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‘The Sick Swollen Heart of This Land’: Pharmacogenomics, Racial Medicine and Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt*

In the summer of 2015, a worldwide media storm erupted after the parents of Rachel Dolezal, a civil rights activist and Professor of Africana Studies in Washington State in the United States, gave an interview in which they claimed that their daughter had been posing as a black woman when she was in fact white. Wearing tanning lotion and afro hair weaves, Dolezal had presented as black to her colleagues, students and fellow officers at her local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, of which she was president. Following a television interview in which she was asked whether she was African American, Dolezal appeared on NBC news and confirmed that she identified as black and with ‘the black experience.’¹ The case garnered international attention as commentators and critics argued over whether choosing a race was something that it was ethical, or indeed possible, to do. A minority supported Dolezal as a ‘transracial’ woman who had proved that race is ultimately a fiction, but most condemned her as participating in a form of black-face, pointing to the fact that the idea of being transracial and the ability to choose a racial identity are options only really open to white people. Among the many debates and discussions about Dolezal which occurred across various fora, a meme appeared which pictured Dolezal with the caption ‘But doc we black people need Bidil’.

Designed as a humorous comment on the case, the meme references a drug, BiDil, which was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2004 for the treatment of congestive heart failure exclusively in the African American population. The invention of the first-ever racially targeted drug (a combination of two pre-existing heart failure drugs isosorbide dinitrate and hydralazine) was reported widely in the media upon its approval, but the drug failed to gain widespread acceptance in the medical community in large part due to the controversy which surrounded its development. Based on a contested

Figure 2 Rachel Dolezal Meme. Anonymous, <http://www.quickmeme.com/p/3w42zi>.

statistic that heart failure rates were twice as high in black people as in white, the drug's developers located the cause of this disparity in biology, rather than taking account of what an editorial in *Nature Biotechnology* called the 'host of factors, including genetics, diet and lifestyle, social discrimination, economic inequality and even geographic location'² that a greater part of the medical community recognized as the cause of health inequities between black and white populations. While only a few years earlier the HGP had asserted that race had no genetic meaning, BiDiil seemed to affirm the opposite; that race was in fact a medically verified genetic reality. Indeed, its appearance in the Dolezal meme ten years after its approval reveals not only widespread public knowledge of the drug, but a public understanding of race as a genetic and medical fact. The joke of the meme works through appealing to the 'common

sense' of its viewer, who knows that BiDil is a drug only for African Americans and therefore not one that Dolezal could possibly take: her blackness is not real because it is not biological and so her identification as black is revealed to be not only a sham, but a potential danger to her own health. Anyone can look black, the meme suggests, but race is really an internal property, something which cannot necessarily be seen and, therefore, claimed by anybody, even if the social conditions were to be such that a white person might want to become black.

It is therefore somewhat ironic that it was in fact self-identification with a race which lay at the heart of the method used to develop BiDil. The original study, which re-examined data from existing clinical studies, was based on patients 'self-identified as black (defined as of African descent)'.³ An earlier linked study on the methodology of the BiDil trial noted that 'although ethnicity may not be accurately determined or have a true biologic basis, identifying patients by ethnicity does select a group of individuals who have some characteristics in common'.⁴ The researchers identified 'African-American ethnicity by patient self-identification' because this was 'the method used in other studies in which the impact of ethnicity was analyzed'.⁵ BiDil thus emerged from a medical understanding of race not as biological essence, but as a proxy for unknown genetic markers which, its proponents argued, were clustered in self-identified black populations but might well also be found in white populations. Until researchers could 'identify genotypic and phenotypic characteristics that would transcend racial or ethnic categories',⁶ BiDil, it was argued, should be prescribed on the basis that 'the drug is saving lives in a large and clearly identifiable black population'.⁷ The pitfalls of using such a loose and ultimately 'unscientific' methodology have been well-documented. A 2003 study found that prospective patients of race-based medicine do not have complete knowledge of their ancestry and that 'the ability to identify one's geographic ancestry in a way that rules out recent admixture and provides a homogeneous background for drug prescription or diagnosis is not reliable with a proportion of the population that is large enough to be of relevance in designing medical policy'.⁸ As Jonathan Kahn contends, the relationship between skin colour or physical appearance and genetic ancestry is unstable, and while self-reporting – a fundamentally subjective social practice – may capture valuable social variables that affect health, it is something which changes over time as people age and may fail to capture significant variation in biological ancestry.⁹ Dolezal's identification as black is a case in point.

