

Interview with Junot Díaz

JULEYKA LANTIGUA-WILLIAMS

In 1996, his first book, *Drown* — a collection of short stories based on his life growing up in inner city New Jersey — made Junot Díaz an instant literary darling. Over a decade later, his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, solidified his status as a literary force and quickly made him one of the most recognized and celebrated authors writing in English or Spanish. The novel oscillates between Oscar, an overweight and ostracized young man in the throes of finding an identity, exploring his creative urges, and pining for true love, and his emotionally-scarred mother, Belicia, who may have passed a Trujillo-era family curse on to her son and his sister, Lola. Díaz sat down for a candid conversation four months prior to the publication of the novel in 2007, before it became a national bestseller, an international sensation, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. Reflecting his many preoccupations at the time, and touching upon some of the major themes in the novel, the discussion ranged widely from diaspora as a curse or blessing, the complex and often damaging relationships between Dominican women, the impact of becoming a public figure, sacrificial nerds in the 1980s, and the impulse to reject our natural need to create.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams: What was the effect of the success of your first book, *Drown*?

Junot Díaz: It got me a steady job teaching at Syracuse University, and then I was recruited by Anita Desai for MIT. Both jobs afforded me paychecks, health insurance,

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams teaches writing at Naugatuck Community College in Connecticut and is a literary editor.

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and tenure. I was young — at least I thought I was young — I didn't realize much about myself. Probably the most important thing is how little I like attention. My close friends all know anytime I have to spend time in public or do an interview, I'll spend days recovering. I have a very negative association with too much attention. So the other part was that it made me feel incredibly self-conscious in a way that I never felt before. You become — even to a minority of a minority of readers — a public figure. For someone who strove for invisibility, that was more shocking than anything else.

J.L.W: How do you deal with the responsibility of being a public person?

J.D: I don't think anybody expects anything from writers, except for them to write. Though a lot of people think — a lot of writers think that other people expect more — because editors, publicists, and publishers want to build brands, they want to create labels. My sense of it is that most readers only expect, if anything, for you to write in ways that they don't feel like they wasted their money, their time. There are community responsibilities, which I feel are much stronger. It's a public and collective responsibility. People like you, and you can take out of the system and put back in to benefit the collective. I have no problems with being a mentor or teacher; I think that's a private and intimate relationship in ways that being a public figure is neither private nor intimate. It demands different facilities.

J.L.W: So mentoring fulfils the collective responsibility?

J.D: I believe it does, if you're mentoring the right kinds of people. The idea is — I don't want to make that sound elitist — but it's the sense that you don't ever want to raise bad Jedis. You don't want to train people who are damaging. Who are we to judge who's good or who's bad, who damages? You try to see if you can make people critical-minded. Who knows if you're not the bad guy training good ones? So, for the most part, for me in any kind of mentoring situation the more critical-minded you make someone, and the more compassionate you encourage someone to be, more likely than not you're going to produce someone who's human.

J.L.W: How did you approach the process of writing a novel?

J.D: The idea is to encounter life at its most naked form — random, uncaring, and brutal. So I was living with these lies, which in some ways is very, very difficult. We are dished

out some incredibly bad lies. I had to find a way to be in it, and be like, this life is bull. You can't fake that. So, many of these chapters I wrote, and in many versions, the balance was off. The brutality was on, the pathos was on. It was good, but there was no sense of that vibrancy which I feel was important to the book. I want it to be like somebody's trying to give you a gift, even if they took you through a bad, fucked up neighborhood, like you're going to meet the nicest people you've ever met. That's often what I feel when I go home to Santo Domingo, to Villa Juana. But you're like, it's the most fucked up, most damaged place ever. Yet you will meet the most wonderful people if you can just withstand some of the difficulties, some of the reactions; but you have to go through difficulties to really encounter people. That was a long fucking struggle, and I had no idea what I was doing.

J.L.W: How so?

