

Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Daniel Bautista

FROM THE MARVELOUS ACCOUNTS OF FIRST ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN EUROPEAN explorers and the peoples of the “New World” to the spectacular success of writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez closer to our own time, Latin America has long been associated with a rich tradition of fantastic literature. Junot Díaz’s recent novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, clearly picks up on this tradition. The novel, which recounts the unfortunate experiences of its Dominican-American protagonist and his family both during and after the Trujillo era in the Dominican Republic, opens with a long digression about “fukú,” a traditional Dominican curse of supernatural bad luck that would fit comfortably in any García Márquez story. Other magical realist touches in the novel include the uncannily accurate premonitions of Oscar’s sister Lola, their grandmother’s seemingly supernatural ability to sense and affect events from afar through the sheer force of her prayers, and most prominently, a spectral, golden-eyed mongoose that miraculously appears to aid both Oscar and his mother, Beli, during the moments of their greatest pain and danger.

At the same time, however, Díaz’s book is clearly not a typical magical realist novel. Indeed, critics have commented on the impressive variety of genres or forms that Díaz deploys to tell his story. A. O. Scott, for example, describes the novel as an “unruly multitude of styles and genres” which includes “a young-adult melodrama draped over a multigenerational immigrant family chronicle that dabbles in tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, [and] post-postmodern pyrotechnics.” With particular reference to the place of fantasy in his writing, Scott compares Díaz to other contemporary American authors like Jonathan Lethem, Dave Eggers, and Michael Chabon who also use “comic books, sword-and-sorcery novels, science fiction, [and] role-playing games” to “infuse their ambitious, difficult stories with some of the

allegorical pixie dust and epic grandiloquence the genres offer.” While Scott sees this as part of the charm of the novel, Henry Wessells takes some issue with Díaz’s narrative eclecticism. Although Wessells finds much to like about Díaz’s book, which he considers at least partly “written within the genre,” he argues that rather than using sf to develop the plot of his novel, Díaz primarily uses the genre as a badge for Oscar’s nerd identity: “[F]inally, all the genre allusions in Oscar’s life and death are so many bars of a freak-show cage in which Oscar is put on display” (11).

The differences between these two critics is a good example of the challenge Díaz’s novel poses to easy classification, a challenge which also brings up interesting questions about the function of fantasy and sf in this work. This article will argue that there is much in the novel to suggest that Díaz’s use of sf and other popular genres is ultimately much more pointed and complex than either of these critics suggests, especially if we consider the novel in its proper historical and cultural context. In particular, I will argue that Díaz’s mix of sf, fantasy, comic books, and gritty realism subversively reworks a strong tradition of magical realism in Latin American and Latino writing. The result is a new kind of genre, which I am calling “comic book realism,” that irreverently mixes realism and popular culture in an attempt to capture the bewildering variety of cultural influences that define the lives of Díaz’s Dominican-American protagonists.

Magical realism has a long and complex history in Latin American literature. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the genre as a “kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the ‘reliable’ tone of objective realistic report” which is “associated chiefly with certain leading novelists of Central and South America, notably Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel García Márquez” (“Magic Realism”).¹ Rather than a simple aesthetic choice, these Latin American authors often present magical realism as an authentic expression of the peculiar political and cultural condition of their region. The powerful persistence of traditional or indigenous beliefs in modern Latin America, for example, has served as a particular source of inspiration for much magical realist writing. The “magic” in Carpentier’s early novels finds root in the voodoo practices and beliefs of the slave population in pre-independence Haiti. In Asturias’s novels, the mystical beliefs of the indigenous Mayan peoples of Guatemala provide a marvelous contrast to the mindset of the modern world. By assuming an open-minded or faithful attitude in their literary work towards these alternate cultural beliefs, which they often contrasted with what they saw as the false rationality of modern society, these writers symbolically offered readers a bridge to what were implicitly presented as more “real” or “authentic” Latin American traditions. At the same time, their representation of these older traditions bolstered their claims that magical realism was an absolutely

native and authentic expression of the multicultural and historically fractured nations of Latin America. Carpentier makes this point most clearly in the prologue to *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), a text that is often considered one of the earliest manifestoes for magical realism:

Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [*mestizaje*], America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real? (“On the Marvelous” 88)

