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 “fúkú,” 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 this story. A. O. Scott, for example, describes the novel as an “untry 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 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 piste 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 badge for Oscar's dead 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 any classification procedure. 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 in its proper 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. 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 '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"). 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 source of inspiration for these writers who see 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
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 Diaz’s novel: “What,” he asks, “is more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Añezí?” (6). Oscar’s question suggests that the Dominican Republic must also share in what García Márquez has described as the “outrused 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 causes. As a result, this paper will consider 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 ever since the work of Latino authors writing in the US. 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 by Oscar’s query or even by Díaz’s tone (“The Solitude”). “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).

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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 Yunior, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar’s 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 atavistic, something aboriginal”) and his literary tastes, 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 Yunior, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar’s 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 atavistic, something aboriginal”) and his literary tastes, 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 Yunior, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar’s 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 atavistic, something aboriginal”) and his literary tastes, 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 Yunior, the family friend who serves as the main narrator of the novel, treat Oscar’s 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 atavistic, something aboriginal”) and his literary tastes, 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 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 world offers a wealth of parallels for the challenges faced by any Dominican-American who does not feel quite at home on either side of that hysphen (“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, Diaz notes that these genres share some basic homology with the Dominican experience. In at least one interview, Diaz elaborates on this rich connection:

sometimes the only way to describe these lived moments—the surreality and it-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 same world provides many useful metaphors for the immigrant experience in general. In at least one interview, Diaz elaborates on this rich connection:

Nor is Diaz 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 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 (“moflot”) 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 Nor is Diaz 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 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).
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 world
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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: simultaneously pokes fun at widespread Dominican beliefs about the seemingly supernatural extent of the dictator’s power. Diaz 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 Diaz’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 wondrous 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 Carpenter’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. 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, Bel, 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 doubtfull.

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 too plain, too beautiful. Gold-lined eyes that reached through you, not so much judgment or reproach but for something far scarier. They stared at each other—it was not just a Buddha, he in total disbelief—and then the whistle blow 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 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 uncecently 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 passages that are far from precise, it is never absolutely clear where the fukú comes from, how it operates, or whether exactly is cursed, or who has done the cursing and why. Indeed, the notion of the fukú as the real existence of fukú 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 fukú. Some examples of 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 on the part of the narrator suggests that Oscar probably would not believe the stories about fukú precisely because he was a "hardcore sci-fi and fantasy fan" (6). The notion that 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 fukú. 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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. "Wrote 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, the book's author even writes a book that explains the fukú and its place in his family once and for all (333–34). Ironically, however, the book itself never arrives 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.

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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, Yunior’s grandmother, 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 telefowels (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” these next generation Dominicans 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.

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 Carpenter to deny or play down its reliance on literary convention, the “comic book realism” I have been describing flauts 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, Yunior 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.

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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 of his own upbringing in modern Chile, he 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. Like Fuguet, the young characters in Óscar 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 Óscar’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 Óscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Bel was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary. Powerful elder magic. Three barri
er shields against the Eye. Backed by a six-mile plinth of prayer. (329)

Along with the “azabaches,” traditional Dominican bracelets that are sup
posed to function as charms against bad luck, Yunair 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

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Abstract
While Junot Díaz's most recent novel has ties with a larger tradition of magical realism 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.

Abstract
While Junot Díaz's most recent novel has ties with a larger tradition of magical realism 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.
Junot Díaz's wondrous first novel is so original it can only be described as Mario Vargas Llosa meets Star Trek meets David Foster Wallace meets Kanye West. Continue reading the main story. Junot Díaz's Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a wondrous, not-so-brief first novel that is so original it can only be described as Mario Vargas Llosa meets Star Trek meets David Foster Wallace meets Kanye West. An extraordinarily vibrant book that's fueled by adrenaline-powered prose, it's confidently steered through several decades of history by a madcap, magpie voice that's equally at home talking about Tolkien and Trujillo, anime movies and ancient Dominican curses, sexual shenanigans at Rutgers University and secret police raids in Santo Domingo. La novela dominicana/yankee del escritor Junot Díaz La Maravillosa Vida Breve de Oscar Wao fue publicada en el año 2007 por la editorial Alfaguara. Como señala Victor Barrera Enderle en su artículo sobre la alfaguarización de la literatura hispanoamericana, A look at comic-book culture in Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao with specific reference to Alan Moore's Watchmen. Save to Library. Download. Junot Díaz's first book, Drown (1996), detailed the lives of children in the Dominican Republic and, later, of young men and their difficult parents in New Jersey's immigrant ghettos. When first published, it was widely seen as marking the arrival of a young writer to be reckoned with. But there was less agreement about what kind of writer Díaz was. Although it was laid out as a story collection, Drown wasn't billed as such by its publishers. Some reviewers saw it as being close to reportage, others as a fragmentary autobiographical novel. It could also be seen as belonging to