J.D: I had no idea how these characters wanted to fall in with each other. I had no idea how Lola, and La Inca...I had no idea how to balance that. Everybody wants to be 100% emotionally serious to be able to tear someone's heart apart, but also make them burst out into laughter. That's what I was trying to do; I couldn't get that balance right, to be how I thought it would be to be fundamentally New Jersey-Dominican, which is such a specific sureño thing, sureño-Dominican thing. To get that balance, but also to show the complexity of saying and being Jersey-Dominican. There's something in there, that's hilarious. But while trying to balance that with all the nerd stuff, and all the science-fiction stuff, I wanted to have a very literate book, a book that was about books, where there is all this writing, and all these stories, and this writer constantly recommending books.

J.L.W: It's like a canon in a way.

J.D: Yes, a canon, that's a good way of putting it. But also to balance that with how I grew up... As a matter of fact, I can't say nothing. I live in a world of hip-hop, where everybody's like, I'm harder than the next motherfucker. I grew up poor and everything. I grew up as poor as the next person. I knew we were poor because we never wanted to talk about it. So how do you balance the place I grew up in? London Terrace, on welfare in the 70's and 80's, with no fucking dad around, five kids, a brother with cancer, and the highest fucking cancer rate in the state, living near the largest active landfill within 500 miles. How do you counterbalance that with intellectual language? How do you

balance the fact that I'm much more comfortable — and not because I'm putting on an act, I'm a fucking nerd — cursing, that's what I grew up with, that feels like home to me.

Then I am talking about this other thing which I've also now become comfortable with, simultaneously comfortable talking about Derek Walcott or Patrick Shimizu as I'm like, “Yo, bitch what's up?” It's not one or the other, it's both of me. But how do you find a place for both these things to exist at once? Can they exist in a way so they don't feel like they've drawn a truce, or that there's a balance, but they feel that they can't exist without the other one? But it's not only inevitable, it was essential. Being able to say, “Negro, please” is as much a skill as being able to say, “To the latecomers are left the bones.” That took a lot. It might seem like it's a lot of boasting, but trying to describe the perimeters in my mind of what the language was trying to do; how I knew that things were wrong; how I knew when chapters were not working; how I knew when I went too far in one direction or the other, and why that would take fucking forever.

J.L.W: Did you help create the idea of the “first literary Ghetto Nerd” touted by publicity materials?

J.D: No. I think the publicist is always looking for a way to angle stuff. As we say, *el guiso*. I have no connection to any of that. I think it's fundamentally absurd because the work of a novel is very difficult to put labels to. The same way that we always discover when we wrestle with each other; the problematic of a human is that any label we slap on them, they exceed or they defy, or in some way they elude. I hear that, and I'm like, Dude. The concept that there haven't been ghetto nerds before or after or simultaneously seems silly to me. People like the idea that you coined something.

J.L.W: But there are some things that characteristically define Oscar as a nerd.

J.D: The concept of who a nerd is is a very historical, specific thing. Oscar is a nerd for all the things we think make a nerd, but he's also a nerd for the historical period because in '81 came MTV, Cable. In New Jersey, Cable arrived in a very fundamental way, the time MTV arrived. Both of them were located in Jersey. Home computing, video games — '79. Role-playing games, which was everything you see now; half the video games are based on the architecture of pen-and-paper games. Role-playing games were first

out in the public consciousness in 1980. Things that we call the core of a nerd, all the damn superhero movies that we see, the concepts in all the fantasy stuff. 1980 was *Star Blazers*, considered the first big Japanese anime ever to arrive in the States, issued by Global Tech. These kids were it. In some ways, they paid enormous social consequences for holding the torch.

J.L.W: So you would say that Oscar absorbed and processed contemporary youth culture?

J.D: I think that these kids held it together, and they created it. Yet, what was interesting is that these young nerds weren't thinking that this was going to be a cage; they didn't even want to think about it.