More than fifty years later, the title character of *Oscar Wao* poses a rather similar rhetorical question near the beginning of Díaz’s novel: “What,” he asks, “is more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (6). Oscar’s question suggests that the Dominican Republic must also share in what García Márquez has described as the “outsized reality” of Latin America (“The Solitude”). Yet, despite their ostensible similarities, there are important differences between these two questions and the challenges they offer to realist assumptions. While both make claims about the fantastic nature of reality in some part if not all of Latin America, this quality is framed in different ways and traced to distinct sources. As in the rest of his prologue, Carpentier casts the marvelous as a natural and authentic product of Latin America’s very blood and soil, an idea that continues to exert a powerful influence on Latin American literary tradition and even on the work of Latino authors writing in the US.² However, unlike some of his contemporaries, Díaz revises as much as he borrows from this tradition in *Oscar Wao*. The kinds of specifically racial or possessive cultural claims we find in Carpentier, for example, are not so clearly assumed or asserted in Oscar’s query or in the novel as a whole. Despite the fact that he has Dominican parents, Oscar has a rather complicated and problematic relationship with his ancestral “homeland” due to his upbringing in the US. While Carpentier stresses a shared Latin American cultural legacy through his repetition of the possessive “our” (“our upbringing,” “our ontology”) in his prologue, Oscar’s inability to live up to stereotypically Hispanic and macho ideals puts his Dominican “identity” in question throughout Díaz’s text. Oscar is not only accused of being a gringo on his visits to the Dominican Republic, but even back in the States, his peers often find it hard to believe that he is really Dominican (19–20, 49). Unlike Carpentier, then, Oscar self-consciously approaches what he perceives as the fantastic aspects of Santo Domingo from the position of an outsider. This helps to explain why Oscar sees the Dominican Republic through the optic of literary genres that are not exclusively or, in the case of sf, even particularly Latin American.

Ironically, Oscar’s literary predilections for a mostly English and American

tradition of sf, fantasy, and comic books make him even more of an outcast, again not just in the Dominican Republic, where they must truly appear as some weird foreign import, but also in the US, where these genres are still often treated as sub-literary or adolescent pursuits at best. Even sympathetic characters like his sister Lola and Yuniór, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar's love for what he calls the "more speculative genres" as a rather unfortunate and nerdy addiction (43). Moreover, a significant part of the text is devoted to implicitly poking fun at Oscar's often pathetic flights of fancy. When Oscar dreams about morphing into a "plátano [plantain] Doc Savage" to defend the latest girl he has a crush on from "a pack of irradiated ghouls" in a post-apocalyptic world, for example, it is all too sadly clear that this will never happen (27). On some level, Oscar's comic book fantasies and sci-fi³ dreams represent yet another melancholic sign of his profound alienation from his New Jersey peers and his sense of awe at a life in Santo Domingo that he can barely comprehend.

Nonetheless, Wessells's suggestion that the sf allusions in the novel represent "so many bars of a freak-show cage" hardly does justice to the rather more complex place of the genre in the novel. As much as they may mark him as a nerd, sf and other related genres clearly provide a real source of solace for Oscar. The fact that they "helped him get through the rough days of his youth," when his weight and social awkwardness would make him an outcast regardless, helps explain his devotion to the genres despite the mockery and disapproval of his peers (22). In a significant passage and footnote early on in the novel, the narrator offers additional compelling reasons to account for Oscar's outsized affection for the genres: that it was "a consequence of being Antillean [...] or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey," that "the early seventies [were] the dawn of the Nerd Age" and "the libraries of Paterson were so underfunded that they still kept a lot of the previous generation's nerdery in circulation," or that already "in the DR he had watched too much *Spider-Man*, been taken to too many Run Run Shaw kung fu movies, listened to too many of his abuela's spooky stories about el Cuco and la Ciguapa" (21, 22). While the narrator does not settle definitively on any one of these explanations, together they suggest that any number of roads might naturally have led Oscar to his love for the genres and that there was a truly logical connection or elective affinity between Oscar's experience as a young Dominican-American, the supernatural beliefs and traditions of his ancestors ("something deeper, something ancestral" [22]), the "wrenching" dislocation caused by immigration, and the sf and fantasy world he was exposed to in both the Dominican Republic and the United States. In other words, while Oscar's love for sf and comic books do serve as signs of his alienation, Díaz's novel suggests that in a weird way these literary tastes are simultaneously a natural outcome and

appropriate expression of the peculiar mixture of change and tradition that marks his immigrant experience.

