Author Junot Díaz Visits Hartford  
by Lian Partridge

Junot Díaz, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, visited Capital Community College (CCC) and the Hartford Public Library last month. At Capital, he gave a talk to about 150 people consisting of CCC faculty and staff and college and high school students. A class from Santo Domingo was also streamed in through a speaker phone.

Díaz, dressed in a hoodie and jeans, began the talk with a quick address to students followed by a Q&A.

Díaz grew up in a military family in Santo Domingo before immigrating illegally to New Jersey. As a child, he would box and practice using firearms every weekend with his father and brother. While most boys his age fantasized about learning self-defense and experimenting with violence, Díaz said he hated it. “I didn’t like getting hurt,” he explained, “And I saw what guns did to people.” Díaz also did not get along with his father who came into his life when he was six and left again when he was twelve. To escape from him, Díaz went frequently to the library, reading everything from fantasy to history.

Although an avid reader his entire life, Díaz hated high school. In fact, Díaz never passed a single math or science course. During his senior year, he managed 110 official absences but graduated anyway.

After high school, he lived in his mother’s basement and got a job delivering pool tables. It was then that he had an epiphany: If you want anything, you have to work for it. “If you hate high school, you get what you asked for,” Díaz said.

Díaz attended night classes at King College, working one hour a day “for himself” by doing homework on top of the eight hours a day for his job. He soon developed what he calls a “calling” to write. “You get life for free,” Diaz said. “But a calling you have to work to find and to keep.”

In 1997, Díaz began writing his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel is about a fat, Dominican nerd who just wants to be accepted into his Dominican community. Although not autobiographical, Díaz admitted to his childhood nerdiness which included, like Oscar, a love of sci-fi. Instead, the book was a tribute to
all the nerds he saw persecuted - he himself protected by his “borderline psychopathic brother.”

“Sci-fi was about ten percent of what I read,” Díaz said. “I chose it because it’s the most ostracized and made-fun-of genre. It’s not considered relevant or useful to society…[but it is actually] important in worldview.” Along with his theme of sci-fi, Díaz introduced the Dominican idea of fukú, an essentially unrecorded folkloric belief before Oscar Wao. “There are almost no citations for the things that matter most,” Díaz said.

Díaz also focuses on violent Dominican history that has often been overlooked, especially that concerning the dictator Trujillo. He draws attention to the millions murdered in the Dominican Republic, commenting that “having resorts in the DR is like having a spa in Auschwitz.”

Oscar Wao, centered around a dysfunctional family, also highlighted the combative relationship between the mother and daughter of the family. Though stressing the fact that there is no “typical” Dominican, Díaz noted that young Latina girls have the highest suicide demographic because of poor mother-daughter relationships.

It took Díaz 11 years to complete Oscar Wao. When asked about why it took him so long to write it, Díaz replied, “Perseverance is hard to learn, especially when it’s not modeled.”

According to Díaz, his family provided no encouragement. “If you were not good at something the first time you tried it, you would never be good at it,” he explained. “But it’s okay to make mistakes,” said Díaz. “You need to suck for a long time to become excellent.”

Díaz, who is now an MIT professor, has indeed become excellent at his craft. When asked what was next for him, Díaz responded, “I’ve written a book of short stories about Dominicans in the present, and another book about Dominicans in the past and present. Next I think I want to do Dominicans in the future…you know, Dominicans in space or Dominicans fighting robots or something. We’ll see what happens.”