

The twins must decide

Scholarly source:

Lopez-Hardin, Whitney M. (2011). *Puerto Rican migration: Hybrid identities among return migrants*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida.

Meet the twins

Meet the Perez twins, Lucia and Maria. They were seventeen-year-olds living in Puerto Rico in 2005.

Well, they were "sort of" living in Puerto Rico. You see, they actually belonged to two worlds, two countries, and two cultures. And the time had come for them to make a decision.

But we'll discuss that in a minute. First, let's learn a little more about their worlds.



The twins' worlds

The Perez twins were born in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is one of a group of Caribbean Islands located off the coast of Florida.

To understand how the Perez family ended up belonging to two different cultures, we should begin our story in the 1500s.



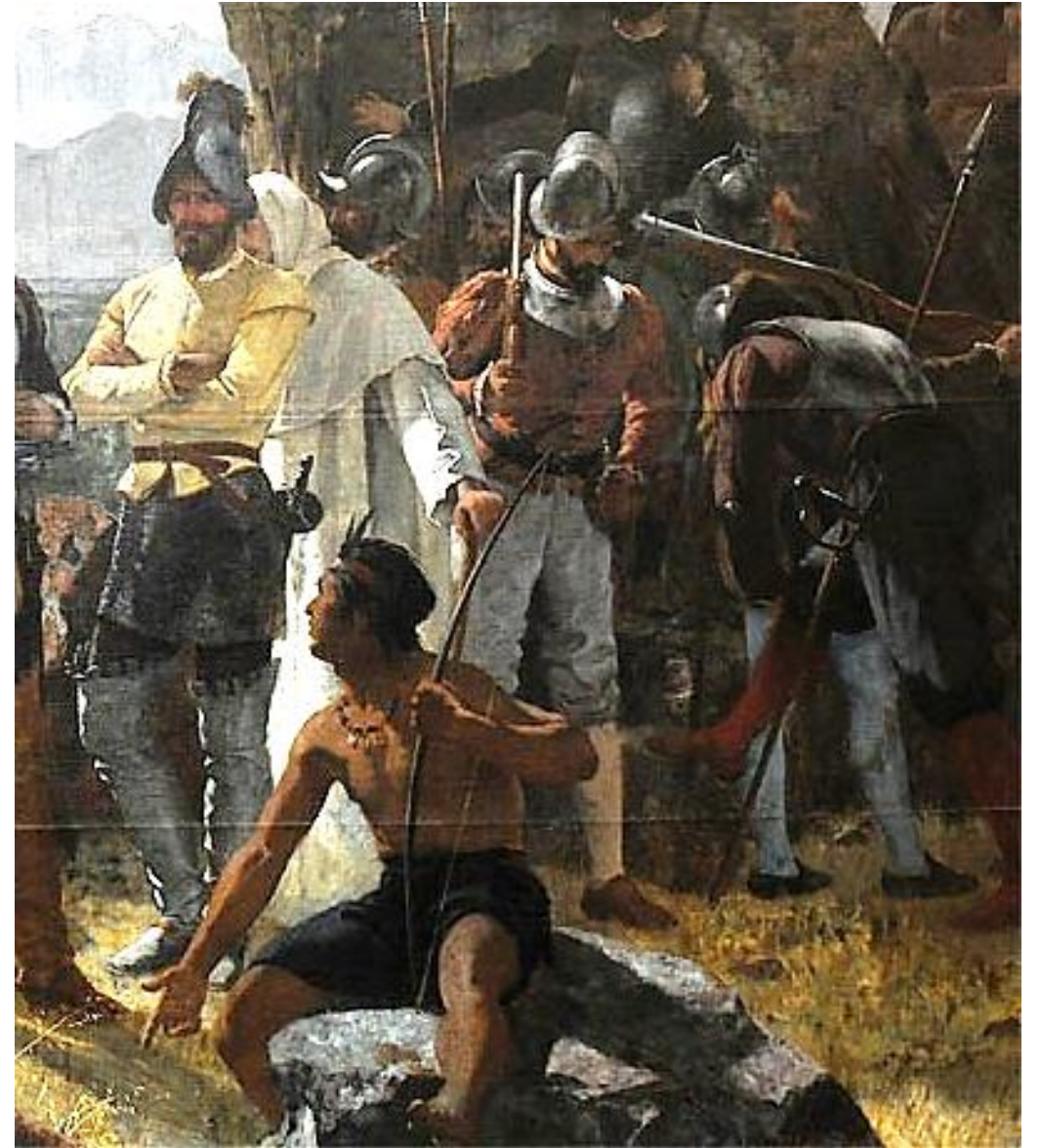
At that time, the island of Puerto Rico was settled by the Taino Indians. This peaceful tribe had a sophisticated language and religious system.