Used in this fashion, sf and fantasy serve as more than mere signs of otherness in the novel; they are an integral aspect of Díaz's particular vision of Dominican and Dominican-American reality and history. By incorporating them into his novel, Díaz suggests that the comic book and sf world offer a wealth of parallels for the challenges faced by any Dominican-American who does not feel quite at home on either side of that hyphen ("You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart book-ish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto" [23]). At the same time, Díaz suggests that this same world provides many useful metaphors for the immigrant experience in general. In at least one interview, Díaz elaborates on this rich connection:

sometimes the only way to describe these lived moments—the surreality and ir-reality of some of the things that people like myself have experienced—is through lenses like science fiction. The joke is you're Dominican living in the Dominican Republic in 1974, and you get transported to the U.S. from the campo [...]. [...] I think the narrative that would logically be most useful would be not only space travel—traveling between two planets—but time travel. Jumping between two entire existences, two entire temporal moments, is what it feels like. These conventions you find in science fiction are awesome in trying to discuss some of the tensions and weirdness of being a person of color, being a third world person traveling between the third world and the first world. And even the terms "first world" and "third world" already intimate science fictive travel between planets. So I'm like, why not? (Lewis)

Nor is Díaz the first person to recognize the rich metaphorical possibilities that sf offers for dealing with cultural otherness. In his book on the genre, Adam Roberts argues that all sf is ultimately "about the encounter with difference," a point confirmed by the growing numbers of well-known female and minority writers in the genre (183).

The notion that these genres share some basic homology with the Dominican experience also helps to explain why Oscar is not the only fan of the sci-fi, fantasy, and comic book world in the novel. Yuniór, the family friend who becomes the main narrator of the tale as the novel progresses, often displays just as wide a knowledge of the "speculative genres." Not only does he immediately recognize the Elvish language created by J. R. R. Tolkien on the sign that Oscar posts on their shared dormitory room door the first time they meet, but Yuniór himself is also fluent enough in the tongue to greet Oscar with the Elvish word for friend ("*mellon*") later in the novel (172, 200). Although he tends to play down his own "otakuness" or affection for the genres, these examples suggest that Yuniór has grown up with the genres almost as much

as Oscar has (21). At the same time, however, Yunior is presented as quite comfortable with his Dominican-American identity, proving that an affection for the genres does not automatically make one an outsider. Indeed, his womanizing prowess provides a clear foil for Oscar's own failure with the opposite sex. While Yunior disapproves of the way that Oscar flaunts his love for the speculative genres, especially when it comes to pursuing women, Yunior himself draws extensively on sci-fi and fantasy references in his descriptions of Oscar's life, and the dislocations of twentieth-century Dominican history more generally.

Unlike in magical realism, where the objective narrator tends to fade into the background, Yunior's narration in *Oscar Wao* is openly opinionated and his sf and fantasy comparisons color the novel in a particularly dramatic fashion. Yunior's frequent allusions to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are a particularly good example of how these genres do more than simply add "allegorical pixie dust and epic grandiloquence" to the text, as Scott argues. Díaz selectively uses these genres to shape the very story he tells. Largely eschewing its more heroic elements, Díaz borrows almost exclusively from the dark and monstrous aspects of Tolkien's world to offer a specific vision of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. Yunior's frequent comparisons of Trujillo to Sauron, the Evil One, and his main henchman to Nazgûl, ringwraiths, and other baleful creatures created by Tolkien, as well as his comparison of the Dominican Republic in general to the land of Mordor, for example, are an effective expression of his sense of the outsized evil of the Dominican dictator's regime. The absence of allusions to the more hopeful, idealistic, or utopian aspects of Tolkien's texts is equally marked. In Díaz's telling of Dominican history, we find no characters who might compare to Gandalf, the Elves, or Tom Bombadil, and the few positive characters who are mentioned are alluded to in a uniformly negative fashion: some of Oscar's ancestors act as foolishly "carefree as Hobbits" before their downfall, while Oscar's grandmother, La Inca, is "diminish[ed], like Galadriel after the temptation of the ring," by her experiences, for example (219, 156). The point is that Díaz does not draw on the sense of wonder or redemption that Tolkien sometimes offers, as much as on the more cynical sense of evil and failure that his texts also provide. With a few rare exceptions, the marvelous in Díaz's text hardly ever functions as a hopeful or positive alternative. Instead, Yunior's sf and fantasy allusions mostly serve to reveal a fallen world where the marvelous either no longer exists or where what remains of it has been forced into the service of evil.

