



Photograph: Nina Subin

On reading, fame and immigration.

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## Junot Díaz

Earlier this year, Junot Díaz re-scheduled a Los Angeles meet-and-greet in favor of lunch with an admirer. His fan? Barack Obama. Lunch? At the White House, during the final week of Obama's presidency. The reasons behind his invite echo, perhaps, those for which Díaz has also received awards that include the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and a MacArthur Fellowship (also known as the "Genius Grant"). His novels, in the words of Obama, speak "to a very particular contemporary immigration experience," and are "steeped with this sense of being an outsider, longing to get in, not sure what you're giving up." Here, Díaz riffs on his own feelings of alienation and discusses how, following an upbringing during which he was seldom the center of attention, finding anonymity is akin to feeling "mission accomplished."

**Why did you become a writer?** I had a sense very early on that I wanted to be an artist, because I was taught that an artist inhabited a certain place in society that wasn't predicated on approval. To my young mind, an artist's practice had everything to do with exploration, experimentation and breaking silences. It seemed incredibly heady, very intellectual, and I was drawn to that deeply. I was this immigrant kid from

a very poor and boringly troubled family who fell in love powerfully with books in ways that only the loneliness and the disorientation of immigration could explain. Reading was in some ways a compass and salvation. In that love I developed for books and reading, and in that curiosity and interest in this concept of the artist, I began to come together.

**How does reading fit into your life now?** Some hungers never dull. Everything for me seems to begin and end with books. I continue to read frantically. It's sort of like people who went hungry for a period in their lives. Their relationship with food is forever altered. They stock a refrigerator as if they were still going hungry. In the same way, I'm frantic about books in ways that I don't need to be. A friend of mine said to me, "I'm always looking for excuses to put myself in the way of really bad men" and I thought, "I understand that." It's not great for my writing, but people offer me opportunities to waste a lot of time reading, and I'm like, "Sign me up!"

**How does the theme of immigration play into your writing?** That might be the most autobiographical part of my work. For all my attempts to not fit in, I really do belong to my community. My books all have a central alter ego, Yuniors,

and he is simultaneously part of his community and in an enormous struggle with it. When I began to put that to language, as I was coming of age and in college, I realized what a wonderful curse that was for a literary character. What does it mean to be a member of the team and yet very critical of it? It's a way of permanently never being at home.

**Where do you feel a sense of belonging?** I often recreate and feel most at home with the community I grew up with—Dominican, African-American, working poor. Emigrating to the United States from the Dominican Republic added an extra level of consciousness, where there's always a distance between where I am and the island that I still call home. My little brother was born and raised in the United States and doesn't know anything about the Dominican Republic. He's not any less complicated than I. It's just that he only has one lens, though it's probably twice as thick as my two lenses. My identity is predicated on the idea that there are two worlds. When I'm in one world, I'm looking for the second.

**Where else do you see the immigrant narrative depicted in popular culture?** I'm always struck by how central an immigrant sensibility is to our modern experience.

Even if we don't recognize it, the immigrant narrative is important for our way of understanding the world. Recently, I went to a meeting at an animation studio and they showed me their slate of films for the year. Every single film was about a character who is in one world and is either transported or travels to another world and is forced to learn its language. These films all tell immigrant narratives, but that's not something people want to be reminded of. It ruins the magic. Immigration is an idiom we speak very well but refuse to understand socially. We all can relate to these narratives in one way or another, so you would think it would draw us together more.

**How do you deal with fame?** I am very uncomfortable around the apparatus of being a "famous" writer, even though fame at the literary level trades at something like the Venezuelan bolívar. My dream in life is to disappear, to have anonymity. There are easier ways to get famous than what I've done. In spite of myself, I have received a certain level of attention. I think that everything I've done as an artist has been because I haven't been able to say what I need to say or get close to some of the things I've been through—the family traumas. It's hard to indulge fame when you grew up in a world of shame.