SARGASSO Interview

*Sargasso 2008-09, II Quisqueya: La República Extended*

Junot Díaz is the author of the short story collection *Drown* (1996) and the novel *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. Born in Villa Juana, a barrio of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, he moved with his family to New Jersey at the age of seven. He is currently a Professor of Creative Writing at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Katherine Miranda.** I'd like to start this interview by throwing out a term and seeing where it leads us. This volume of *Sargasso* is entitled “*Quisqueya: La República Extended*.” Could you talk about how you see an “extended” Dominican Republic—both in terms of your work as a writer and also personally, as a member of the diaspora?

**Junot Díaz:** Any exploded society, like the Dominican Republic, in some ways you could say has multiple existences. It's funny how some people in the Dominican diaspora don't see any diaspora whatsoever—who believe that somehow, miraculously, at some imaginary level, that a nation exists as some sort of pure territorial space, and that therefore the insane level of connectivity that late modern capitalism brought and that international divisions of labor, which produced a lot of fucking waves of immigration—that all of these things don't exist. The idea is just that there's a Dominican Republic and there are people who live in it—even though the people who live in it is also contested—and everyone who lives outside of it isn't Dominican. It's the “milk theory,” that you have a certain shelf life as a Dominican and as soon as you leave the *nevera* of Santo Domingo you, within a few days, go bad. And you're no longer milk. I think this idea is ridiculous, but clearly it's a narrative that works for some people. And that's what I mean when I say there are
multiple diasporas, multiple worlds. There's one that's completely unaware, doesn't see itself in any form of diaspora. Like my mother. My mother doesn't think of the Dominican diaspora, my mother sees herself as Dominican. Who just happens to live in fucking New Jersey. It's a terrible accident, but in her mind, she in no way links her brain, her imagination, to the U.S., even though she's been here for thirty years. What do you do with someone like that who's literally, physically living in a place thirty years non-stop and yet that place is more insubstantial than memories from her first thirty years?

My sense of it as a writer and an artist ... what fascinates ... is that all of these points of view are existing not only simultaneously, but also at a level of enormous intensity and tension; that because of the historical moment of the Dominican diaspora, the tension between these various sectors is very, very strong. And what I mean by that is that there's an increased sense of nationalism, of national identity based on things like bachata, based on things like merengue, based on things like baseball, based on the fact that we've got over a million people in the New York area. There's a certain consciousness of the nation as a possible entity that casts all these things in a different light. When we were living in the United States in New Jersey in the 70s, I don't think these questions were as charged.

KM: Because of the demographics?

JD: The historical moment. There was no possibility, no-one ever imagined that Dominicans would be at the place they're at now in 1974. We had no idea. I think that why this is all very interesting is because you rarely get this much intellectual leverage at such an important historical moment. I feel like we're time witnesses to an extraordinary moment in what we could call the Dominican "century," the Dominican "state." As an artist, that's what drives me, I feel like — will we ever be in this situation again? Imagine having institutional, intellectual, all the historical ancestry that me and you have now, but imagine that and being a Puerto Rican in 1950s Manhattan. Being on the ground floor, but with all the intellectual institutional apparatus we've managed to accumulate after long years of struggles — it's a wonderful opportunity, and it certainly draws all my energies, both intellectual and artistic, and in some ways even spiritual.

KM: Related to this idea of a unique historical moment, Juan Flores' recent book, *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Tales of Learning and Turning*, talks about the idea of "cultural remittance," something that really interests me as it relates...
specifically to literary remittances—what the diaspora “sends home” in terms of literary production and how that’s changed over time. Do you see your work geared in that way—to be sent back to the Dominican Republic? Or is it more a part of this extended Dominican nation you were just describing that exists outside of the territorial boundaries of the DR?