In a similar vein, the particular mix of genres or comparisons the novel uses to recount Dominican history often creates an ironic and irreverent tone that repeatedly undercuts the more mythic elements in the story. When the narrator likens Trujillo to a comic book villain like "Darkseid," a character much feared for his ability to shoot energy beams from his eyes that unerringly

hit their target (the dreaded “Omega Effect”), he gives us a good sense of the dictator’s destructive efficiency (80). Yet the comparison also diminishes Trujillo at the same time by casting him as a mere comic book character. There is something literally comic and overblown about the comparison that simultaneously pokes fun at widespread Dominican beliefs about the seemingly supernatural extent of the dictator’s power. Díaz injects notes of irony and mockery into his novel in other ways as well, beginning with the very title of the book, which applies the adjective “wondrous” to a life that is really not very wondrous after all. The ironic distance between many of the fantastic allusions in Díaz’s novel and the actual life of his characters highlights the fact that, despite traditional superstitions about the existence of the supernatural, the grim reality of Dominican history in general was often neither wonderful nor magical.

In magical realism, narrators and characters typically do not exhibit surprise or fear when they encounter the marvelous because they accept it as a natural and even unremarkable part of their reality. When a voodoo priestess sticks her arms into a vat of boiling oil without getting burned in Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* (25-26) or a young girl suddenly floats up to heaven while she is hanging clothes to dry in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (236), we are supposed to accept these as facts, at least within the worlds of these novels, where the easy acceptance of the marvelous marks one as part of the community. By contrast, despite Oscar’s suggestion that there is nothing more “sci-fi” or “fantasy” than Santo Domingo, with rare exceptions, little that could strictly be defined as sf or fantasy actually occurs in this novel. Even when the marvelous does seem to occur, like the appearance of a spectral mongoose at several key points in the novel, it is usually accompanied by notes of doubt and skepticism. Oscar’s mother, Beli, cannot bring herself to fully acknowledge whether she was really saved by the mongoose (or “God” as La Inca puts it) after her savage beating out in the cane fields at the hands of Trujillo’s police (152). The reality of Oscar’s own vision of the mongoose just before he attempts suicide at another point in the novel is similarly doubtful:

Later, when he would describe it, he would call it the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew that wasn’t what it was. It was very placid, very beautiful. Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgment or reproach but for something far scarier. They stared at each other—it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief—and then the whistle blew again and his eyes snapped open (or closed) and it was gone.

Dude had been waiting his whole life for something just like this to happen to him, had always wanted to live in a world of magic and mystery, but instead of taking note of the vision and changing his ways the fuck just shook his swollen head. (190)

Oscar's staring "in total disbelief" and the fact that this vision does not seem to really move him both suggest that even he cannot accept the reality of what he has just witnessed. Moreover, despite the convergence between their experiences, since both Beli and Oscar are in significantly altered states when they see it, whether the mongoose is real or a simple hallucination is never made absolutely clear. Ultimately, the novel remains significantly ambiguous and coy about whether magic like this really exists.