J.L.W: Why did you make the choice to kill Oscar?

J.D: Because in the end it doesn't make a difference. You know, nobody lives forever. We're all going to die; we've all got the death sentence on us, and everyone's got their own list of reasons, of rules, of what would make life worth it. But I'm like, you're not even the one who set the clock on the game. So you shouldn't make too many rules 'cause you should discover how much life doesn't give a shit about you or your little criteria of what makes life worth it or not. The only criteria you could possibly hang on to is that somewhere you've created love. So Oscar's confusion was that he always wanted love, but the thing is, it was only in the end that he realized that in this process he had created so much love. He had created enormous love. Whether he had gotten sex — love or not, for him — I think it was in some ways a personal achievement beside the point because he had created love. It's not that a person has to fall in love. The world ain't that nice.

J.L.W: But a person gets to create.

J.D: Everybody has a chance to create. As a human being, it's the only thing that you're given. What happens to most of us is we take every chance to make sure not to create, because there's no return for us. There's no real direct return, but you never know what you created until you die. Getting rid of Oscar allowed me to show how much he actually created; by taking him out of the picture so then you could see. Because I pulled him out, and suddenly people have that absence. When you pull someone out, you suddenly

have to feel what they are. When they're around, you don't really have to think of that. It's easy to avoid, to not directly address what a person gives you.

As a kid, I was deeply attached to a sense of love. My father was always trying to sell me this concept of fucking girls. I always loved my father, really wanted his approval. But I also was really angry with him because he rejected me, rejected my mother, and a lot of other things. So, with my mom I had cultivated this counter point to his, *Abhh, mira esa muchacha con ese culo enorme. Mira esa morenaza*. I adopted this sense — as a juvenile young kid who didn't really have the understanding of how the world works — this possible romantic dimension. It wasn't just the tangents of bodies. It wasn't like that, but there was something; I was trying to dream up a love that would've made my father love us, and love my mother, and keep us together.

So for me, love has been very much what I wanted my whole life. You would laugh if you would've seen the Hallmark card idea I had of love. Even in high school — I was this nerdy, fucked up, asocial, really screwed up terror in some ways — in my mind, my sense of love was ridiculous. It was a picture card. It was the romantic dream of an 11-year-old Amish girl. That's how fucking crazy it was, disconnected, it was ridiculous — no, not even an Amish girl. So that was that. I think it's really important to know, and I had a sense growing up, since my father didn't. Clearly, it's one thing for me to say it, it's only now I can actually say it. My father so clearly didn't have much love for me or my siblings. I couldn't speak to my mom; she'd have to answer that question. But, I always had a sense that I was going to be doomed in love. Once you're denied a primary love like that, it becomes fucking fucked. I've always been very, very curious about it in a way that I think someone who had always been given it would not have been curious. It was not a time and place for me yet. Love was this thing that I really hoped existed, but I never had any evidence of as a child.

J.L.W: The most typically Dominican character is the narrator, Yunior, who describes himself by the Alpha male characteristics of a prototypical Dominican.

J.D: I also think that he's another example of the worst Dominican. In the text, he's constantly being corrected by people who know way more about Santo Domingo than he does. He constantly makes the simplest mistakes throughout the book. I'm not just saying that as a way to cover, but there are a number of very critical historical mistakes that Yunior makes throughout, and they get referenced in a number of places that you have to be very careful about. There's a moment in the footnotes when the dude doesn't

even get the geography correct and this woman, Leoni, has to come in and be like, Dude, there's no fucking beaches over there. There's a sense that he's passing for Dominican on so many levels. I think that he's trying as desperately as anyone else to put it together, to put together something that works. I think he doesn't seem to be able to relinquish certain myths. He can be critical about the Alpha male Dominican myth, he understands it, but he seems completely unwilling to let it go. It's like knowing that drugs are bad for you but still being like [inhales deeply].