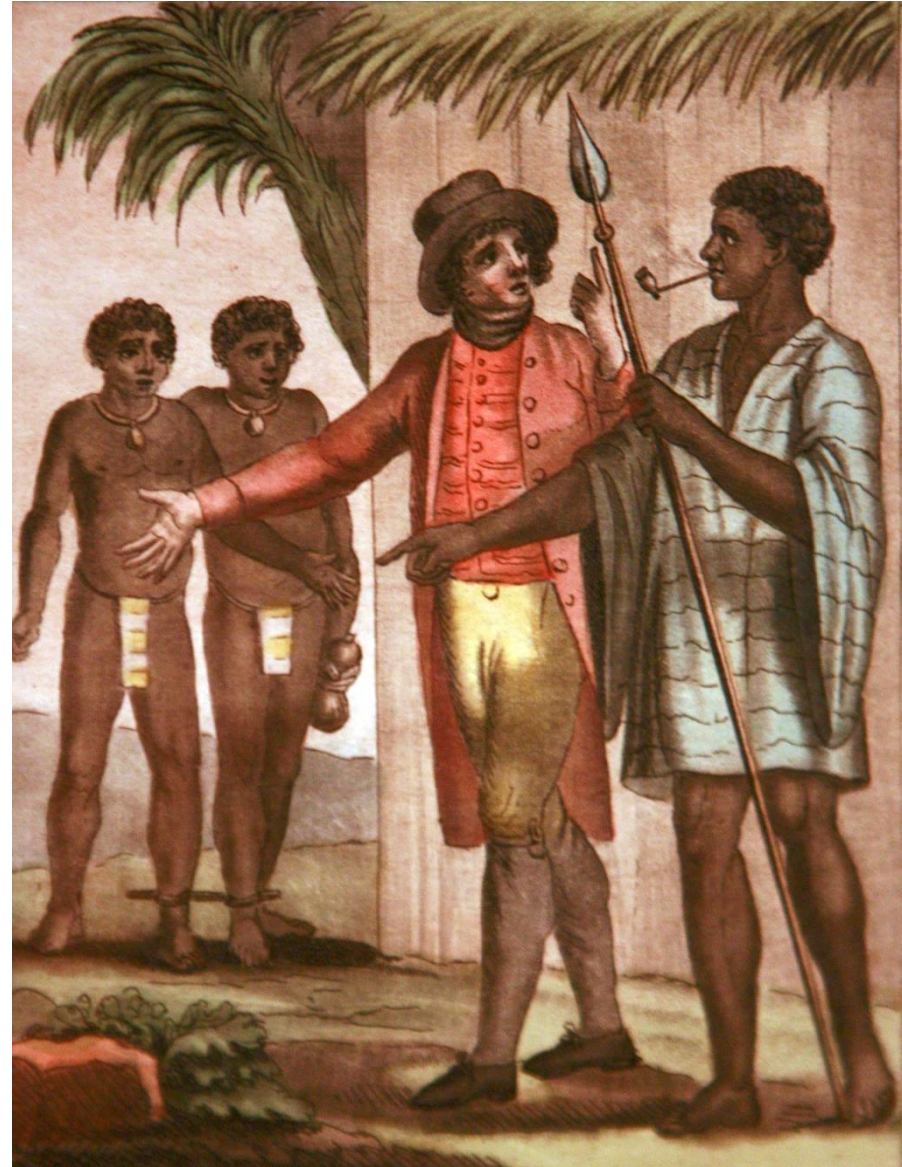
But in the 1500s the Spanish conquistadors began invading Puerto Rico. At first it wasn't so bad. They traded with the Taino Indians and learned from them.



But later on the more powerful Spaniards enslaved the Indians. The Tainos quickly died off in large numbers due to overwork and disease. A smallpox epidemic in 1518 took thousands of Tainos.



