

# Junot Díaz

writer, tigre, ghetto nerd, college professor

"The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: how to explain to you that I don't belong in English though I belong nowhere else." Junot Díaz, *Drown*

*Junot Díaz is a graduate of Rutgers University and received his Master of Fine Arts Degree from Cornell University, and is currently teaching at MIT. His fiction has appeared in Story, The New Yorker, The Paris Review, Best American Short Stories 1996 and African Verse. His first book, Drown, was a national bestseller. He was involved in the screenplay of the movie Washington Heights, and is currently working on his first novel.*

*Junot was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, a few short years after it had regained its colonial name after a three decade existence as Ciudad Trujillo, the US-backed anti-communist military dictator whose presence is felt in Drown via the ex-soldiers who mill about, and the mannerisms of Yuniors (the principal protagonist in Drown) pops. He was also born a few short years after a US invasion to suppress any communist uprising within the democratically elected government, a military action that literally scars the body of Yuniors mother.*

*As one goes from the capital of the Dominican Republic to the airport (or as a tourist on the road to Boca Chica), on the side of the freeway lay signs bidding farewell to the Dominicano Ausente, the absent Dominican whose presence is felt in virtually every conversation on the Dominican side of the island. The Absent Dominican represents a difficult separation, not a divorce, a separation made manifest in the works of Junot, for can we separate la República from the writer? Junot's fiction gives voice to the Dominicano Ausente in this country, but who is his audience? Does he have his back to Quisqueya, the indigenous name of his homeland? Is he sipping rum outside a colmado and telling stories in which the hero never wins, or does his fiction call into question the notion of the American Dream for an Anglo audience that speaks no Spanish? His aggressive use of Spanish more than peppers his English prose, it challenges the reader to question whether or not she or he can comprehend the reality of an immigrant's struggles.*

*On a sunny afternoon in Berkeley, California, Junot Díaz, and mind you, its "Jun-oh", not, "Ju-nott", as he politely reminded us, was a feature writer for a conference held by a graduate student working group on the Caribbean, and fortunately, we were able to*

por **Chrissy Arce**  
**Edrik López**  
**Anna Deeny**

University of California, Berkeley

**Carlos Fernández**

University of California, Los Angeles

squeeze in a few hours to talk about his career as a writer. We were a little nervous, as Junot's incendiary, in-your-face manner is enough to make any graduate student stutter, but after a couple of pitchers of Heffenweizen, we all bonded like old college roommates. In truth, he was a gracious and honest conversationalist. We discussed everything from his representation of women and his feminist project, to his role in the arts of the Dominican Diaspora, to the very delicate issue of language, specifically in dialogue with the introduction to his book where he proclaims that the fact that he is writing in English necessarily "falsifies" his narrative.

**Can you talk about your writing process, when do you like to write and what forms do your drafts take, on word processor, a pad or computer? What ritual do you follow when you write?**

My writing process is very simple. I always write in the morning; I can never write after any discussion. In other words, it's a pre-social activity, and it can't be any other way for me. I always write on pad then transport immediately to computer. Only when I've gotten a huge chunk of it can I independently type on a word processor. I'm more of a sensory deprivation person. I don't like windows, I don't like much light; I tend to lock myself away because I get easily distracted.

**For your first book, why did you choose the short story as opposed to the novel? Was that a conscious choice?**

Yeah, it is a conscious choice, but part of that choice is that I thought I had done a different form. I don't think it's either a short story collection or a novel, and it was done intentionally that way. The short story convention was something that I was really interested in. Those are the small units. But the larger unit is a novelistic convention, which was something that I was also interested in. And so I was trying to create this really weird hybrid that didn't have a name. You open up *Drown* and it doesn't say a collection of short stories. It doesn't say a novel. That's part of the project that people were supposed to decide individually what it was. And it being a short story collection was supposed to be simultaneously correct with someone saying, "No, it's supposed to be a novel." People say it's a little of both. I wanted simultaneously to have multiple readings of it. Almost none of the critics noticed that. Most people call it a short story collection. And I don't, for the most part, correct anyone because it's not meant to be corrected. I felt that part of the process, part of the joy of writing it was writing this weird Caribbean hybrid; that it's neither one nor the other but it's both simultaneously. I think it's a short story collection. But it also has novel elements so it undercuts the idea that

it's a short collection. Whatever, it was a project; I didn't do that great a job with it.