J.L.W: To me, he came off as the anti-Oscar: macho, girl-crazy, but unable to focus, unable to believe in himself enough to actually produce.

J.D: I agree. And he seems extremely scared. The fundamental thing about Oscar is that he might be alone and think, life sucks. He might be scared, but he is so much more willing to go into his scary places. He doesn't like to do it; it kills him, just like anyone else. I wouldn't want to go to scary places, but Yuniór is incapable of it. Any time there's anything even remotely difficult, he jumps out — emotionally, intellectually. Throughout the book, he seems unwilling to go into the hardest of hard places, which is what Oscar ends up doing. He never seems to have a problem throwing himself into the abyss.

J.L.W: Tell me about the three women who are the pillars of this book: Belicia, Lola, La Inca.

J.D: It's funny because they're the pillars, but there's this whole cosmology of women in this book — all these women characters, whether they're fantastic, mythical, whether they're pseudo-historical.

First of all, hyper-masculinity is perfectly found in the African diasporic Caribbean space in the Dominican Republic. It can be found in other places, but here's its ground zero. You can't create that kind of masculine myth without the counter myth of the feminine. For me, part of it was that interaction between these kinds of typologies. There's this Dominican hyper-masculine male, and there's this hyper-sexualized feminine woman, yet it's extremely complicated. I honestly feel like writers don't seem to have fun with their female characters. So male writers, I think we either think we know what we're talking about or we're scared we don't know what we're talking about. The worst is the first, you think you know what you're talking about. I'm always terrified of ever writing in the female voice or to write female characters. But, in the end, that hobbles your ability to have fun. Then it's the same thing when you want to be serious,

you want to reveal the sort of creative energy of the diasporic Dominican woman, that's also not going to be fun because you're trying to deliver a message.

All the male shit is great, but none of it could have been possible — why I see Manny Pérez on TV, why when you go to Spain you hear Aventura, why Tony Capellán has an art exhibit in Washington D.C., you're very aware [of the role women played, women like my mother]. She made people like Manny and David Ortíz possible. Her culture, that kind of collectivity, that kind of stick-togetherness, that kind of working, that kind of sacrifice, raising children, marshalling resources, all the different things that these women put together, mostly ad hoc, and a lot of times despite themselves. I have this illusion that they're all sitting around and are like mother goddesses, healing with a touch.

We benefit from this silent stealthy culture. It's always very interesting. I guess it all comes down to what a friend said to me, "Dude, if it wasn't for salons, Santo Domingo would be destroyed." If it wasn't for women doing women's hair, half our economy would be done. I think about my sister; she was a stripper, and she paid for the rent for many, many years when I was young and we were very poor. Her whole thing was, "If it wasn't for my *culo*, nobody would be eating here." So there's this huge hidden component that doesn't pertain to the official story. So I wanted to pursue that, I wanted to show these women. And I wanted to have fun. It's not like they came together in this multigenerational way. Lola was like my two sisters, with some of my exes thrown in. I've known Lola my whole life, watching very carefully someone like her try to live, try to deal with a mom like my mom, and this mom. Our moms are all tremendous.

J.L.W: Metaphorically speaking, would you say that Diaspora was our *fukú* or our *zafá*?

J.D: I think it was an attempt to find an answer. It was an attempt to create that question. That question isn't possible without what we did. Whether we are Dominicans, what we do, is it part of a curse? Part of a blessing? Both? That it was only possible when we began to get this sort of context that Diaspora allowed us, multiple understandings. You could no longer have that illusion of a consolidated *país*. I mean, there is no real place called Santo Domingo. It's an illusion hosted by media elites and political elites. This tiny little country, what holds us together is kind of ephemeral; people really believed that myth until you sent a million, two million people out of the country.