When the Indian slaves did not work out, the Spaniards made deals with Africans in order to import slaves (who were captured in battle) to labor for them in Puerto Rico. These slaves were not freed until 1873.



Within a few generations, most Puerto Ricans were a mixture of Taino, African, and Spanish blood and culture.



But over the years, the United States was growing unhappy with the presence of Spain in the nearby Caribbean Islands. In 1898 the US invaded Puerto Rico in order to gain control of the area from Spain.

Shortly afterwards, Spain was forced to cede Puerto Rico to the US under the Treaty of Paris.



The island ultimately became a commonwealth of the United States. By 1917 the United States passed a law that gave US citizenship to Puerto Ricans. This meant that they could move easily from the island to the mainland without needing visas.



The US revamped the Puerto Rican educational system so that students would be forced to learn English and mainland American history. At that time, leaders in the United States had little respect for Puerto Rican culture.



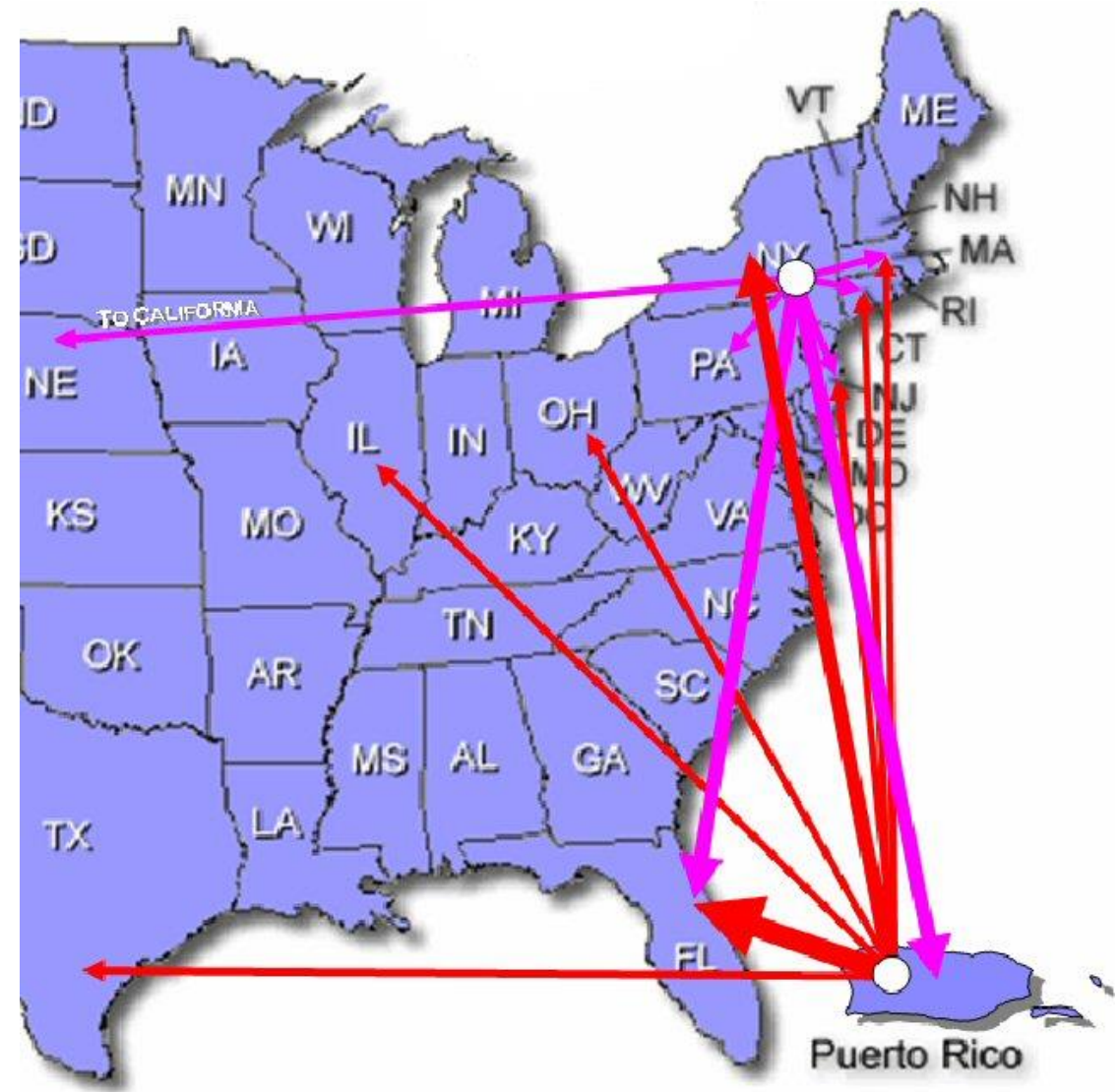
The US also changed the way Puerto Ricans earned their livings. At the time the island became a commonwealth, most people were farmers. But by the 1940s many, many US companies had opened factories in Puerto Rico, employing many of these farmers.

