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Pulling off the Mask: Junot Díaz's Yuniór and Reconstructions of Adolescence

Beatrice Mendez Newman

Yuniór, the recurring protagonist in Junot Díaz's short stories and novel, negotiates the realities of his life with a rawness that at once minimizes and highlights the trauma of adolescence. In *Drown*, Díaz's first collection of stories, we meet Yuniór and his brother Rafa, boys growing up in the Dominican Republic, and Ysrael, a boy who wears a fabric mask over his head. Ysrael's face was grotesquely disfigured when a pig attacked him when he was an infant. In a narrative strand that runs through several stories, Yuniór and Rafa are obsessed with pulling off the mask. In the story "Ysrael," they finally succeed.

Yuniór is at once *every* adolescent and a distinct individual, enabling us to simultaneously cast a telescopic and microscopic view into the literary construct of adolescence. As the narrator in almost all of Díaz's stories, Yuniór's consciousness invites us to explore a world of older childhood, adolescence, and impending adulthood with a critical sharpness that brings into question traditional views of adolescence. His experiences, presented through a raw, unfiltered first person voice, position him as the fulcrum of the boyhood world that seems dysfunctional but is, ultimately, realistic, consistent, and predictable. Functioning at a much higher level of intentionality and consciousness than is typically attributed to young characters in traditional discourses of adolescence, Díaz's characters compel us to re-imagine the construct of literary adolescence.

Exploring the Construct of the Literary Adolescent

Junot Díaz's fiction offers a somewhat novel opportunity to explore and reconsider constructs of adolescence. In the narrative progression of his two story collections and novel—*Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *This Is How You Lose Her*—Díaz escorts us through Yuniór's childhood, adolescence, and early adult years. If we expect didacticism or morals in reading Yuniór's story, we will be disappointed: Díaz's Yuniór wrenches us free from traditional anticipations that compel us to see literary adolescents as "performative models" (Lerer, 34) that can guide young people toward desirable behaviors or steer them away from reckless, immature acts or that can help young readers negotiate the turbulence of adolescence. Additionally, Díaz's adolescents shatter the traditional mold of the adolescent as a malleable, needy young person in search of guidance as he/she lurches toward adulthood. If we accept this hypothetical framework, we thereby place young readers behind a "youth lens" that zooms in on the literary adolescent to find realistic representations of themselves. While we cannot argue that Díaz's fiction was crafted as young adult literature, a good bit of Yuniór's story fits the parameters that usually define YAL: it reflects adolescents making their way into adulthood and is told from a point of view that reflects the character's negotiation of new realities of life cast in a compelling narrative (Bucher and Hinton 10-11). Díaz's adolescents are "capable, knowledgeable, complex, and contradictory" (Sarigianides, Lewis, and Petrone 18), with a pragmatic dysfunctionality that prepares them for fully effective participation in their worlds but which excludes them from the class of literary adolescents who are transformed or who effect transformations in others or even in society. This is why Díaz's adolescents command particular notice.

Discourses of adolescence predominantly focus on deficit views of adolescence. Historically, adolescents have been viewed as “inchoate, inferior adults” (Moran 1). Lesko launches her analysis of adolescents as stock characters by challenging the prevailing notion that adolescents are trouble/troubled/troubling:

The ubiquitousness of teenagers with problems, their ability to outrage or worry adults, and the certainty about their naturally occurring “nature” beg scrutiny. The ready construction of young people into numerous public problems . . . suggests that teenagers are complex and malleable accomplishments with broad political and social effects. (1-2)

Lesko’s analysis invites us to reconsider the prevalent discourses that peg adolescents as problematic, unfinished, and deficient, and that use adolescent literature in the context of pedagogical authority to remediate young people and guide them toward productive adulthood (Sarigianides 224; Stevens *et al.* 108, 122).