JD: This has been an important criticism before *The Diaspora Strikes Back* and I always ask: how much money do you send home? We’re very, very aware, anyone who has been in a remittance economy, that when a nation gets wind that it’s getting a ton of remittances, that it has a certain percent of its people outside of its borders, the state, or the elite factors, begin to organize themselves in a way to immunize the territorial, let’s say Santo Domingo. Santo Domingo has organized itself at a political, cultural, and social level to immunize itself against its diaspora. Which is to say that, and we’ve always criticized this, our money is always welcome in Santo Domingo, but not our intellectual or cultural ideas. These are not welcome. There are certain spaces where perhaps they’re welcome, like, let’s say, the moment of political unity around Vieques. Certain kinds of solidarity, but do you really see the political elites of Puerto Rico or Santo Domingo open to the contributions and suggestions and ideas of their diasporic populations? Get the fuck out of here, there’s no space at the fucking table.

KM: Do you think that these relationships are changing at all? In Puerto Rico that certainly was the case for writers decades ago, but it may be changing slightly, shifting certainly from what it was in the 1970s.

JD: Well, I wasn’t even thinking about the writers.

KM: Cultural production more broadly?

JD: I’m thinking about our intellectual and cultural work. By intellectual work I mean, for me, the gold standard is—do our political ideas have any space? And there is no way that anyone can tell me that beyond minor insertions, that the diaspora has been able to take part in the national conversation of the Dominican Republic. I think any state permits a certain level of entry so that people don’t feel like they’re completely being blocked. There’ve been some changes, certain kinds of interventions are possible, but I feel like these states are even more guarded against their diasporas now than they were in the past. In the Dominican Republic, diasporic Dominicans have been success-
fully stigmatized as drug dealers and delinquents. We send millions of dollars home, but we're the problem—not the state—that fails to serve its people. A very useful divide-and-conquer strategy for elites. And when I hear my Puerto Rican students at MIT talk about U.S. Puerto Ricans, they are not level or very open-minded. They speak of US Puerto Ricans in the same negative register. And I think that these are folkloric points of view, folkloric stereotypes, that have enormous power, that make it very difficult for someone from the diaspora to enter productively or to challenge productively these vocal, regressive hegemonies.

KM: Is it a challenge you take up consciously as a writer? Because Oscar Wao is certainly tackling, or at least making a very strong political critique, of many of these Dominican hegemonies.

JD: Elite structures try to 'manage' the diaspora in the DR but they can't block us completely, no more than the U.S. can build a wall around itself. We diaspora Dominicans participate in the society at so many levels that can't be regulated. The very fact that we're not just there with our money, that we're also there with our bodies and our experiences and our intellectual power and our critical perspectives, is, as you indicated, an optimistic sign.

KM: Is it the sort of change that's going to be felt from the ground up?

JD: I'm not prescient or anything, but barring large utopian change, I suspect that it will only be felt at the ground level. For a while at least. I mean, I haven't seen U.S. political elites give up an inch to the larger African American community. Sure, we might have a black president, but has that changed the fate of the Black community in the U.S. one iota? Why?

KM: So is part of your writing then directed towards these powers that be? This political elite?

JD: When I write about the Dominican Republic, I think about the fact that I sit across from a relative who never left the island, and never wants to leave the island, and who can make that choice because we send dollars. I sit across from a brother who was born in the United States and has never gone back to Santo Domingo. I sit across from a cousin who lived in the United States, went back to Santo Domingo and never returned. Anyone who's writing in a form as complicated as the novel is writing often to multiple audiences. So,
who I'm writing to, sure, it could cover those people. But in the same breath it could be said that it's not covering them. It's like a coin that just keeps spinning. Sometimes it's facing you, sometimes it's not. I always felt that I was trying to write to that complex moment of what I knew.

*KM*: Your personal experience.

*JD*: Well, your subjectivity is all you have. I grew up with a very complex view of the Dominican Republic. I had a very complicated family. It's hard for me to say, because it's too short a term, whether what I write speaks to the Dominicans back on the island who never left. It's hard for me to say if it speaks to the Dominicans living here. It's something I think we have to look at, and view, over a long period. In twenty years, me and you will have a better idea if this book has been a part of the conversation of the diaspora or not. I hope it has, but will it?