However, by the 1980s, most of the American factories had left the island for Asia and South America where the labor was cheaper. The Puerto Ricans then lost their jobs.



This led to a practice called circular migration. Puerto Ricans needing or wanting more employment would use their US citizenship to migrate to the mainland for temporary jobs and then return to the island (where the cost of living was lower) to spend the money.

From the 1980s on, nearly half of Puerto Rico's population was involved in circular migration.



People had their feet in two cultures. People could choose to continue going back and forth or could choose to select one culture over the other.

The choice became an issue in the Perez family.

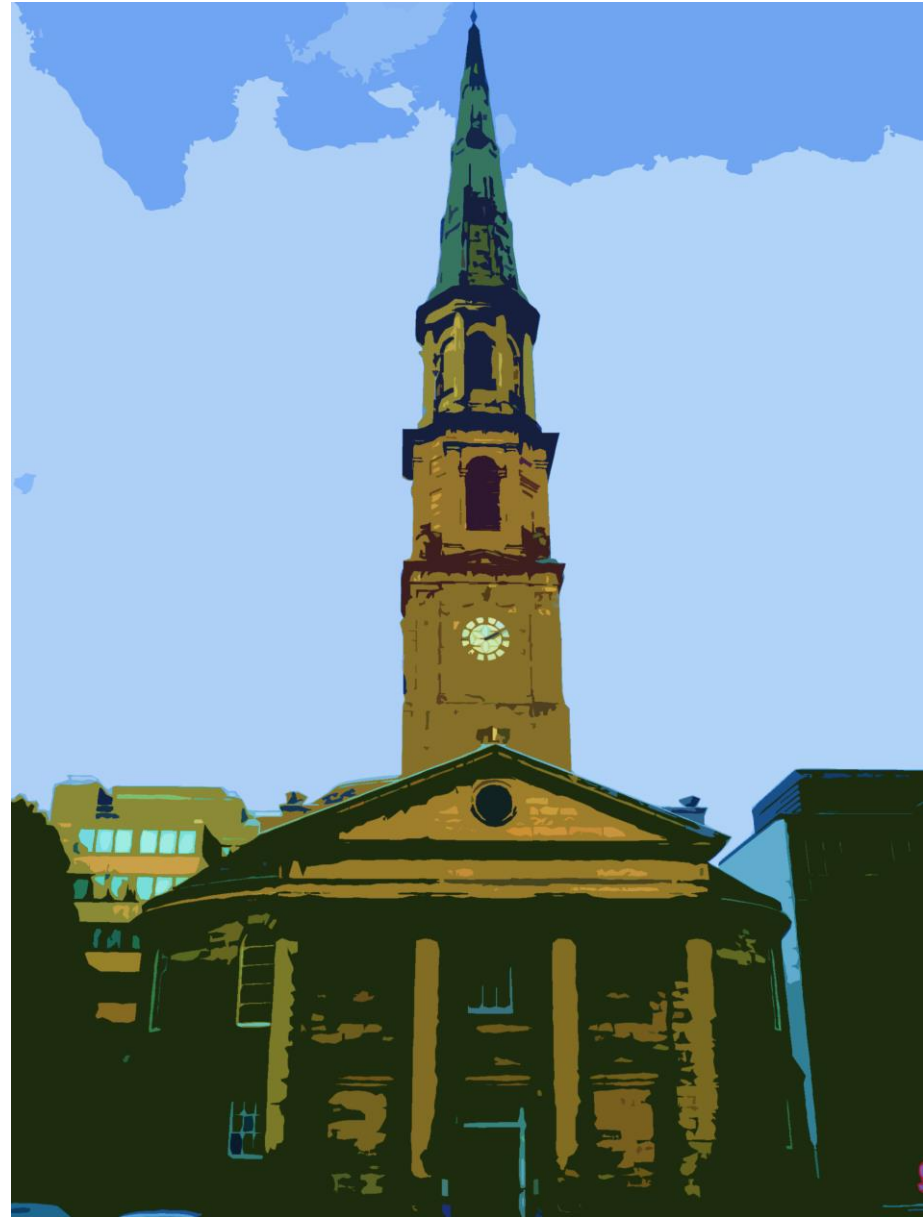


The twins' decision

Unlike most Puerto Ricans involved in circular migration, the Perez family was not poor. By Puerto Rican standards, they were middle class. They lived in a nice house in a nice neighborhood in a coastal village.



Like most Puerto Rican families, the Perezes were Catholic. Jorge Perez, the twins' father, was an elementary school teacher in a Catholic school near their home.



Because Lucia and Maria were both exceptional students in school, the family's dream was to send the twins to the best possible college—regardless of cost. For this reason, the twins and their mother, Wilfreda, migrated to New York City every summer to earn extra money.

She sold tickets to rides at the Coney Island Amusement Park. When the twins were younger, they got free tickets to rides and could hardly wait for summers to begin. Now in 2005, they also sold tickets to save for college.



Over the years, Lucia and Maria got to know American culture nearly as well as they knew Puerto Rican culture.



But things were about to change. Wilfreda was offered a full time job in New York in the tourist industry. This would absolutely ensure that the Perez family would have enough money to send the twins to the best possible college. Wilfreda and Jorge discussed the opportunity one night on their balcony that overlooked the ocean.

"I know that I could easily get a teaching job in New York, with my bilingual skills," Jorge admitted. "But I feel reluctant to leave our home here permanently."

"But you don't know how fabulous life in New York can be," Wilfreda argued.



The couple could not reach a decision. They brought the girls into the conversation.

"It will have to be up to you two," Jorge said. "You have seen both worlds. You must sit down and discuss which world you want for a permanent home."