Numerous theories posit that adolescence is a chronological period loosely delineated by age, a stage through which the individual progresses and exits when pivotal emotional, physical, and psychosocial milestones are negotiated (Erikson; Moje and van Helden 214; Stevens *et al.* 110-111). This assessment informs discourses about adolescence as a developmental period characterized by generally undesirable, deviant, irrational behaviors, as a space shaped by chronological realities, traditional expectations, and individual recreations of that space. These views objectify the adolescent as a flawed creature because he/she is not yet a whole/complete/fully-formed/rational adult. The adolescent’s otherness is almost wholly attributed to his/her status as a non-adult.

The prevalent constructs of adolescence also represent a safe, detached assessment of the realities of adolescence. We distance ourselves from deficiencies attributed to adolescent characters: we criticize deficiencies without taking ownership of them (“I was *never* like that!”), but despite that distancing, we are able to identify with adolescent characters possibly because scrutiny of literary adolescents exposes suppressed/repressed memories in readers. In my reading of Díaz, I see this exposure of latent reader memories as a significant appeal that lends potent verisimilitude to the characters and their circumstances. It is hard to look at Díaz’s adolescents and dismiss them as “just characters” who can be objectified as literary adolescents.

Yunior negotiates his day-to-day encounters far more realistically than typical literary adolescents. The scene in “Ysrael,” when Yunior and Rafa gang up on Ysrael and finally pull off the mask, exemplifies the need to reconstruct our understandings of adolescence. From the safety/surety of adulthood, we recoil, superficially denouncing the act of pulling off the mask as unconscionable or immoral while uncomfortably recognizing the *pleasure* of wish fulfillment. While the tension of wanting to pull off the mask is released in “Ysrael,” the aftermath persists through several stories, allowing us to construct a coherent narrative of Yunior’s childhood and adolescence. Simultaneously, we posit motivations that eventually position him in front of the boy with the mask and make him a participant in metaphorically denuding the boy by yanking off his mask. In psychoanalytic terms, Rafa and Yunior are in a state of “psychic excitation” that generates a great deal of tension until they achieve gratification by pulling off the mask. The tension that propels them uncritically toward their goal is created by wanting to achieve “a cessation of excitation,” a state not limited to adolescence; it is a fundamental human drive that persists throughout

our lives (Brenner 17). As we'll explore later, there appears to be no alternative, no conflict, no ambivalence—the boys forge forward like warriors who must conquer an adversary.

Traditional discourses of literary adolescents position the adolescent as a sort of adult in training who, in the context of the narrative he/she is operating in, needs guidance to get on the right path, to resist temptations, and to eschew acts that might grant gratification. When we otherize and objectify adolescents, in part it is because, from our adult vantage point, we have repressed the memory of similar instances in our own experience; those memories are troubling, and we safeguard our conscious thought by relegating troubling fixations into unconscious states (Brenner 27). When we explore adolescence as a manifestation of the drives that impel action from childhood through adulthood, dominant discourses of adolescence become problematic. Reconstruction of these discourses requires an honest look at genuine adolescent characters, like Yuniior, Rafa, and Ysrael.

Paradigms of Adolescence

Dominant discourses about adolescence seem to cluster around numerous traditional paradigms that pose the adolescent as an innocent who ventures into a perilous space once he/she chronologically crosses the threshold into adolescence. Considering several of these paradigms points to the sort of objectification that the typical literary adolescent represents.

The adult-free world. In *The Outsiders*, the parents are efficiently dismissed (via a fatal traffic accident) even before the narrative is launched—efficiently because we see no grief and instead immediately enter a world in which the gangs are the kids' *de facto* families. Similarly, the boys in *Lord of the Flies* are thrust into an adult-free world and must establish their own social, political, and general survival rules. In line with dominant discourses about adolescence, the boys in these novels seem to make infelicitous decisions because they are not intellectually, emotionally, socially, or psychologically ready to be adults. Presumably, those choices would have been regulated or prevented by adults had those adults not been summarily dismissed through plot constructions. Concomitantly, if the parents were in place, the compelling narratives of adolescent characters' freedom to explore, experiment, suffer, and live would be severely inhibited. I tell my students that *Finding Nemo*, *Bambi*, the *Star Wars* films, and an almost endless variety of orphaned young person narratives are scaffolded on the construct of the freedom that adolescents and children can appropriate and, in traditional views, "misuse" in an adult-free world.