*KM*: In terms of the literary acclaim the novel has received, and winning the Pulitzer, do you think that's going to change the way either audience receives the work?

*JD*: Well, you know, I don't want to say this, but sometimes you have to get recognized from outsiders before your own culture values what you are. What that means in the long term is very difficult. You can't tell me you know who won the Pulitzer five years ago. And in five years no one will remember that I won it, either. And I think that that's really important, that for a book to survive in the long-term isn't because it won an award. A book survives because it remains relevant at some sort of a cultural, social, political level. And we can only determine that by actually sticking around long enough to see it.

*KM*: What would you say are the major influences, the canonical influences, on your work? You blend many different genres and styles – science fiction, magical realism, you've discussed how Chamoiseau was very influential in the use of extensive footnotes in *Oscar Wao*.

*JD*: In everything, Chamoiseau is important to me in almost everything.

*KM*: Is there a particular canon that was more influential than any other? Can you speak to the influences that are reflected in your work and how this relates to your diasporic identity?
JD: Hard to say. Because I always joke around about this, but asking a writer about their creative genealogy tends to mean that the answer you’re going to get back is more of a fantasy than anything. I don’t have direct access to what shaped my unconscious interests; I don’t really know which writers gave me my art. So yeah, my literary genealogy is going to be more wishful thinking than accurate. But with that said: I always felt that the African diaspora had an enormous impact, whether it was U.S. African American letters, whether it was writing from sub-Saharan Africa, whether it was Caribbean writing... but also immigrant writing across the board. I’ve read a ton of Asian-American writers. And I could never be the writer that I am if I hadn’t learned to write about immigration in interesting ways from what I learned from those kinds of writers. A lot of international work in translation, and then of course huge blocks of what Samuel R. Delaney calls the “paraliterary.” I grew up reading fucking junk. I love junk of all forms.

KM: (laughing) Like what?

JD: You name it. Science fiction, fantasy, horror. Most people find historical monographs really boring. I find them absolutely fascinating. About topics no one gives a fuck about.

KM: Any one in particular?

JD: Sure, when I worked at Rutgers University Press we put out this wonderful sociology series called the ASA Rose Monograph Series that had a tremendous impact on the way I thought about how communities survive and thrive across time. I know a lot about South Africa. A tremendous amount about South Africa. I’ve read a lot of South African literature starting from the 80s. Strangely enough, I am the local resident nerd on post-50s Vietnamese history. I know a fucking awful lot about Vietnamese history — I don’t know why, it just interests me.

KM: In terms of the political oppression and postcolonial history it may share with the Dominican Republic? Do you see links there?

JD: Who wouldn’t? I think nothing changed my life more than the fact that when I was ten years old I was a paper boy. And I was a paper boy for four years until I could get my way into a regular job, and every god damn day I would hand out papers and there would be the headlines. And I was the only
Kid in my neighborhood who knew what the fuck was happening in Northern Ireland, who knew what the fuck was happening in Central America, who watched the Brazilian dictatorship throw itself over the financial cliff. And I think that had a great way of shaping my mind and my art. I think that writers like Edward River, Oscar Hijuelos, Cristina García, Toni Morrison, Edward Jones, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin... I'm a child of Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Marmon Silko, Anjana Appachana, Rushdie, Chamoiseau, Carpentier, Borges, Valenzuela, tons of Colombians, Rulfo, I mean, I just read and read and read. If you're like me, when you read, you're looking for narratives that make explicit things that only a kid who grew up really poor in the 70s saw every day. So South Africa and Ireland—two places I was very interested in in the 80s—made explicit the certain dynamics that I was seeing everyday, growing up a poor fucking Dominican in central New Jersey. I mean it's a far stretch to say that these struggles are analogous, but certainly they're connected.

KM: In terms of oppression?