The girls began the debate.



Maria was first to speak. "Well, New York has so much to offer that we could never get in Puerto Rico. Think about the theaters, the museums, the art galleries. Think about Times Square (right), Broadway, and Central Park.



Lucia agreed. "But let's not forget about our beaches in our backyard. Think of the swimming, the surfing, the beauty. And the weather here is warm all year around."



"And yet," continued Lucia. "If we don't move to New York, we lose the chance to go to the best college. Both of us want Columbia University."



"Ah, Columbia," mused Maria. "I really want to study at Columbia. But sometimes I worry about losing our culture, our language."



"I worry too," agreed Lucia. "But then I think about the diversity you get in New York. Think about all the foods we have tried there—all the different kinds of ethnic dishes."



"True," said Maria. "But when have we tasted Puerto Rican food like we get at home? Have we ever had a decent order of *arroz con gandules* in New York?"



"No we haven't. And I'd miss our food," admitted Lucia.
"Still wouldn't you miss the variety of people that we
get to know in New York?"



"Maybe," answered Maria. "But I don't see the same *respeto* in the New York as we see at home. I don't see the Americans honoring their elders the way our people do. In fact, at some times I think they treat their elders like throw-away people."



"That's true," responded Lucia. "But let's not forget the great careers we could have in New York. It's like the song says, 'If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.' We'd be on the fast track to great careers."



"But is this what we really want?" asked Maria. "In America the people just go wherever the best job is—even if it's leaving family behind. Back at home we have the village mentality. People in our village want to grow old with the people they grew up with."



"Ah, this is so true," agreed Lucia. "In Puerto Rico we value our family and relations more than individual opportunities."

"Yes, *familia*," replied Maria. "The security. The love."



"Well I think we've talked this to death," declared Lucia. "Now we must decide."

They got up from the table and together came to a decision.



Now you must guess:
What did the twins decide?

Turn the page and see if you guessed right

The twins' decision

The twins chose to stay in their loving village in Puerto Rico.

They thought that culture and family were more important than opportunities to earn more money and have more status.

Would you have made the same decision?



The end
Let's talk!!!