The noble mission. *The Hunger Games* gives readers, young and adult, vicarious fulfillment of fantasies that could never be realized in actual life. We tolerate without a flinch the endless killings that go on in the woods because not only is Katniss literally fighting for her life, she is also a heroine rebelling against the dystopian normalcy of her society. *The Giver's* Jonas is a similar character in a similar quandary: he chooses to leave the sterile stability of his society in order to save his little brother and find a more normal world. *Ender's Game* positions Andrew/Ender in the most noble of missions: training to be the warrior leader that can save the planet from alien invaders; like Jonas and Katniss, he must leave the normalcy of home to fulfill the noble mission.

Romance. *Twilight* recasts the traditional angst of teenage love in a complicated tangle of fantastic characters operating in modernized vampiric horror, suggesting that traditional characters are just not convincing or compelling enough to realistically explore the torment of young love. We accept a huge measure of willing suspension of disbelief

because Bella and Edward are liminal representations of the duality of the sexual and aggressive drives (Brenner 21), and that makes them seem “real.” In other words, it doesn’t matter that they’re vampires because their drives are human.

The victim. Classic adolescent Holden Caulfield literally runs away, reflecting the escape wish of every young person who has ever snuck out the window in the middle of the night or run away from a situation that has become untenable. Harold Bloom describes Holden as a “troubled seventeen-year-old [who] frames a chaotic rite of passage” through adolescence into adulthood (10). Holden rejects the restraints of normalcy, adults, and expectations; escape is the only option.

In short, many young adult texts feature characters that “reinforce stereotypical views of youths struggling with their identity and risky choices” (Sarigianides 224). The quintessential explanation that young adult literature appeals to young people because they see their situations reflected in the adolescent characters supports the persistence of dominant discourses about adolescence and the parallel expectation that young adult literature should ideally reflect those discourses. This approach is both limiting and limited: when we embrace this approach, YA lit takes on a didactic tone and young people are seen as creatures mired in a narcissistic obsession with their adolescence-induced problems. However, when we consider the adolescent as a *genuine* person, rather than as an objectified person-in-information, the literary adolescent is reborn as a compelling, complex individual with viable, realistic goals.

The Reconstructed Adolescent in Díaz’s Fiction

Díaz’s adolescents recast the traditional paradigms of adolescent narratives on various planes. Yúnior and Rafa bully Ysrael by inflicting unrestrained cruelty on an individual who is already marginalized. However, to restrain that cruelty would have made the boys seem unrealistic and unreliable as adolescents. It is their lack of restraint that sends shivers of recognition through us—they do what we probably would have done too, not because they are inherently or indifferently cruel but because they are curious, self-absorbed, and intent on satisfying their desires, meeting their needs, and reaching their goals. In pulling off the mask, Yúnior and Rafa literally uncover Ysrael’s hidden face but simultaneously reveal uncomfortable truths not just about adolescents but about people in general; from a psychoanalytic perspective, the boys represent our own repressed desires to cross societal bounds of normalcy. The boys’ actions are not a constructed plot event but an exposure of desires we normally control; the boys essentially *uncover* what needs to remain hidden if we want to preserve cultural and societal normalcy (Jackson 65, 70). It would be disingenuous to claim that as we read “Ysrael,” we want the boys to do the “right” thing, to leave the disfigured boy to the safety of his mask. It is more likely that we unabashedly hope the boys ignore the tug of human decency and yield to the temptation to pull off Ysrael’s mask. The boys’ narrative mission, established in the first few lines of the story—“[Rafa] was the one who wanted to see Ysrael, who looked out toward Barbacoa and said, We should pay that kid a visit,” (3)—becomes *our* mission: we too want to see what is under the mask. We want the narrative and moral tension to end. We want gratification as readers and as the surrogate adolescents we become in reading the story.