The ambiguous reality of the fantastic in this novel is equally apparent in its treatment of the notion of fukú, or the "curse of the New World," whose description serves as our introduction to Oscar's tale. As the narrator describes it, the fukú is a peculiarly mysterious and doubled-edged curse that dooms both colonizers (Columbus and the Spanish) and colonized (the indigenous peoples of the Americas and their descendents) in Latin America from the moment of their first encounter. For those who believe in it, only a curse like the fukú could explain the calamitous results of Columbus's "discovery" and the often tragic and problematic history of Latin America ever since. However, as much as Díaz entertains the possibility of the real existence of fukú, he never does so uncritically or with the sense of simple faith that we sometimes find in magical realism. Where a more strictly magical realist text might simply assert its reality, Díaz's novel repeatedly treats the true existence of fukú as an open question. Despite numerous clues and suggestions, the reality of the fukú remains rather vague; it is never absolutely clear where the fukú comes from, how it operates, who exactly is cursed, or who has done the cursing and why. Indeed, the notion of what the fukú is responsible for is sometimes so amorphous and diffuse that it becomes comic in its triviality. This is particularly true with regards to the notion of the "small fukú," the smaller, more personal, or familial experiences of bad luck described in the novel that are also attributed to the curse. Some examples of the small fukú described early in the novel, such as the cramps caused by a bad meal of shrimp, are so petty and silly that they strongly suggest that the belief in fukú is really just a superstition, a grasping at supernatural explanations for what are really just unfortunate coincidences (3). This indeed is the perspective that some of the characters in the novel take, including Yunior and Lola (who insists that misfortune is just a part of "life," and not necessarily the result of any curses [210]).

Even a consummate speculative genre fanatic like Oscar questions the true existence of fukú, at least initially. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator suggests that Oscar probably would not believe the stories about fukú *precisely* because he was a "hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man" (6). The notion that the fukú, on the one hand, and sf and fantasy, on the other, are mutually exclusive "traditions" in Oscar's mind is made further apparent on his first visit back to the DR, when he writes two sf books but does not bother to find out more about the family curse he had often heard about (32). Clearly,

at this point in the novel, Oscar does not give much weight to these rumors. They are part of a Dominican tradition that does not particularly interest or impress him due to his upbringing in the US. However, over the course of the novel, Oscar does increasingly come to believe in the true existence of the fukú. After Oscar survives a suicide attempt at the end of his first year in college, he tells Yunior that it “was the curse that made [him] do it.” When Yunior rejects this explanation by insisting that the fukú is “[their] parents’ shit,” Oscar significantly replies that it belongs to their generation as well (194). When Oscar receives his first beating at the hands of the Dominican police later in the novel, it further convinces him of the reality of all of the rumors: “it dawned on him that the family curse he’d heard about his whole life might actually be *true*” (303; emphasis in original).

While this progression towards belief in the fukú can be interpreted as a sign of Oscar’s growing pessimism about the course of his own life, it is also an important reflection of his reconnection to his Dominican roots. By the end of the novel, which describes Oscar’s final and ultimately fatal trips to the Dominican Republic as he pursues an unlikely yet romantic love affair with a Dominican prostitute, he is clearly consumed by a desire to learn as much as he can about the fukú, a desire that significantly leads Oscar to really learn about his family’s history and tradition for the first time in his life. In an ironic twist, given Oscar’s initial attitude toward the fukú, Yunior suggests that it is precisely Oscar’s sci-fi and fantasy outlook that ultimately nurtures his growing openness to a Dominican supernatural tradition he had initially dismissed. The rumors that his grandfather Abelard’s downfall may have been due to a book he authored about the supernatural roots of Trujillo’s regime, for example, “[a]ppealed to the deep structures in [Oscar’s] nerd brain” at this point in the novel (246). The notion that Oscar’s love for the speculative genres actually help him connect with older Dominican and familial beliefs represents an important reconciliation between what had first seemed like two very distinct traditions in the novel. In the DR, where “a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow,” Oscar’s sci-fi dreams serve as an unlikely yet effective bridge back to the Dominican supernatural tradition that Oscar was formerly indifferent to (246). Near the end of his life, it is strongly suggested that Oscar even writes a book that explains the fukú and its place in his family once and for all (333–34). Ironically, however, the book is lost before it can be delivered to Yunior, just as the book by Oscar’s grandfather about the supernatural roots of Trujillo’s regime might have vanished years before. Whether this is just a coincidence or another example of the curse itself is left unclear. Either way, this is yet one more example of how the novel refuses to provide any definite answers about the reality of the fukú.