JD: More than that, oppression doesn't entirely cover what we're talking about. As a writer, what fascinates me is how people "un-see." How societies are trained to not see. In other words, I don't think what determines a person is what their point of view is. I think it's what their point of "un-see" is. What are the things that you've been socialized not to see. And that fascinates me.

KM: Things that for immigrants—exposed to two different societies and able to see comparatively—would stick out so much more?

JD: Well, for most immigrants, no, we're as good at un-seeing as anyone else. In fact, immigration gives you a license to un-see in two cultures. I grew up in a fucking hard-core community, man. I didn't see anyone encouraging me to talk about the silences that surrounded us. In fact, it was considered more problematic for you to challenge or to question what was going on because as immigrants we were so desperate to have a stable identity. So when I was reading about South Africa, what was fascinating to me wasn't the brutal, horrific, white supremacist, near-genocidal violence, and in some cases, genocidal—which of course are enormous, enormous things—but how a society can organize itself not to see that. And live happily.

KM: "I happily" in quotes.

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JD: Yeah, happily in quotes, I agree, of course. The world has organized itself to be completely blind about what happened in the New World, specifically what happened in the Caribbean.

KM: Or to silence those who are talking out against those horrors.

JD: Well, you don’t even need to silence them. You just don’t need to listen. We come from places where we’re not in a position to stop the music long enough for you to announce there’s a fire in the house. And that’s what’s really interesting. I feel that all of these things get back to the fundamental impulse for me as an intellectual and artist, which is that I came out of the site of the greatest trauma of our New World. And the fact that that doesn’t exist in most people’s minds, the fact that the reality of it doesn’t exist in most people’s minds, both inside the trauma and outside the trauma zone, Jesus. That put me on the path.

KM: Do you think the ways the diaspora views that trauma is similar to the ways it’s still viewed at home? Or does leaving the Caribbean change the way the trauma of conquest and slavery and colonization is viewed?

JD: It’s very nuanced. For example, my Dominican friends in Jersey are way more willing to talk about colorism. Even folks who have no progressive training, or don’t see themselves as progressive, openly talk about being discriminated against or treated well depending on their skin color. In Santo Domingo, there’s a lot more silence around it. Yet, whether one speaks about it or not, colorism is practiced quite enthusiastically in both places. So I do think there are differences in silences, clearly, but I don’t think the sum total is any better or any worse. I mean, Jesus, the amount of fucking rape of children that goes on in my community in the United States? Well clearly, a lot goes on at home, too. I mean, are things really, per capita, that different — is it worse or better? And that for me is very important to remember: I’m a poster child for the idea of immigration as progress. And yet I’m not so sure that that myth is something we should be so happily embracing.

KM: You said something in an interview in 1996 that you did with Silvio Torres-Saillant and Diogeno Cespedes,

JD: An almost incoherent interview, but go on.
KM: (laughing) And they were asking you about the success you may have been allowed through your immigration to the U.S. that others who remained in the D. R. may not have had. You said:

I think success is more arbitrary in the U.S. than most people like to admit. We all have an easy time congratulating ourselves when we succeed, but how much of that success is just plain luck? Sure, you might have the talent and the drive but so do a thousand other folks. So why you? I'd say it's arbitrary.

Considering you are the second Latino to win the Pulitzer Prize, would you still say the same thing is true now?

JD: Oh, certainly. We all participate in our fortunes, there's no question. Lay in bed till three in the afternoon and smoke weed all day, you're participating in your fortune. Get up every day and bust your ass, you're participating in your fate. But we're also talking about systems. I was asked that question thirteen years ago... but I would add that there's more to it than that. That we use the success of individuals to erase critiques at a collective level. In other words, we elected Obama, yea, we can clap, but we're not asking: Has the African American community's condition really changed?

KM: So just because two Latinos have won a Pulitzer doesn't mean that we have an equal standing ground in the U.S. as the largest minority.