They yield to human temptations, but Díaz’s adolescents are not deficient, not victims, not incomplete. Díaz locates his characters in a world in which there is no space for normal

childhood, a world of want, war, abandonment, and hopeless waiting. His characters are catapulted into adult situations while they are still children: Ysrael has shrouded his face in a mask since infancy; Rafa has stepped in as a male mentor to Yuniór in the absence of their father; Yuniór has known sadness and suffering from his earliest years. Yuniór dispassionately describes the scars on his mother's body inflicted during a period of political instability in the DR: "[A]cross her stomach and back [were] the scars from the rocket attack she'd survived in 1965. None of the scars showed when she wore clothes, though if you embraced her you'd feel them hard under your wrist, against the soft part of your palm" ("Aguantando" 71-72). We sense no sympathy, no empathy, only objectivity. Things are as they are. The boys never complain.

The title of this story—"Aguantando"—offers a view into the world of Yuniór. In brief, the story presents vignettes that showcase a mother and two sons forever waiting for the absent father to return. *Aguantando* means "waiting." *Esperando* also means "waiting." But *aguantando* is semantically weighted with a darkness that suggests enduring, bearing, and hurting. *Esperando*, in contrast, is semantically much lighter, etymologically linked to *esperanza* (hope) and a relative assurance that a hoped-for event will actually come to pass. Díaz's pithy title allows us a deep view into the world of Yuniór and his brother. Díaz's adolescents show remarkable insight, indifferent acceptance of reality, insouciance, objective acceptance of flawed adults in a flawed world, and consistent intentionality in their actions. They are not young people who "cannot be left to face [the] crucial struggle on their own (Moran 20); nor are they "susceptible to the wiles of those who might lead them astray" (Moje and Van Helden 214). Neither are they intended as characters in a cautionary tale. The choices they make are grounded in realistic acceptance of the world as it is not the world as they want it to be.

Yuniór is an objective recorder of and participant in life; he does not reveal emotional response to the drama of life swirling about him. Looking at the one photograph that his mother has of his father, he muses, "I did not think of him often. He had left for Nueva York when I was four but since I couldn't remember a single moment with him I excused him from all nine years of my life" ("Aguantando" 70). Later, he distances himself from his mother with similar pragmatism. In an emotional crisis precipitated when her husband promises to come for the family but never shows up, she closes her heart to the boys, abandons them for a while, and is a different mother when she returns. Yuniór sanguinely assesses the new relationship:

She didn't treat me badly on her return but we were no longer as close; she did not call me her Prieto or bring me chocolates from her work. That seemed to suit her fine. And I was young enough to grow out of her rejection. I still had baseball and my brother. I still had trees to climb and lizards to tear apart. ("Aguantando" 84)

In traditional constructions of adolescence, Yuniór would be judged as distant, troubled, narcissistic, in other words as a "normal" adolescent who conforms to the dominant discourses about literary adolescents. A more critical view that takes into account Yuniór's personal history casts his reactions to his parents' rejection as self-advocacy: he is not a victim but is instead an agent of adaptability and psychic self-preservation.

Yuniór's parents are curious, quirky adults. Despite the first person narration, Yuniór's story never becomes accusatory or pitiable; instead, he views them through an adjustable lens that occasionally brings his parents into the foreground of his narrative but

that far more often relegates them to an ephemeral, unfocused existence in the periphery of Yuniór's consciousness and day-to-day existence. Yuniór casts himself as the focal character but also as a reliable, objective recorder of his life. Yes, he refers to his father as "asshole," but never offers direct invective. In fact, so objective is his representation of his father that potentially painful or abusive events are given a humorous cast, as when his father tries to cure him of car sickness by taking him on frequent short rides. Yuniór sardonically observes, "These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When we were alone he treated me much better, like maybe I was his son or something" ("Fiesta, 1980" 35). There's no nostalgia, no recrimination in this comment, just realistic recognition of the dynamics of the relationship. We don't get the sense that Yuniór yearns for things to be different.

