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 “unusually multiverse of styles and genres” which includes “a young-adult melodrama shaped 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

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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 Diaz’s narrative eclecticism. Although Wessells finds much to like about Diaz’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, Diaz primarily uses the genre as a bridge 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 Diaz’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 Diaz’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 as part of postmodern historical and cultural context. In particular, I will argue that Diaz’s mix of sf, fantasy, comic books, and gritty realism subversively reworks a strong tradition of magical realism in Latin American literature 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 Diaz’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 the fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the ‘realistic’ tone of objective realistic report” which is “associated chiefly with certain leading novelists of Central and South America, notably Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel Garcia Márquez” (“Magic Realism”). 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 realism. 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 novel La sombra del ciprés es图案, the voodoo doo practices and beliefs of the slave population in pre-independence Haiti 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

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native and authentic expression of the multicultural and historically fractured nations of Latin America. Carpenter 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 manifestos for magical realism:

> "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. While Carpentier stresses a shared Latin American cultural legacy in the US. While Carpentier stresses a shared Latin American cultural legacy 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 Carpenter, 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 Carpenter, then, Oscar self-consciously adopts what he perceives as the fantastic aspect 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

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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 feudal racial mixing [mestijaje], 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 Diaz'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. While Carpentier stresses a shared Latin American cultural legacy in the US. While Carpentier stresses a shared Latin American cultural legacy 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 Carpenter, 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 Carpenter, then, Oscar self-consciously adopts what he perceives as the fantastic aspect 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

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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 Yuniya, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar’s love for fantasy and science fiction as “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] [banano] [banana]” to defend himself 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 science fiction 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” barely 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 transition to the US was anything but easy, 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 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 ancient and something ancestral”) [22], the “wrenching” 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 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 Yuniya, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar’s love for science fiction with something like disgust. 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 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 ancient and something ancestral”) [22], the “wrenching” 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, of course, fantasy serves as more than mere signs of orthodoxy in the novel; they are an integral aspect of Diaz’s particular vision of Dominican and Dominican-American reality and history. By incorporating them into his novel, Diaz suggests that the comic book and sf 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. from the camp […] […] 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 Diaz the first person to recognize the rich metaphorical possibilities that of offers for dealing with cultural otherness. In his book on the genre, Adam Roberts argues that all of us 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. Yunior, 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 Yunior 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 Yunior has grown up with the genres almost as much

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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 own animizing 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 opiniated 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. Diaz selectively uses these genres to shape the very story he tells. Largely eschewing its more heroic elements, Diaz 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, add to a 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 world 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 world 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 “diminished[ed], like Galadriel after the temptation of the ring,” by her experiences, for example (219, 156). The point is that Diaz 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 marvellous in Diaz’s text hardly ever functions as a hopeful or positive alternative. Instead, Yunior’s frequent fantasy allusions mostly serve to reveal the world 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 undercut the more mythic elements in the story. When the narrator likens Trujillo to a comic book villain like “Darkseid,” a character 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 “diminished[ed], like Galadriel after the temptation of the ring,” by her experiences, for example (219, 156). The point is that Diaz 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 marvellous in Diaz’s text hardly ever functions as a hopeful or positive alternative. Instead, Yunior’s frequent fantasy allusions mostly serve to reveal the world the marvelous either no longer exists or where what remains of it has been forced into the service of evil.

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hit their target (the dreaded “Omega Effect”), he gives us a good sense of the dictator’s destructive efficiency (60). 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 not 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. 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, Belí, 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 valid, 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 Buddha, 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 luck just shook his swollen head. (190)

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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 converse 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 a metaphor to Oscar’s acceptance of his identity. As Díaz 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 descendants) in Latin America from the moment of their first encounter. For those who believe in it, only a curse like the fuki 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 fuki, 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 fuki as an open question. Despite numerous personal experiences of bad luck described in the novel that are also attributed to the curse, some examples of the small fuki 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 fuki 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 fuki. Indeed, during the course of the novel, the narrator suggests that Oscar probably would not believe the stories about fuki precisely because he was a “hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man” (6). The notion that the fuki, the other, and what they are is mutually exclusive “traditions” in Oscar’s mind is made further apparent on his first visit back to the DR, when he writes two of books but does not bother to find out more about the family curse he had often heard about (32). Clearly, the notion of what the fuki is responsible for is sometimes so amorphous and diffuse that it becomes comic in its trivality. This is particularly true with regards to the notion of the “small fuki,” 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 fuki 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 fuki 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)).

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Indeed, at the beginning of the novel, 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 a metaphor to Oscar’s acceptance of his identity. As Díaz 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 descendants) in Latin America from the moment of their first encounter. For those who believe in it, only a curse like the fuki 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 fuki, 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 fuki as an open question. Despite numerous personal experiences of bad luck described in the novel that are also attributed to the curse, some examples of the small fuki 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 fuki 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)).
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 convinced him to commit suicide. The notion that Oscar’s love for the speculative genres actually helped 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, Diaz seems more interested in exploring the way that this 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 convinced him to commit suicide. The notion that Oscar’s love for the speculative genres actually helped 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, Diaz 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, for next generation’s protagonist, 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 Yurián’s affection for st, Lola’s Goth identity is a significant reflection of the novel “culture” that she will seek to redefine and subvert in her own stories. As new “Americans,” with 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 does not make 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 pretexts that it is giving us an authentic and transparent view of a truly marvelous and “wonderful” reality, a pretext that led writers like Carpentier to deny or play down its reliance on literary convention, the novel “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 her key frames of reference, for example, for next generation’s protagonist, 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 Yurián’s affection for st, Lola’s Goth identity is a significant reflection of the novel “culture” that she will seek to redefine and subvert in her own stories. As new “Americans,” with 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 does not make popular culture serves as a rich and important resource for these first-generation children.4

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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-post-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 subvertively 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 fúki 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 bari

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 use of 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, Diaz 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 shly questions and pokes fun at that very perspective. While magic may no longer exist in "reality" for a writer like Diaz, 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 writers Cristina García and Dominican-American writers like Angie Cruz, Lois Mattitza Pérez, and Nelly Rosario.
3. I am deliberately using the mass media nickname rather than the standard literary acronym of for science fiction in order to be consistent with the way that Diaz refers to the genre in his novel.
4. This is clearly a realization based on his own personal experience. Diaz himself admits that he grew up reading what other people might dismiss as trash: "[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 Diaz 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 "tala," 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 Mocando than in McOndo" (7). The line, which also clearly makes reference to One Hundred Years of Solitude, leaves little doubt as to Diaz’s familiarity with the place of Pugat’s work in the history of Latin American literature.

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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 US and in 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.


García Márquez, Gabriel. One Hundred Years of Solitude. Trans. Gregory Rabassa.


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Magical Realism and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. 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.