JD: Or, that we can clap so that we don't have to think about the fact that the Dominican community is in as bad a state as it's been in the last twenty years. For me, the question of being allowed and not being allowed to succeed at the individual level erases what for me is more important, which is that historically there's always been room in most societies for "extraordinary individuals." Someone from the slave class can suddenly own a million slaves or somebody who was a tailor can suddenly be the most important general. Societies are not that fixed, that simple, where these things don't happen. The real question isn't what happens at the individual level, the real question always to me is what happens at the collective level. And often in societies that are hegemonic, like the United States, there's a lot at stake in promoting the success of individuals as a way to silence a conversation about how the community is faring.

KM: So how do we change how our communities are doing?
JD: We change them the way we always change them. To think of my success as an individual Dominican writer masks something very important—that you have to take my entire cadre into consideration. In other words, for me to win this award, how many of us go to prison? How many of us are not given the proper services for our mental health? How many of us have to work terrible jobs? How many of us, because of environmental racism, suffer from asthma and all sorts of other conditions? It seems an incredibly high price to pay for the community, for one person to get a Pulitzer, when you connect all the dots. And I think that my “success” cannot be seen outside of the conditions that we all came up in, and that we all had to experience. It’s a remarkable thing— it’s like the house burned down and fifty people die and you just say, hey, let’s just talk about the one guy who survived.

KM: So these narratives of uplift cannot be normalized.

JD: I mean, Jesus. As far as how do these communities change, I mean, I’m no fucking expert, but from what I know about history it always seems to be the same thing. It’s that you gotta do community work and you’ve gotta create progressive imaginaries at an artistic level and an intellectual level and a political level. And then you wait around and do as much work as possible until the historical moment comes that opens the door for utopian change. Beyond that I think it would be incredibly hard to predict. Each generation at a historical level seems to surprise the shit out of the generation that came before.

What’s unfortunate is that where I came up, and I can’t talk about anyone else, seeing things too clearly was considered negative. If you point out that this thing [pointing to a bottle] has a crack in it, people think you’re a negative person and that you’re not optimistic. I always think that true optimism is demonstrating that even though there is a crack, that the bottle still has value, still is beautiful. True optimism isn’t un-seeing that crack in the bottle and saying the bottle’s wonderful. I think that at many political levels, we function in this way. We think positivity is underplaying what’s wrong and promoting the positive. And I think that’s fucking toxic. Real positivity is seeing how fucked-up and crazy things are and still thinking that we’re worthy of all the things human beings should be worthy of: justice and fuckin’ fairness and peace and well-being. So I believe in positive change. I think the stuff that my generation—the generation that came before and the generation that came after—has done is remarkable. Could we do more? Always. Are we a bunch of narrow-minded, consumer capitalist stooges?
KM: (laughing)

JD: Yes. Given that, are we trying the best we can? I think a lot of times we are. I think we try. I think we good.

KM: I'd like to talk a bit about your literary technique, and about the ways I see your work engaging both science fiction and magical realism. There are two figures in Oscar Wao that strike me personally as incredibly magically real: the mongoose and the man without a face. You mentioned in another interview that the mongoose is actually the most "real" character in the novel, and that it's from a family history...

JD: My mother's history.

KM: But there are also constant canonical references to science fiction in this novel. What is the connection between science fiction and magical realism? Do they engage each other as two sides of the same coin?

JD: Nuh-uh. I think it's the Todorov question. You know Todorov's book on genre? There's a book called The Fantastic that discusses the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous. This book talks about this very issue - you say the mongoose is magical realism - and I think that the text is pointing to other things. Oscar Wao is in some ways a litmus test, a Todorov box. Todorov was a Franco-Bulgarian critic and in The Fantastic he argues this: you see someone there in the middle of the room, floating above the ground. That event is fantastic, it's not normal. And there are two ways this thing works: if this fantastic event is proven to be an optical trick, and then what you think is fantastic suddenly is revealed to be just uncanny. Ever watch Scooby Doo?