Through Yuniór's objective lens, Mámi is seen not as a pitiable creature scarred physically by war and emotionally by her husband. Instead, she is enigmatic: she passes through rooms "as if gliding on a cushion of felt, crying without a sound" ("Drown" 94). She is tiny but imposing: she wants to go to the mall so Yuniór gives up a profitable day of drug trafficking to escort her on the bus and gives her \$50 for a day of shopping. But she too is a shadowy presence existing on the boundaries of Yuniór's life. He doesn't blame her for the absent father or her lack of parental succor; he just coexists evenly with her.

While they may not realize it, the parents teach Yuniór a lot about sex. Yuniór may seem be "controlled by raging hormones" (Lesko 3), but he is actually modeling himself after his parents. Yuniór recognizes sex as a powerful force in his father's life; he has a *sucia* (a mistress) to whom he introduces the boys. It is an open secret: everyone knows but no one says anything about it. At a family party celebrating an aunt's arrival in the U.S., Yuniór fully expects that, fortified by liquor and family, his mother will finally confront his father; but nothing happens. Yuniór's brother Rafa is very likely sexually active. At the party, they meet a new girl; the first thing Yuniór notices is her breasts and he speculates that Rafa will "gun for her" ("Fiesta, 1980" 32). Sex for these adolescents is not forbidden or secret; it is a commanding physiological drive (Brenner) which they fulfill naturally, healthily, and guiltlessly.

In the context of the incident with Ysrael and his mask, Yuniór is responding to another drive—the aggressive drive. The fixation on Ysrael suggests the coexistent duality of sexual and aggressive drives (Brenner 25). The boys want to see Ysrael's face; we could speculate that Ysrael becomes a type of sexual conquest for Yuniór and Rafa. They don't want to see Ysrael's genitals but the hidden face creates the same sort of curiosity that they feel about the female body. Thus, when they pull off Ysrael's mask, they figuratively rape him.

The Brothers as Classic Heroes

Ironically, while the act of unmasking Ysrael seems amoral, the story of the quest to conquer Ysrael fits the classic hero journey in many ways. It is Yuniór who first spots Ysrael and begins to weave the "story" that will evolve into a heroic mission:

That's Ysrael! I was told. He's *ugly*. . . And that face of his would make you *sick!*

I told my brother later when I got home, and he sat up in his bed. Could you see under the mask?

Not really.

That's something we got to check out. ("Ysrael" 8)

Thus, they launch their heroic journey with a classic "call to adventure" (Campbell 30, 58). They have to travel eight or nine miles to another village to confront Ysrael, whom they cast as a metaphorical monster not just because of his shrouded face but because of the exceptional strength he has developed through working out and wrestling ("Ysrael" 7, 15; "No Face" 153). Access to the area where Ysrael lives is "guarded" by a miserly store owner. They have to negotiate obstacles (a bus ride for which they have no fare, getting directions from strangers to where Ysrael hangs out, fooling Ysrael into trusting them, manipulating him into a position where they can crack a bottle on his head). When they figuratively "slay" their monster, they can return with the boon of having pulled off the mask and having seen the horror of the boy's disfigured face.

