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 **Fiction is the Poor Man's Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz**

Diógenes Céspedes, Silvio Torres-Saillant

Callaloo

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 23, Number 3, Summer 2000

pp. 892-907

10.1353/cal.2000.0131

ARTICLE

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Callaloo 23.3 (2000) 892-907

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Fiction is the Poor Man's Cinema
An Interview with Junot Díaz

Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant

This interview with fiction writer Junot Díaz, author of Drown (Riverhead Books, 1996), was conducted at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, City College of New York, on December 3, 1996. Silvio Torres-Saillant is a member of the faculty of the City University of New York, and Diógenes Céspedes is a Dominican literary critic who edits Cuadernos de Poética and the weekly cultural supplement La Cultura del Siglo for the Santo Domingo newspaper El Siglo.

CÉSPEDES: I am going to begin this interview with an overused cliché, which I hope will trigger a symbolic response. The cliché says: children are the future of the world, or more locally, children are the future of *la patria* [the fatherland]. In other words, nobody has the right to deprive a child of his or her right to imagine and create. This is crucial to the child's happiness and the possibility of developing all of his or her potential. To sum up, we do not know if this or that child harbors a genius inside. Nor do we know if the material and spiritual conditions of Santo Domingo, had you stayed there, would have allowed you to become the writer you are today. Of course, there are personal ingredients, namely talent and intelligence. I'm sure you can think of promising *chichos y chicas*, youngsters who went to school with you in the course of your formative years. You must remember young brothers who began with you but who did not run the race to the finish line. They dropped out mid-race probably under unfortunate circumstances in some cases. Have you given these things any thought?

DÍAZ: I'm always uncomfortable with that cliché. I think that statements like "children are the future" have always been duplicitous because they tend to sugar-coat the truth. Children are not treated like the future. I mean, there is an active war against children across the world. They're exploited, they're abused, they're raped, they're killed. And the only time children are the future is when they've been disciplined and regimented and organized into a form that is acceptable to the older ruling class. I know that is a crazy thing to say at the beginning of this discussion, but the truth is not enough people care about children. I think some people do. But the majority of people don't give a damn.

TORRES-SAILLANT: What about thoughts on your generation, your peers, who began with you but did not continue, who fell out in the process? **[End Page 892]**

DÍAZ: 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. There's no state in the world that can facilitate all the ambitions of its underclass. So it throws up obstacles—plenty of intoxications, bad schools, aggressive cops, no jobs—and depends on us to do the rest. You don't know how many times I saw a person escape institutional discrimination only to knock themselves down with self-hate and self-doubt. Together these pressures are a lethal combination.

TORRES-SAILLANT: Now, tell us, if you will, about changes in conditions, material and spiritual conditions, inherent in leaving the Dominican Republic at the age of seven and coming to the United States.

DÍAZ: I think if you're poor in the United States, chances are you're going to be poor for a very long time. It is very much the same way in Santo Domingo. People say there are lots of opportunities here ...

FICTION IS THE POOR MAN'S CINEMA An Interview with Junot Díaz

by Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant

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