KM: Of course!

JD: Scooby Doo's a perfect Todorov example. There's a ghost, that ghost is the fantastic element, the kids go in and find out it's Old Mr. Petersen and it's revealed just to be uncanny. And then, at the end, there's actually a real ghost, and that's the marvelous. When something is proven to be human or normal, it's just uncanny. When it's proven to be for real, like if he's really levitating, it's marvelous. Now, the thing is that the marvelous can be subdivided into various genres. Into horror, fantasy, science fiction, and even these areas can be sub-divided even further. It's up to the viewer of a fantastic event to decide.
whether what they're experiencing is marvelous or uncanny. But I also think it's up to the viewer (in our specific case the reader of this book) to decide which form of the marvelous they encounter. Most readers are more comfortable with making the argument that the fantastic elements they encounter in my novel are magical realism/marvelous. But the text makes a very strong argument that things like the mongoose are either the marvelous of fantasy literature or the marvelous of science fiction. The text is organizing itself and training the reader to view the world from a science fiction/fantasy and supernatural background. Everything is described in this way because it's trying to give you an epistemology. The mongoose that appears in this book, even though it had its origin in a family moment — my mom tells the story about being saved by a mongoose when she was lost and almost starving to death in a coffee plantation when she was little — is actually from a young adult novel written by Alexander Key that takes place in Puerto Rico called *Flight to the Lonesome Place* where the mongoose is an alien from another world. Alexander Key is the guy who wrote the books — way before you were born, *jovencita*— the *Witch Mountain* books, very popular young-adult books in the 70s.

And so, in some ways, it's a test for the reader because most readers are more comfortable with rejecting Oscar's point of view. They don't mind hanging out with Oscar, or feeling sympathy for him. As a form of entertainment or emotional affection, Oscar is interesting. But when it comes down to it, very few people want to really embrace Oscar's intellectual point of view. And from his epistemological point of view, if you embrace not only the language and the literature and the genre and the lenses he cherishes, if you embrace as well what meaning these things create, both the man without a face and the mongoose suddenly can lead you along very different lines than magical realism. But because as scholars and as readers we've been trained to think of anything fantastic happening in a Latin American novel as being part of the magic realist marvelous, we miss the trail of breadcrumbs that's leading us to an alternate conclusion. And I think this novel in some ways aims to teach you to see along a science fiction way, or, in fact, a fantasy way. It's perfect in some ways... because so many readers resist the novel's lessons. We, in the end, resist Oscar.

The book opens with this wonderful admonition: of what import are brief, nameless lives? I would argue not just of what import are brief, nameless lives to Galactus, but: of what import are brief, nameless lives and their nearly, genre points of view? I think that many readers, without realizing it, embrace their inner Yuniur, their inner dictator. The person who's like, "I privilege certain kinds of narratives, and even though the main protagonist has a narrative
that he argues is very, very important, I’m not gonna fuckin’ embrace it.” I’ve always thought of this book as a really interesting choose-your-own-adventure book at the level of signification.

KM: You had that in mind throughout the whole process of writing it?

JD: Oh, yeah. There were a number of ways I was trying to do it. I actually had pages where the narrative would stop and it would say: “If you think this is science fiction, go to page 77,” – for real. But it was too complex, I couldn’t pull it off.

KM: Well, maybe for volume two?

JD: No, no, no. It’s enough. I did what I did. The grad students are the ones who can take it to the next level.

KM: (laughing) When you mention Yunior as an inner dictator, and talk about the ways Oscar is overpowered by his own readers, I’d like to relate this to a discussion of gender. I see your work as deeply critical of Dominican machismo, and the ways that it can perpetuate forms of both domestic and institutionalized violence. But Oscar Wao has been critiqued by certain scholars. Lisa Sánchez González refers to Oscar Hijuelos’ The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love to claim that a latino Pulitzer-prize winning novelist must “interweave in his tale miles and miles of sexualized floss. Preferably the kind that confirms stereotypes about muy macho Latin men and Latina hotties.” How would you respond to the ways your construction/representation/approach of gender deals with these stereotypes?