But success is pyrrhic for Yuniór. On the bus ride to Ysrael's village, a man molests Yuniór, but he doesn't tell Rafa, so busy hustling for bus fare that he fails to see what has happened to his little brother. Once off the bus, Yuniór starts crying. Rafa assumes he feels guilty about all the tricks they pulled that morning on their quest to conquer Ysrael: "You, he said, are a pussy. . . . What the hell's the matter with you? We didn't do anything wrong. . . . If you can't stop crying, I'll leave you" ("Ysrael" 13). Rafa, 12 years old to Yuniór's 9, is the younger boy's mentor and role model. Earlier in the story, Yuniór explains Rafa's influence: "I was too young to understand most of what he said [about the girls he hung out with], but I listened to him anyway, in case these things might be useful in the future" (6). Thus, after the trauma of the bus ride, Yuniór is shamed into silence when Rafa demands "Are you always going to be a pussy? . . . You have to get tougher" (14). As Yuniór anticipates the upcoming encounter with Ysrael, he has to "suck up" the incident with the molester on the bus and stick to the quest. At nine years old, Yuniór has left behind his childhood and is fully on his way to the world of adulthood, lingering only briefly in the realm of adolescence.

While he seems to want to pull the mask off Ysrael as much as Rafa does, Yuniór suffers further trauma when they finally overpower Ysrael and unmask him: he jumps back and implores Rafa to leave. Yuniór's last-minute resistance is probably fueled by what happened in the moments before they attack Ysrael. Just before they smashed the bottle onto Ysrael's head, the brothers lured him into complacency by disingenuously chatting about Ysrael's kite, which he says his father sent to him from New York. Finding common ground with the monster-boy, Yuniór shouts, "No shit! Our father's there too!" ("Ysrael" 16). Clearly seeing this connection as an obstacle to their plans, Rafa frowns and Yuniór steps back into his role as follower. Rafa changes the focus of the conversation to Ysrael's mask asking if it's hot and why he doesn't take it off. Not recognizing the threat posed by the brothers, Ysrael innocently reveals that American doctors are going to operate on him; then he can take off his mask. Rafa snickers, "Those doctors will kill you faster than the Guardia" (17). But for Yuniór, the revelation that Ysrael also has a father in New York, creates a sort of leveling in the boys' situations, and the discovery is critical in understanding the dynamics of pulling off the mask.

Yuniór keeps talking to Ysrael about wrestling, chatting with him as if he's a "real" boy, even speculating when the mask twitches that Ysrael is smiling beneath the mask. That unseen smile moves Ysrael out the realm of "the other": Yuniór has forgotten why they're there and has instead found a potential new friend. Yuniór's investment in the quest to unmask Ysrael dissolves when he recognizes in Ysrael a "brother" who also has an absent

father in New York. At this point, Yunior's affinity with the brother with the mask trumps his allegiance to the brother with the bottle in his hand.

Thus, when Rafa smashes the bottle on Ysrael's head (in that moment, Ysrael and Yunior are in the middle of a sentence), Yunior exclaims, "Holy fucking shit." Ironically, despite the machinations that got them to *el colmado* and finally positioned them in front of Ysrael, Yunior seems oddly surprised when the monster falls to the ground. We wonder if in his little boy's mind he had dismissed the quest to pull off the mask as a fantasy they would never realize, much like their fantasy that their father would come home some day and be a real, true, normal father. In that moment, the fantasy of Ysrael, the monster, and the reality of Papi, the abandoner, coalesce into a single, painful understanding of the truth: hope and fulfillment are two different things, and when they come together, you might get something you didn't expect.

Yunior is jarred back into the reality of their mission when Ysrael falls to the ground and Rafa yanks off the mask. Ignoring the little brother's plea—"Please, Rafa, let's go!"—Rafa clinically turns Ysrael's unmasked head from side to side, immune to whatever horror and guilt Yunior feels. On the bus ride home, Yunior tries to purge himself of guilt by reflecting on Ysrael's innocent hope that the doctors would fix his face and he could be shed of the mask:

Ysrael will be OK, I said. . . . They're going to fix him.

A muscle fluttered between [Rafa's] jawbone and his ear. Yunior, he said tiredly. They aren't going to do shit to him. (19).