Ultimately, rather than insisting on the idea that Dominican reality really *is* marvelous, Díaz seems more interested in exploring the way that this

“reality” is filtered through and shaped by the particular traditions, cultures, and fantasies that define the identities and actions of his characters. Much of the novel is devoted to tracing the changing cultural history of different generations of Dominicans in Oscar’s family, focusing especially on the persistence of older traditions even as these are gradually replaced, modified by, or incorporated into a worldview increasingly defined by the influence of popular culture and the experience of immigration. While the older generation represented by Oscar’s grandmother, La Inca, still holds to traditions of religion and noble propriety associated with the formerly illustrious history of their family, for example, the next generation, represented by Oscar’s mother, Beli, a girl who is dispossessed of her rightful inheritance by Trujillo’s persecution, is already more significantly influenced by Latin-American popular culture. Rather than following a religion or tradition that no longer seems to speak to her, Beli models her desires after the *telenovelas* (Latin American soap operas) she assiduously watches, and it is their example that arguably helps to lead her into disastrous love affairs with the men in her life. In yet another example of cultural change, Oscar’s sister, Lola, will take on the trappings of Goth “culture” and identity in the US in order to help sustain herself in her constant struggle against Beli’s strict and domineering mothering. Like Oscar and Yuniór’s affection for sf, Lola’s Goth identity is a significant reflection of the novel “culture” these first generation Dominican-Americans create for themselves. As new “Americans,” without much accumulated cultural capital or a wholly stable attachment to the traditions of their ancestors, the most recent generation draws on the alternate, lowbrow, and popular cultures of the young and marginalized in order to make sense of their own realities. Rather than simply dismissing these pursuits as adolescent pastimes, Díaz shows how popular culture serves as a rich and important resource for these first-generation children.⁴

The way that all of these cultural influences mix with and influence one another is expressed in the very form of Díaz’s syncretic novel, which borrows elements from magical realism, the speculative genres, and American popular culture in order to create something new. Unlike simple magical realism, which often relies on the pretense that it is giving us an authentic and transparent view of a truly marvelous and “wonderful” reality, a pretense that led writers like Carpentier to deny or play down its reliance on literary convention, the “comic book realism” I have been describing flaunts its status as text, parody, and pastiche in a way that foregrounds the importance of cultural mediation. Along with the sci-fi, fantasy, and comic book universe that serve as his key frames of reference, Yuniór borrows from an impressive range of literary and popular sources in order to tell Oscar’s story. His eclectic use of both high and low references reveal an ironic, self-aware, and critical attitude that further distinguishes his storytelling from the innocent faith or suspension of disbelief

demanded by magical realism.

The thick net of textual and cultural allusions in Díaz's novel create a perspective that is much closer to the postmodern and post-faith world that Alberto Fuguet describes in his well-known critique of magical realism. In his essay "I Am Not a Magical Realist," the Chilean writer expresses his frustration at having his literary works repeatedly rejected by publishers who came to expect and demand magical realism from all Latin American writers in the wake of the enormous success of García Márquez. Fuguet argues that because his own upbringing in modern Chile was more influenced by a global Western culture than by any traditional or magical beliefs, magical realism was in no way the proper form in which to express his experiences. In contrast to the sense of magic that characterized García Márquez's mythical town of Macondo, Fuguet describes a thoroughly modern and often banal world defined by Apple Macintoshes, condos, and McDonald's, a world he subversively renames as McOndo. Díaz's book is very much a product of this McOndo world as well.⁵ Like Fuguet, the young characters in *Oscar Wao* all grow up in a transnational space thoroughly saturated by the pop cultural detritus of late twentieth-century American culture. The fact that they are all Dominican-Americans means that they are even further removed from the older Dominican traditions of their parents.

Nonetheless, Díaz is not as ready as Fuguet to give up entirely on the possibility of magic, either as a fictional resource or as a real cultural influence. Despite the doubts expressed about fukú over the course of the novel, for example, the idea that there just might really be a curse still has a certain currency for his characters, even after Oscar's death at the end of the novel. The continued influence of such "magical thinking" is especially apparent in the legacy that is carefully preserved for Lola's daughter, Isis:

A happy kid, as far as these things go. Happy!