JD: Look, I’m not a woman, so I might not have a leg to stand on, but I don’t think that’s a very rigorous critical argument. You put two bottles next to each other and just because of their proximity you say they’re both wine – that’s not the way that it works. I’d like to hear an argument of how my representation of sexualized latinos and latinas is similar to that of Oscar Hijuelos. That would help me out. And honestly, miles and miles? I got more sci-fi references in this novel than ass references – so where does that leave us?

But really, I would love to have this conversation in Santo Domingo or Puerto Rico, countries where the majority of the inhabitants were basically raped into existence, where (in simplistic terms) we’ve covered this trauma.
with a certain kind of internally embraced hyper-sexualization. Listen: bodies
mean something in the Caribbean that they don’t mean anywhere else, and
that has everything to do with a deep history of black, brown and red bod-
ies having been sold, dominated, and raped. Go to the Dominican Republic
and give your average woman this choice: “Be a whore for life or have no ass.
Which one do you want to choose?” Even though this is a folkloric joke, the
importance of our bodies, the importance of beauty, the importance of sex —
these things cannot be denied or underestimated. Lisa’s critique seems to con-
fuse representation with approbation. I also repeatedly describe child rape in
this book. So therefore I am encouraging child rape because I’m representing
it? I find those arguments really simplistic.

Look, I’m a male writer. My sexism is a given. There’s no question of my
masculine privilege, no matter how foreign or how much of African descent I
am. No matter these things, my sexism is a given. My privilege blinds me to
an entire half of the planet.

KM: A little more than half...

JD: The way this novel is organized is to try to take advantage of that lapse.
For me, this book is literally arguing that the person telling the fucking story,
the person who is using this language, who is talking about women in this way,
who is talking about men in this way, is the son of Trujillo. He is the perfect
child of the Trujillato. In this book, you could draw a direct line in Dominican
society from Trujillo to Yunior. Yunior takes the present role of the dictator — in the past Trujillo was the dictator, he was the only one who spoke. In
this novel, in the present, Yunior’s the only one who speaks. He’s literally the
dictator. The point, I thought, what was really dangerous about the novel,
why Yunior’s such a scary narrator, is because he’s so incredibly charming...
If you buy the book. If you don’t buy the book, of course, he doesn’t work.
But if you buy the book, Yunior’s a winner. He’s a fucking winner, people like
this guy. And he’s a horror. He does everything Lisa accuses me of doing.
What’s ironic is that Trujillo is this horror in the book, but the readers don’t
even recognize that the person telling the story is Trujillo with a different
mask. All the stuff that Trujillo believed in, Yunior practices in one form
or the other. No matter how critical or how left wing he is, his sexual politics
are fucking nightmarish.

KM: But is there redemption for him in the end? Does he end the same way
he starts?
JD: Well, that's a very good question that the reader has to decide. And that is what the book is an argument for or against. The book, in a way, is Yosúa's last testament. So, is he different from the person who cheated on Lola and broke all of their hearts? Who betrayed Oscar? Is this book an act of love? Does this book show, despite its language, despite its limitations, the real life of a specific group of Dominican women in a way that other men haven't spoken about before? And as a reader, you've gotta answer that question. I can't. And that determines whether Yosúa finally escapes... If a part of him escapes.

KM: So it's more in the hands of Yosúa than Oscar. The novel is not as much about Oscar as it is about this inner dictator's redemption or non-redemption.

JD: No, I think it's about the two of them. The reason Oscar's so important to Yosúa is the reason Yosúa's so important to Oscar: the two of them circle each other in this book because no matter what we think about Yosúa and his sexual practices, Yosúa isn't an evil dictator. He doesn't really want to kill or hurt anybody. And in Oscar, Yosúa sees something that Yosúa's never had. Oscar is a million things that are fucked up, but he's one thing that is really quite beautiful, really quite luminous, and it's that Oscar's always Oscar. He has an authentic self, no matter how complicated, how fragmented, how fluid, he has an authentic self. He's always who he is. Yosúa is never who he is.