Seeing the event from nine-year-old Yunior's perspective, we recognize an abrupt transitioning into the realm of adolescence and a clear path toward adulthood. In unmasking Ysrael, the boys' notions of humanity, charity, responsibility, and consequences crash into the turbulence that defines true adolescence. At the moment they rip off the mask, the boys are no longer "becoming or developing"—they step fully into an adult world that is interdependent and interconnected and from which no one can shield them (DeJaynes and Curmi, 75). Given the brothers' independence in the absence of traditional nurturing parents and their social indifference in the context of the war, poverty, and hopelessness that has defined their childhoods, unmasking Ysrael is not optional; it is inevitable, and it transitions them into an adult world. In traditional discourses of adolescence, that transition comes with leaving behind the habits of mind that characterize adolescents as "hormonal, disengaged, and disaffected" and moving into realms of responsible citizenship (DeJaynes and Curmi, 76).

However, in the real world of Yunior and Rafa, personal responsibility means doing what it takes to stay viable; the boys have become opportunistic, depraved citizens who will fit smoothly into the society of the nameless man on the bus who molested Yunior. After this, no act of cruelty will be deemed an act of cruelty, and everything inflicted on them by society or nature or the cosmos will be normal, manageable, and reciprocal. We need, as well, to push this construction a bit further. Having worn the mask since infancy, Ysrael knows the power he wields over the people in his village. He is forever the mystery, the monster, the superman. When Yunior and Rafa spot him, Yunior's description suggests an intentionality in Ysrael's self-created exceptionality:

He was about a foot bigger than either of us and looked like he'd been fattened on that supergrain the farmers around Ocoa were giving their stock. . . . Ysrael's sandals were stiff leather and his clothes were Northamerican. I looked over at Rafa but my brother seemed unperturbed. ("Ysrael" 15)

We don't see the pulling off the mask from Ysrael's perspective, but a later story in the collection, "No Face," illuminates his frame of mind: "He watches for opportunities from corners, away from people. He has his power of INVISIBILITY and no one can touch him. . . . So many wish him to fall. So many wish him gone" ("No Face" 155). We have to wonder if that smile that Yuniór detected crinkling the mask was not the innocent smile of a friend talking with another friend but the triumphant smile of a stalker who finally caught his victims. Ysrael is no innocent; he is as ruthlessly pragmatic as the brothers because he lives in exactly the same world the brothers inhabit. That smile, which is perceived as a movement under the mask rather than as a true uplifting of lips and eyes, is Ysrael's pre-emptive volley: he may be the one whose head is banged by the bottle, but when the boys pull off his mask, he figuratively pulls off *their* mask and exposes Yuniór far more fully than they have exposed him. It is Yuniór who experiences psychic discord after the incident. Ysrael, on the other hand, is indomitable: "He runs . . . never slipping or stumbling. Nobody's faster." ("No Face" 160). When the brothers pulled off his mask, perhaps Ysrael was thinking, "Gotcha, *cabrones!*" Ysrael *knew* from past cruelties that no one was to be trusted, that everyone was a voyeur wanting a look at his face. Pulling off the mask disturbs Yuniór but is probably normal and expected for Ysrael.

Revisioning Adolescence

Junot Díaz's Yuniór is remarkably complex. He lends to representations of adolescence a multi-dimensionality that defies categorization in traditional views of adolescence. Through the lens of youth—the perspective of real-world adolescents who might read Díaz's stories and novel—we generate a view of adolescence reconstructed as a vital, compellingly ambiguous space unbounded by chronology or life stages. In such reconstruction, adolescents emerge as powerful, self-assured, confident individuals. Yuniór seems ageless; his insights into people, events, and situations reveal a sardonic complacency about "the human condition" and his spot in the universe; he is an "everyman" type of character; he can be simultaneously unfazed and amazed about a moment. He is neither an exemplary nor a cautionary character; he is, however, painfully and delightfully realistic. Junot Díaz's Yuniór focuses and authenticates adolescence/ts with a startling verisimilitude that is missing from traditional discourses that define (and limit) adolescence. Through the medium of Junot Díaz's Yuniór, we generate a reconstructed discourse that realistically and critically showcases the ambiguities of adolescence.

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