**Why would you say that? The form itself conveys that ambiguity because there's a lot of ambiguity in the text: sexual ambiguity, national identity, and the form does convey that sense because it does tell a whole story.**

I just feel that a lot of people didn't get it. A lot of critics didn't get it. Many people in the publishing industry didn't get it. I think the entire staff of the New Yorker didn't get it.

**How does that make you feel when people don't get your work? Is that why you would say your project failed?**

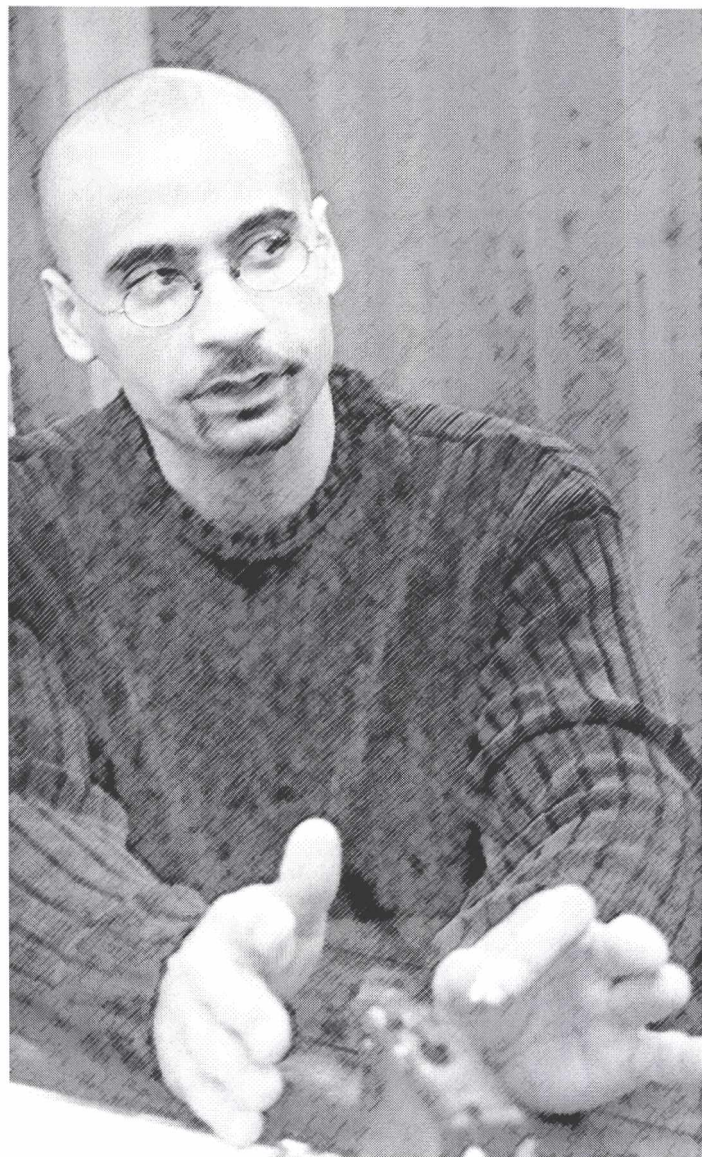
I wouldn't say it failed, I just think there may have been another approach that could've been more successful. I think you're always restless. It's not like putting yourself down. For me it wasn't about putting myself down. It's that you're restless. You're like "O.k., this worked for certain people," like you guys, and I appreciate it. It makes me happy that people feel strongly about it. But then that other part of you goes, "O.k., now I have to take another approach. How do I reach other people? So part of me is just restless with it. Every thing that you've done in the past, I'm more aware of its limitations. The limitations are where I want to work right now.