Then you have to deal with people who were saying they were Dominican but didn't speak any Spanish, people who said they were Dominican and lived their whole

lives in Switzerland. What's most important about it is, for the first time, as a community, we are beginning to ask these questions. That was helped along by our encounter with the world. Because one of the things about the *Trujillato*, one of the things about the Dominican diaspora, is that that was a homecoming to the world we created. The Dominican Republic really did help create the New World, literally. But then we were isolated from the 20th century by a dictatorship that completely locked us in. We returned to a world that we helped to create, yet didn't know anything about. It wasn't until we encountered that world that we could really see ourselves, because we were written all over it. I feel like inside of Santo Domingo we had no mirrors, because we didn't see the world we helped wrought.

J.L.W: Let's segue to Trujillo, whom you vilify in this book.

J.D: Actually, no. I think Trujillo is almost completely absent from this book. I think it's a joke about someone like that; it's that the evil that they generate is so colossal that it confuses our ability to see a nuanced individual. For me, the absences in the book — the actual physical absences — are really intentional.

J.L.W: In a way, Trujillo is the creation myth for the book.

J.D: We design creation myths because we have no direct connection to our creation. But what I'm saying is that Trujillo is necessary to try to explain what the fuck happened. And because he is both principle and outcome, he's in some ways this bizarre thing. So, yes, I agree with you completely, I'm simply saying that to me Trujillo is this very bizarre figure.

J.L.W: I have heard you say that we're all Trujillo's kids — illegitimately and legitimately — even second, third generation Dominicans and hyphenated Dominicans.

J.D: Yes, that's part of it. The evil of the father — the bad father — lasts. The consequences of those kinds of patriarchal traumas last to the point where, like I said, the person no longer has contact with the origins of that evil, that trauma. I had no concept that I was Trujillo's child, that I was Trujillo's son. I had no concept until I was reading, got older, went traveling, and I was like, Okay, my dad was a total copy of Trujillo. He grew up in the military, during the *Trujillato*. He thought Trujillo was a great fucking man, and we had in my family — and this is very common in many third

world families, I would argue, though I wouldn't say it was all of them — we had a dictatorship in the house. *La dictadura de la casa*. Everyone has different *dictaduras*, but the one that I lived under was *a dictadura* that would've made Trujillo very, very comfortable, because he helped design it. The contours are very, very much aligned with what was happening in the country for those 30 years. What interests me is that he created that apparatus, the machine that would keep going. That's what's great; I almost feel like Trujillo had to die to ensure that the machine would keep going forever. He was the sacrifice, the evil Jesus, in some ways.

J.L.W: In terms of immigration right now, when you're looking out into the world, what do you see?

J.D: This country has such little sense of itself, sometimes I'm astonished. We are one of the biggest myth-making countries, whether we're talking about how many books are published, how many movies we make, the story of America; we are an enormous myth-making country. But the greatest myth of all is what America is or if America even exists. I think that America is such an incredibly dynamic place; it is changing so rapidly because of immigrants. We fundamentally have been a culture that's been put together from the explosions of other cultures. That's exactly it, but it's hard for us to see. In some ways, we have blinded ourselves to the reality of what our country is.

If you watched television, you would have no idea what's going on in this country as far as the level of immigration, how our communities are being rejuvenated, the incredible regeneration, the hopefulness — everything the United States claims to be on a political level, which is not in any way true if you look at our behavior in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, where we claim to be benevolent, this place of optimism and regeneration. It doesn't exist at the popular level. But it does exist when you go to these damn neighborhoods full of immigrants from all over the world. That's what's really interesting, that the very thing we're touting on a planetary level we're denying on a local level. We're doing everything possible to stop it, to legislate it, to kill it. I think it must be really disturbing to be reminded of that optimism and energy. As a country, we're so incredibly jaded, and we're so incredibly negative, and we're so incredibly narcissistic — that must be really, really hurtful. And you believe, you've accepted that your dreams are not possible. As a country, we've really accepted that there are these incredible limitations; we think the worst of the world.

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