But on a string around her neck: three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary. Powerful elder magic. Three barrier shields against the Eye. Backed by a six-mile plinth of prayer. (329)

Along with the "azabaches," traditional Dominican bracelets that are supposed to function as charms against bad luck, Yunior makes it clear that he is also saving Oscar's "books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, [and] his papers" for his niece (330). Isis's mixed inheritance suggests once again how traditional Dominican beliefs and modern popular culture have joined together to define the lives of the younger generations in his novel. By using Oscar's infatuation with sci-fi and fantasy as his primary optic, Díaz creates a tricky but impressive hybrid form to capture their new cultural reality, which

reflects a curious mix of both belief and skepticism. In doing so, Díaz effectively writes a post-magical realist work, a work of fiction that takes superstitions about the fantastic dimensions of Dominican history seriously at the same time that it slyly questions and pokes fun at that very perspective. While magic may no longer exist in “reality” for a writer like Díaz, he still manages to find an ironic sense of wonder in the literary genres and pop cultural forms that mediate the lives of his Dominican-Americans characters.

Notes

1. Today writers like Gunter Grass, Salman Rushdie, and Toni Morrison, just to name a few, have made magical realism a truly international literary phenomenon. Nonetheless, a general association between Latin America and magical realism remains strong.

2. A short list of contemporary Latino writers who use magical realism in their works would include the Cuban-American writer Cristina García and Dominican-American writers like Angie Cruz, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Nelly Rosario.

3. I am deliberately using the mass media nickname rather than the standard literary acronym of *sf* for science fiction in order to be consistent with the way that Díaz refers to the genre in his novel.

4. This is clearly a realization based on his own personal experience. Díaz himself admits that he grew up reading what other people might dismiss as trash: “[A]s a child, my entire love of reading and of literature was built on what most people would consider crap. I used to read comic books. I used to read really kind of nonsense books” (Lewis). This reading obviously paid off in the wealth of metaphors they inspired in his own writing, the alternate cultural traditions they exposed him to, and in the formation of what Díaz describes as “the most basic quarry stone” of his writing (Lewis).

5. The narrator actually mentions “McOndo” early in the novel during his discussion of “zafa,” the counter-spell sometimes used to ward off the *fukú*: “It used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo” (7). The line, which also clearly makes reference to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, leaves little doubt as to Díaz’s familiarity with the place of Fuguet’s work in the history of Latin American literature.

Works Cited

- Carpentier, Alejo. *The Kingdom of This World*. Trans. Harriet de Onís. New York: Noonday, 1957. Print.
- . “On the Marvelous Real in America.” *Magical Realism*. Ed. Lois P. Zamora and Wendy Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 75–88. Print.

- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.
- Fuguet, Alberto. "I Am Not a Magic Realist!" *Salon*. 11 June 1997. Web. 20 Aug. 2009.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper, 1970. Print.
- . "The Solitude of Latin America." Nobel Lecture. 8 Dec. 1982. *NobelPrize.org*. The Nobel Foundation, 1982. Web. 20 Aug. 2009.
- Lewis, Marina. "Interview with Junot Díaz." *Other Voices* 36 (2002). Web. 21 Aug. 2009. <http://www.webdelsol.com/Other_Voices/DiazInt.htm>.
- "Magic Realism." *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Ed. Chris Baldick: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Scott, A. O. "Dreaming in Spanglish." *The New York Times Book Review*. 30 Sept. 2007. Web. 11 Nov. 2008.
- Wessells, Henry. "A Short and Contentious Note about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz." *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 20.238 (2008): 10–11. Print.

Abstract

While Junot Díaz's most recent novel has ties with a larger tradition of magical realist writing in Latin America, his frequent allusions to a largely British and American tradition of fantasy, sf, and comic books make *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* an original and subversive revision of that genre that reflects the variety of cultural influences that define the lives of his Dominican-American characters both in the DR and the US in the second half of the twentieth century. Díaz's approach creates what I am calling a "comic book realism," a new kind of mixed genre that highlights the extent to which his young protagonists grasp their reality through popular cultural forms, like comic books, which influence them as much as if not more than older traditional Dominican beliefs in magic.

Copyright of Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts is the property of International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Magical Realism and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. by Junot Diaz. Buy Study Guide. Through Díaz's constant reference to what he refers to as Genre (fantasy, science fiction, and comic books), Díaz not only alludes to texts from those genres, but he integrates their magical natures into his novel. Interestingly, Díaz's use of these genres also brings a mix of United States pop culture into a story that is nominally Dominican, and the mix of the two emphasizes the diaspora aspect of the story. Oscar, Yunior, Belicia, and Lola are all caught between the two different worlds, and Yunior's style of narration captures both discourses.