**Is that why you are working on a conventional novel?**

Even this novel is not a conventional novel. It's not that at all. I'm not that experimental. I come from a very traditional, non-experimental background, experimental as it is understood in the contemporary United States literary tradition. But I'm really into bizarre forms. The fact that the novel is like half "high literature", and this is the joke: it's half high literature, half vernacular literature and half science fiction. And they're all, "Wait, that's three halves!" But that's like my world of imperfect geometry. I think it's going to be a freak show. I don't think anybody will like it and if they do, o.k., but I'll keep working.

**What writers influence you?**

That gets hard to create a genome of what your influences are, because half the stuff are genes that you don't know what they're for. But just to talk about books, because a lot of my influences are like oral and music, but just to stick to books, I would say that the Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, Asian, Afro-American experience were really important. Sandra Cisneros, Harry



Thomas, with Oscar Hijuelos and Cristina García did a number on my brain when I was learning how to become a writer. They influenced me powerfully. Asian writers like Maxine Hong Kingston. Look, when I first started thinking about this book, *Joy Luck Club* came out. Now people think of it as kitsch. But when *Joy Luck Club* came out, it came out as serious literature. She hadn't been turned into the kitsch figure she been turned into now. The book came out, and before the movie, before the chop suey bull shit, that book had a big impact on me just for structure. I love fucking crazy bad comic books and science fiction writers. Harlan Ellison and Stephen King taught me more about form, and Octavio Butler taught me how you write about race without people knowing you're talking about race.

**How do you feel about Julia Alvarez as a fellow Dominican writer?**

That's a special question...

**Well, how do you position yourself in relation to writers like Alvarez?**

I think we need them all, period. I just think that there can't be enough. I don't think that there is anything wrong with what she writes, period. And she has her place, you know what I mean. For good or for bad.

**Where do you put yourself in the context of Dominican arts; more specifically, in comparison to other well-known, highly visible, wealthy writers as well as films such as *Nueba Yol' I and II*, which also talk about the disillusionment of the American dream? To what degree is your work a response to these cultural products?**

First: maybe a little bit of autobiography, although autobiographical details tend to obscure things. It's a way to superpersonalize and then reduce them into ridiculousness, almost parody. So I say that with that sense of the danger of what I'm about to say. The first thing that would be helpful is that I was never a good Dominican. I would never get an "A" in Dominican-ness. My family in Santo Domingo, we were not considered...The Dominican nation when it visualizes itself it doesn't consider people like my parents central to the experience of the Dominican Republic, a bunch of poor *campesinos* who were the kind of people that everybody was warned not to be: "don't be *plebe*," "don't fight in the street," "don't curse." "Look, their children walk around barefoot." All the things a culture of respectability turns away from. And then we were immigrants. My father came over illegally. "*Un tigre, esta gente, que son animales*. They live with *morenos*, they live with Boricuas." I felt always, every step of the way, it's not a sense of exceptionalism, of opposite exceptionalism, that there were the cool kids and we were the opposite. I always felt clearly that my family was... And then when my parents separated, my family was on welfare, and that immediately created, in a culture of respectability, this huge shame. "*Nosotros somos trabajadores. Esa gente*, you know, they're lazy, they're this, they're that. They're not like the regular the Dominicans. I came and worked 80 hours." And so every step of the way I never felt a part of what would be considered the national Dominican project, though I felt as Dominican as every kid I knew. But I was always aware that even inside a national project, it always requires a scapegoat. There's always the ugly kid that you need to pick on. So I was the ugly kid, and my family was the ugly kid that they needed to pick on.