I always joke around that Oscar has only one mask that he never takes off, and Yosúa only has masks. We never know who the fuck Yosúa is. Oscar's always vulnerable, he's always revealing himself. The only way you could become vulnerable with another person is to drop all your masks. That's Oscar. He's always without his mask. In this novel, there's non-stop references not only to The Wizard of Oz, but also to everything the The Wizard of Oz inspired. There's a really terrible science fiction movie called Zardoz (from wIZARD of OZ), and there's always these references in the book to people with masks. There are references to masks behind masks. And the reason is that Yosúa is the ultimate masked man, the baka in the Dominican Republic, this shape-shifter that has no original form. And that's why Oscar sees Yosúa as really attractive, because Yosúa can play social codes better than anyone. Yosúa knows how to wear the masks that are socially beneficial. They may oppress other people, Yosúa don't give a fuck, at least he didn't give a fuck at the beginning. And I think that the book is about these two guys, wrestling with this. Yosúa is haunted by Lola because he knew that if he had revealed
himself to her, she would have loved him and accepted him, and he couldn't do it. And he saw in Oscar the lesson that could have given him the ability to do that. And Oscar's the same way. His obsession with what Yunior has. I see all these figures linked in a way that was productive to me as a writer.

You know, when I sat down I was like (laughing) ha-ha...

KM: (laughing)

JD: (laughing) ha-ha — eso es de mi vida.

KM: I hear there's a movie in the works?

JD: Yes.

KM: How is that gonna change things? These representations of characters and their social significations?

JD: I have nothing to do with it, so I don't know how it's gonna change anything.

KM: (laughing) You don't have anything to do with the screenplay?

JD: Nope, I just know that the Boricua playwright, José Rivera, he's the one who's writing it, and Walter Salles, the Brazilian director of The Motorcycle Diaries, I hear he's the one who's directing it. I mean, it's a very complicated book. I talk to you about it because I'm interested in the different levels of meaning, but you can't have any of that in a movie. In a novel I can have all these really neat, intellectual games that I love. I don't think a movie can capture them all in the same way.

KM: So it's going to be quite a task.

JD: I'm just glad I got nothing to do with it. Because in the end, what can you do? If it comes out really bad, everyone's gonna come up to you and say, "How was the movie?" If it comes out really good, people are gonna be like, "I like the book better." You can't win, man!

KM: Yeah, it's complicated. Well, I have one final question: What's next?
JD: I don't know. I really don't know. You know, you don't want to put too fine a point of it, but look, I'm really fucking weird, dude. As a person, as an artist, that's how you have to be. If you're not fucking weird, and I mean that in the sort of weird America way of weird, if you're not weird, what's the use, man? Why be an artist? You've gotta have a point of view that's fucking coming at things orthogonally, and there's a part of me that just wants to do something really bizarre. I really want to write a science fiction book. I don't know if I can do it though.

KM: Wait a minute (laughing) — everything you just explained to me means that *Oscar Wao* is not a science fiction book?

JD: Well, you know, the thing is, the book is a *baku*, the book itself changes its shape non-stop, it does. It's supposed to do that. The novel has reportage, it has actual autobiography, femme-noir, confession, it mixes literary genres, it's science fiction, it's fantasy, it's horror, it's a literary fiction, so it's constantly changing shape. What I mean by science fiction is to actually play into the side of the stable genre expectations. That would be fun. I feel like it would narrow the box some. I mean, you have to have a restless mind for this kind of shit. I have a very restless mind.

KM: Well, here's to restless minds, and keep us posted for the first interview after you write it! (laughing)

JD: (laughing) *Que muchacha fresca, ¡cono!*

KM: (laughing) Thanks so much for this interview.