the profane. Your poem "A Sensitive Male's Mea Culpa" is perhaps an extreme version of this. What sort of reaction did you receive to this poem and others, such as "The Poet Discusseth the Opposite Sex"?

GPF: The poems you mention, and especially "A Sensitive Male's Mea Culpa," seem to me a lot more physical than metaphysical. When I wrote "Mea Culpa," I sent it to a friend, who wrote back: "Never publish this!!" So, of course, I went ahead and published it. Unlike "Bilingual Blues" or "Dedication or Lime Cure," it's not one of the poems that people bring up. I think it makes some people queasy, though to me it's a very funny poem. I wrote it in a huff sometime during the heyday of the political correctness movement. Your reference to the Metaphysical Poets embarrasses me. Comparing me to Crashaw is like comparing a weekend golfer with a thirty handicap to Tiger Woods.

EDR: Perhaps, but many of your poems reveal a certain melancholy. They are spoken by a sinner who seems to be searching for something. What?

GPF: I agree about the melancholy, but I don't think of myself as a sinner. In fact, I haven't sinned since I left Cuba. When I got on the boat to leave, God said: "Go, and sin no more." And I haven't. Even if I have, though, I'm not worried. When I was in Catholic school, we learned that each prayer entitled you to a certain number of days off in purgatory. These things were called indulgences. The best prayers were those that granted you *indulgencia plenaria*, plenary indulgence, which meant that you wouldn't have to spend any time at all paying for your sins. In my view, all exiles are entitled to plenary indulgence. One more thing: In English, a small sin is a peccadillo, but to a Cuban this sounds like something you eat.[22]

EDR: Obviously your nonfiction is highly personal and grounded in real events. Do you feel that poetry should also be grounded on what is real and personal?

GPF: What I know is that I have a hard time inventing anything, at least on purpose, whether I'm writing poetry or prose. I do have a need, which to me is as natural as breathing, to write things down—whether formally, in a book or a poem, or informally, in my journals. Sometimes I write things down to remember them. Other times I write them down to forget them. The personal quality of all my work is obviously a limitation, but I discovered years ago that I couldn't keep myself out of what I wrote, and so I stopped trying.

EDR: Earlier you mentioned your novel, *Anything But Love*. That book shifts between points of view and, at times, seems autobiographical. Do you consider it a work of fiction or a memoir, much like *Scar Tissue*?

GPF: Sometimes I think that I should have written it all in the first person, but at the time, I was afraid that Frank's ranting would become tiresome. And so, in the middle section, I switched to the third person to create some distance (between him and me, between the reader and him). The nucleus of the novel was originally a chapter in *Next Year in Cuba* that my publisher refused to include in the book, believing it would hurt sales. So, I decided to turn it into an independent story, which allowed me to take liberties with the narrative and give it a shape that it wouldn't otherwise have had. So, yes, it's somewhere between memoir and novel.

EDR: What was the reaction from those who know you best, like your family, to some of the things you wrote in *Next Year in Cuba*? Did this affect your decision to make *Anything But Love* into a novel?

GPF: I can't recall very many nice things that my family said about *Next Year in Cuba.* I was hoping they'd be impressed and even flattered, but mostly they were upset that I had aired out our dirty laundry in public. It may also be the case that the man who wrote that book was not the son or brother or cousin that they knew. My mother, in particular, was very angry with the chapter about my father, even though I wrote it, or I thought I wrote it, not to settle scores but out of love and sorrow. I've never felt closer to my father than when I was writing *Next Year in Cuba*—after all, it's his title. But after my mother's reaction to this book, I stopped giving her copies of some of the things I publish. And so I've never given her *Anything But Love*, or *Scar Tissue*, or a story called "Mami's Boy," which is a kind of act of contrition dedicated to her . . . uhm . . . maybe I am a sinner after all . . .

EDR: You mentioned earlier your humor is often a result of anger and distress. This [*Anything But Love*] seems angrier than your other works. Where did the anger come from?

GPF: This is one of those books that I wrote to forget. It grew out of an especially unhappy time in my life, when I was upset at stuff that had happened to me, or that I thought had happened to me. But the thing about the story is that Frank never does find out the truth about Catherine's past. It's all surmises, theories, inferences on his part. Sometimes the people we know best are the same ones we know least.

EDR: In addition to being a creator of Cuban-American literature, you're also one of its foremost critics. Are you a writer first and critic second?

GPF: I see myself not as a writer but as someone who writes. I write for a variety of reasons: it's my job; it allows me to remember and to forget; and I enjoy it—especially after it's done. I also find that writing criticism is more difficult than writing "creatively," because the range of allowable utterances is narrower. One of the things I've tried to do in my scholarship is stretch the boundaries a little, see how much I can get away with. And so a book like *Life on the Hyphen*, which is scholarship, includes autobiographical vignettes and ends with a poem.

EDR: Do you have any predictions about Cuba once it is free of Castro? Will you ever return?

GPF: My prediction: Whatever happens in Cuba, it will have happened too late. If you were thirty when Castro took over, you are now in your seventies. And if you were older than thirty, you are probably dead. The generation of exiles to whom return would have been truly

meaningful is filling up the cemeteries in Miami and elsewhere. This is very sad. Much of the "scar tissue" I carry inside me has little to do with anything that has happened to me, but with what happened to those older exiles who premised their lives in exile on a return that never took place. I wish I could make it up to them. Since I can't, I write poems and stories about my wish to make it up to them.

I haven't gone back to Cuba, and perhaps I never will. Before I didn't go because my father was still alive, and now I don't go because he is not. What's the point of returning if he can't accompany me? Years ago my father would ask whether I would go back to Cuba with him when Castro was gone. I always replied that I would, not knowing whether I really meant it. Now, I ask myself whether I would go back without him, and I don't know what to answer.