**So who was Julia [Alvarez]?**

I don't know who she was. I mean, I can't really speak on it. I think I'm careful about this because I came up in the 80's, out of Women's Studies Department when some people were attacking Alice Walker and Toni

Morrison and diminishing their work, doing *ad hominum* attacks on these women because they thought that these women were pathologizing men and making men look bad. The thing that inspired me as a writer was that moment. I have to say that that moment made me want to write the stuff that I wanted to write. Because I felt that they let us dudes off *nice*. I honestly thought that they didn't know much about men. They write men really well. But an insider could have said more wild shit about how bad we are, and that these guys were covering up. Because all the guys I grew up with... I felt as an insider in a masculine, Caribbean, immigrant community, that they had let us off easy, that this was an act of love. So my project was to not let us off easy, to write about these kind of tough, horrible voices that we never want to hear about, and create this map that they couldn't create. They couldn't create an x-ray of what being a boy means, having this kind of privilege, in essence, how boys are made. That was part of my project. I was trained by these radical feminists at Rutgers who were like, "Men can't be feminists." What they meant is that men should be in a pro-feminist project, but, a lot of these women argued that our position of privilege prevents us from being feminists. That our privileges disrupt our ability to actually be one. That's what I was hearing from all these women. So my idea was to be in a pro-feminist project. I deeply wanted to be in one. That was the outcome of it, to try to write these ex-rays of the terrifying boys who were all the dudes I knew growing up. I feel like I can't write about men honestly without hurting women.

### ***And hurting men too...***

Well there's no question. But I think, it doesn't hurt men. I think the practice already hurts them. For me I think the real thing is that by revealing it, you undermine male privilege. Because privilege is all about silence and secrecy.

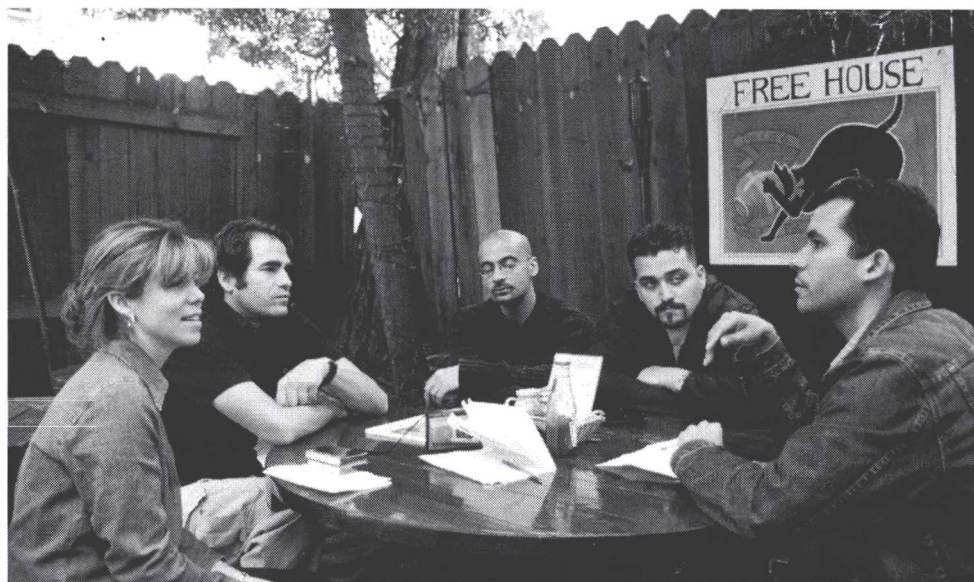
### ***How do you feel when people react adversely to that, that maybe you're glorifying male chauvinism?***

Again, it's one or two things. I was aware of this thing about medieval bell-makers (I always use this so you will hear it again from me). Making bells was a big art: every church, every cathedral, they would need a bell. It was also discovered by military strategists that you could make fucking canons out of bell-molds. There's two approaches as an artist: you can make a bell-mold and say, "What anybody wants to do with this bell-mold is not up to me. I made this bell-mold with a pure idea of wanting to make a bell. If y'all want to make a canon out of it, how can I be responsible for what you want to do with it?" Or there are other bell-makers who broke all their molds, who said, "I'm not just re-

sponsible for mold but I'm responsible for the thing even after it's done." And that always reached me in a deep way; that there's a response that one could break their mold if you think it's going to be used dangerously.

I think that a lot of the stuff that we think that we write can be used dangerously. A: I could make the mistake of being a misogynist, or not even make the mistake, or reproduce a lot of the misogynist upbringing in my work. No question of that.

But... I also think that there's a difference between *representation* and what your project *is*. Just because I represent these people doesn't mean that I condone it or that I'm saying that these are really good signs. And my argument is that in the end I'm not going to argue about representation. Whether these people should be represented or not, they fucking exist. The thing is, is my project more than just representing them? Is my project more than just making a bell so that somebody could turn it into a canon to use against women? Or am I trying to do something else? I would argue that my project is *about* how this type of thinking about women fails men. All the characters in the book *Drown* have these visions of women that absolutely fail them. They always end up alone, they always end up failing, they always wind up misunderstanding the women, they end up not connecting. And the person it hurts is not the women, though the women are hurt in a lot of these relationships, it's them. They're like constantly diminished. The Yunior character, his entire humanity, at least his upbringing, is from compassion with his mother; this deep love and compassion for his mother as she's being cheated on and torn apart. By the time Yunior grows up, he's doing exactly what he felt was tearing his mother up, to other women. He had been built. *Drown* is a book not about the immigrant experience as much as it's a how-to guide to building a boy. You take these boys who have deep compassion for women in their lives, but then they turn around and become the same exact people, and it doesn't help them. Like, you see part of what's eating Yunior de la Casa isn't that he immigrated. Part of what's eating Yunior de la Casa is that he was once a boy who was shattered because his father was cheating on his mom and the way that people treated women. And then as an adult he does it gleefully and unknowingly. Part of that is what's eating Yunior. So that's what I mean. I will argue that I'm doing something very different than just simply representation. Just to wrap up, I think because I represent them so honestly in a way and so brutally, like, just out there. And that's what I mean; I think Toni Morrison is one of the best writers out there, one of the best in the world. But I think she let us off easily. I feel that I don't let any of the guys off easy. And that's why they sound so horrifying; they're just terrifying. A lot of women respond, "Yo. Fuck you!" It's like a physical violence. They're



de izquierda a derecha: Anna Deeny, Carlos Fernández, Junot Díaz, Fernando Ruíz, Edrik López, at Raleigh's, Berkeley, California.

not used to hearing these voices in a public space, because this is the language of boys, how they talk when they are among themselves.

***That's fair; your candor does speak for itself. How do your characters complicate the binaries that it seems, superficially, that you are creating, such as the mother-whore binary that exists in all literature. When you construct your female characters, are there certain people that you have in mind?***

Of course I have female models. You haven't noticed my simplistic structure for writing female characters: they're doppelgangers of the male narrator. In other words, they're almost always the male, mirror version of them. But this narrator's masculine privilege gives him a totally different fate. For example, in "Aurora" two characters are basically just opposite faces of the same coin; but because she's a Dominican woman in this background, certain things happen to her and not to him and he's doing the exact same things. If you look at the story "The Sun, the Moon and the Stars," the girlfriend in many ways is him. They are both on this journey together. In his mind, cheating on a girl is something that you are forgiven for. It's not this thing of trust and a process, a shattering. He can't connect. They're both going through the same experience. There's an infidelity and they're both trying to deal with it. But she's trying to create a narrative that could possibly heal. And he's like, "Just forgive me so we can get on with it. Stop making me feel like I'm a bad boy." And every step of the way the girls always have the storied boyfriend. The girl's exactly like him. They're both broken up, they're both getting over a relationship. She's in the last throes of it. He's totally isolated. All he does is drink and do liquor and bravado with his boys. She's attempting a way to get beyond it through her friendships with women. And his connection is not like a human connection, like, "Oh, we have the same thing. Let's be compassionate." His connection is, "Hey,

we have the same thing. I'm going to try to fuck you." And so, it's not only that I have people in mind. I also have these really weird models that I like to run my characters through.

***At the narrative level if you take all the stories together, it seems that Yunió's mom functions as a representation of the Dominican Republic, meaning that even her body is used as a marker for the struggles that the poor residents face day to day. For instance, when the mom comes back from work in "Israel", the hard work is on her body: she's darker, she has bruises. In the US, she has meat on her bones because of the change. In what way does Yunió's mom represent the past?***

I think she represents the secret history. For me, it's not like any nostalgia. Work is not a nostalgia. I think work is the secret history of a Diaspora. When we have celebrations of our Diaspora-ness, there's never any emblem for the work. The work is the thing that's ritualizely forgotten during the celebration. People are like, "Oh, drinking, party party." But the one thing we do is work, but there's no symbol of it in our celebration.

***Is the work then, always Yunió's mom?***

I think women's work is the secret history. She works so hard to keep this community alive. But the father who is away is the one who is viewed as the guy who is working, and he's sustaining the community through his diasporic sacrifice. But really the secret history is the mom's muscles; the scars that she carries from the Dominican invasion, the secret history that nobody wants to talk about. Again, the American invasion is viewed as a pissing contest between revolutionary boys and the American Yankees, but the mother has got all these scars from that bombing inscribed across her back. Like this real secret history of the invasion of



de izquierda a derecha: Nadege Clitandre, Chrissy Arce, Junot Díaz, Dalia Muller.  
Caribbean Studies Conference, UC Berkeley

the Dominican Republic with the deaths of children, the death of women and the violence towards both of them. For me it's more like anti-nostalgic. The fact that he views his relationship to his mother as intimate, to me, represents that Yunior was exposed to another history that his mom would never talk about.

***In Drown there are several hints to the 1967 US invasion of the Dominican Republic, as well as to the Trujillo dictatorship. I am specifically referring to the soldiers milling about in the background, the mother's wounds, etc. Obviously this concerns you, given the fact that your next project deals with the dictatorship. Were you surprised that there has not been that much attention in the criticism to these military elements as they play out in Drown? (As a Dominican, I personally can feel it).***

There are certain ways to talk about dictatorship. The books that I'm familiar with treat dictatorship as a kind of heroic struggle between this one evil dude versus these heroic under people who are struggling against him; this sense of personalities in history combating each other. But at the level that I experienced the dictatorship and the way my parents experienced it, they weren't personalities. In other words, my mother and father were not on Trujillo's invitation list. They were just part of the masses. They weren't figures in history. Trujillo acted as a force upon them deeply, but he wasn't in our lives as an individual. I felt that in our lives, being poor Dominicans from the *barrio*, Trujillo was a *force*. It would have been fake for me to make Trujillo show up at the house, or have people have a conversation about Trujillo. That's some old crazy literary shit. *Nobody* talked about Trujillo if you were poor. You had no resources; you would get *crushed*. So I think I'm not surprised that nobody noticed it. I think you noticed it because you know what that experience is about. You know what it means to be on the receiving end of a dictatorship in a position of power that is

so asymmetrical that you can't even name the thing that is crushing you. I felt that that act of not naming it is what I wanted to get across. I felt that naming it would have shown a consciousness that wasn't present.

***Talking about the chapter about "Ysrael"... The face of Israel is incredible—this idea of him having an open wound as a face. Do you think it ties in with the idea of language itself as an open wound and the bilingual language of the book?***

I never thought about it that way. A friend of mine had a student who had a reading of "Ysrael." Ysrael is the story that teaches you how to read this book. If you're like the brothers and all you want to do is tear the mask off and see what's underneath, then you are going to have the same experience with this book that the brothers had with Israel. But if you're the type of person that is like, "Yo, this is a human being with a story to tell me" then it's not about, "I want you to supply the monster that I think you are, the Otherness that I think you are. And if you're not going to supply it I'm going to make you that Other, through violence." I felt that is what "Ysrael" is about, the reason it's the first story. I think if you come to this book and you're going to read us a certain way, you want us to be the other, the monsters, then you are basically the brothers. There's another way to read this.

***Another question, the chapter "Drown" being in the center of the book and the presence of the pool there, and the pool having the quality of dissolving anything that goes in it. We were wondering about the relationship between the scene that happens next to the pool and the presence of the pool itself?***

Shit, you can't have a book about the construction of a very specific Dominican boy identity, from *la capital*



into Central New Jersey, without boy love. I think that's the heart of most masculine identity, these kind of contacts, these kind of experiences. That was part of my joke for "Drown."

***I guess our question was, why was the chapter called "Drown"?***

I think that I liked the *sound* of the word *drown*. I thought part of the reason the character Yuniór could have this homosexual, gay, queer experience without it turning into violence was because he himself was so completely just lost in every way. He was between everything. The "firm walls" between his identity were just all collapsing. And that's the only reason why this thing could even reach him in any way. So I don't know why I called it "Drown" to be honest. I felt like he felt that he was just going under. He was a really smart kid, super smart and super sensitive, and he was just going under. Mostly his own fault, he was so closed off to people.

Art for me is trying to figure out a way to let go of control. And I feel like criticism is entirely about control. I think that when it all comes down to it, you're reigning things in. For me, being a good writer, you're always getting messages from your subconscious. A really good writer knows how to just obey, or how to work to honor those things. My subconscious sends me information, instead of being, "Wow, these are messages." I'm thinking, "I've already got my pre-established ideas, but I wanted to do this and this and this." Instead of listening to it, I try to talk back to it. So my experience with my students is trying to teach them to trust their subconscious. Control is the thing that they've been taught. The academic experience from the first grade on is about control. It's not about the imagination. That's the big struggle, teaching them that even what they do wrong has a seed in it. There's a message in a failed story about how to do it right. And that's hard for them because they're taught that wrong is an evil thing.

To quote David Morrow, "writing is not a voyage of approval." If approval is what you're looking for, you should not be an artist. Artistry is a journey of discovery. And you cannot discovery stuff without failing. Failing, unlike an academic process, is absolutely essential. It's not only essential; success is predicated on failure. Those kids are not taught that. They're taught that if you fail, you did it wrong. The thing that they try to do is not to fail. It's hard to teach them that no, you've got to embrace failure. You've got to be willing to fail.

***How do you negotiate your position then, as an instructor of literature (i.e. a critic) and as a writer?***

Part of it is I use criticism as another lens to interpret these subconscious messages from the other side. I don't think that they are always subconscious, I think sometimes it's some ancestor speaking to you. I hate to get spookie-dookie, but I sometimes think you're getting some *shit*. I don't know where they fucking come from. And criticism for me has been essential to interpreting these things, and also providing interesting homes. Because sometimes the shit you get is so complicated you've got to throw everything at it. You gotta be like, a comic book, science fiction book and Homi Bhabba: ah it works! Without it, I don't think I'd be able to interpret 90% of what I was getting. I don't think it goes counter. Everything is in the service of making the art happen. I just want to be able to understand what the fuck this is.

***Could you comment on the introduction to your book, specifically the quote regarding language and the Spanish language. Is there any tension there?***

I didn't choose to write in English. I only learned to write and read in English. I'm like a lot of Puerto Ricans, who didn't choose their language: it was imposed on them. But give me a fucking break. I'm so fucking alien-

ated sometimes it cracks me up, to the point of absurdity. I don't speak Spanish well enough. My Spanish is really good compared to most people. But compared to a fluent native speaker, they're always correcting me.

***How do you deal with that anxiety? I know all of us as US Latinos have had to deal with issues of language, and that constant correcting (by native speakers) creates an anxiety.***

Until I was 25, I couldn't do it. Until I was 25 I refused to speak Spanish. I would speak it at home, amongst friends, but never in public. I was humiliated. Then I embraced that thing which control is a reaction to. For me control is a reaction to powerlessness. The thing with a language is that you are always powerless. Fifty percent of it is somebody speaking back to you that you can't control. And I can't control you calling me an idiot. So I had to embrace powerlessness, which is a thing that most immigrants want to do every thing to avoid because their whole childhood is about powerlessness. Once I did that, it was really easy. I don't care if I humiliate myself on national TV in Santo Domingo, or on the radio. I've realized that it's better to try than to live so ashamed.

When people make fun of my Spanish speaking, it's not always cruelty. It can be deep anxiety because it's like when you have kids and they don't look nothing like you. They know in their heart that you are them. The reason why they call (a Mexican American) "pocha" is because of the anxiety of difference. They're afraid that one day we may not recognize them. Part of this is the anxiety of trying to make you more like them. But it's not going to happen. In some ways it's an act that tries to communicate with you. But instead of being able to put it to words, they hit you, and it hurts us. I've learned that it's an act of community.

***With your Spanish more than just sprinkled into the text in such an aggressive manner, how do you justify it to a publisher and an Anglo audience? As opposed to Julia Alvarez, for instance, who throws in "piropo" but follows it with a parenthetical explanation in English.***

The average person who is a native speaker of one language and doesn't speak another, assumes that when communication doesn't work there is this thing called unintelligibility; that the opposite of communication is unintelligibility. Those of us who have acquired a second language or who live in two languages, know that the bedrock of communication is unintelligibility. I know that in communication unintelligibility is an active component; it's not the evil step-child. The fact is that Spanish is not the only register hard to understand. There's a lot of high-level, academic words in

there that no Dominican kid on the street is going to pick up. But they have no problem living with that because they're used to unintelligibility. But there are a lot of people who see some Spanish words or Dominican words, and they have that colonial desire to look under the veil, translate it, instead of living with that "I'm not going to see your face because that's not what you want".

***How do you negotiate, or confront your different roles and identities, such as the one defined by your upbringing in the barrio, and the one you have now as a writer, and professor?***

I think like the ghetto nerd you know, like this book, this book is called the *Autobiography of a Ghetto Nerd*. Because I feel the ghetto nerd is the character that we are. Because of all of these stereotypes of who we are and some of us inhabit them, because we don't feel we have a safe place. I feel that those of us who went to college, we don't feel safe in the larger community articulating who the fuck we really are. Because we feel we have to pass for authentic in ways that are dishonest to us, and that we are always downplaying our intellectual and artistic side. The voice is a paradox because masculinity is so tied up in not being smart. That's why I was joking, I can always tell a brother went to college cause he's the one who's always waggin out. A brother who goes to college is the one that is most likely to be a parody of himself. Talking about the ghetto all the time and talking about hard core. And my thing in the last five years...you say that I say it a lot, but I don't think I say it enough, cause I feel like I spent so many fucking years trying to pass for some hard core nigger, I came from a very poor neighborhood, I came from a terrible place, you know what I'm saying, we were really poor, we fought, it was terrible, but I was a nerd too. And I feel like I can't just make space for just one side of it and not the other. And I feel like for me, part of my human project, not the writing, is having space for us to be comfortable in our own communities. Cause if we don't fight for being nerds we are always going to be silenced, we are always going to feel uncomfortable, we are always going to be attacked, you know. What I learned from the divine comedy is that the only way through hell is to push deeper into it...

We would especially like to thank the Caribbean Studies Working Group who organized the conference that made this interview possible, Fernando Ruíz for setting up the interview, the Spanish and Portuguese Department for helping to sponsor the conference, and of course the editorial staff of LUCERO.