The Dolezal meme looks different in this light: what was no doubt intended as an off-the-cuff joke about race reveals a chasm between the public understanding

of BiDil and the scientific reasoning upon which its development was based. Dolezal could, in fact, be a viable candidate for BiDil because there was no genetic basis for the drug. Despite being presented as a 'path-breaking example of the coming age of pharmacogenomics ... [BiDil] is not a pharmacogenomic drug', Kahn notes, as 'the mechanism of action by which it appears to have a beneficial effect on heart failure patients is unknown'.¹⁰ Far from being based on specific genetic markers, which might correlate to a particular racial group, there were no definitive biological traits that BiDil could be linked to. Yet the public's (mis)understanding that BiDil is based on a genetic understanding of race is unsurprising, given that the original acknowledgement by the drug's developers – that race does not have a true biologic basis – was largely erased once BiDil was approved by the FDA. Instead, the connection between race and genetics was, as Sarah Blacker has argued, 'taken up in the social world untranslated'.¹¹ This lack of translation was something of a deliberate strategy on the part of NitroMed, the pharmaceutical company which developed BiDil, because their marketing of the drug relied on obscuring the complexities and ultimately incoherence of race in pharmacogenetics in favour of a narrative which represented racial health inequalities as what Blacker describes as 'naturalized biological categories that are understood as inevitable'.¹² Kahn has shown in detail how BiDil was transformed from a drug presented as suitable for patients of all races (which failed to gain the approval of the FDA because the statistics on which it was based did not meet FDA standards) into a black drug because 'race continues to have a commercial value in differentiating products in a crowded biomedical marketplace' and 'racial identity itself is becoming a patentable commodity'.¹³ Locating BiDil as part of a wider revolution in personalized medicine, NitroMed harnessed the support of black organizations including the Association of Black Cardiologists and the NAACP, to target African Americans and present the drug as a means of empowering a community historically exploited and left behind by medicine.¹⁴ Celebrated in trade magazines as a racially targeted marketing success story,¹⁵ this marketing strategy presented BiDil as an anti-racist invention, a drug which gave black patients power, and, as was argued at the FDA meeting at which it was approved, a drug which could act as a sign of the American government's intention to right racial wrongs.¹⁶ This anti-racist framing made some scientists uneasy; it was argued that the drug represented 'the primacy of political correctness over science' and that the FDA might have 'felt it should take the path of affirmative ethnic drug approval in the face of political pressure'.¹⁷ Yet BiDil's advocates used similar reasoning to defend it: for Jay Cohn, one of the lead medical researchers involved in the study, opponents

of the drug who objected to it on the basis that it re-inscribed race as biological were using 'political correctness' to deprive black patients of effective therapy.¹⁸ As in the case of the HGDP, those advocating for a racialized understanding of genetics through BiDil invoked anti-racist reasoning to support their views, leading to a degree of public acceptance and support for the drug which could be used for commercial ends.

However BiDil was a commercial failure: costing seven times more than the two generic drugs of which it consisted, medical insurance companies were reluctant to pay for it while many doctors remained unconvinced about the rationale and motivations behind it.¹⁹ NitroMed, in focusing its marketing on winning over black patients and communities, also failed to recognize that doctors might not listen to their black patients in the same way as they did their white patients.²⁰ Yet despite its lack of commercial success, which eventually caused NitroMed to fold (NitroMed ceased operations in 2011, selling BiDil to Arbor pharmaceuticals through which the drug is still available as of May 2019), BiDil left a significant legacy. It legitimized the use of racial categories in medicine and the idea that specific genetic markers could be linked to particular races, while simultaneously underscoring how fragile, unstable and incoherent race becomes in that context where it is accepted and worked with even though there were no justifiable medical or scientific grounds for doing so. In some ways the attempt to racialize heart disease that BiDil represented was not new. As Anne Pollock has shown, racial thinking had been present in cardiology since the discipline's founding, and the idea of race itself has been shaped by medical practice across a long period of time.²¹ Another recent study of race in medicine, Lundy Braun's *Breathing Race into the Machine*, has demonstrated how, in the case of lung capacity, the idea of racial difference became embedded in the machinery used to measure lung function, with predictably negative results for the health of black populations.²² What distinguished BiDil, however, was its branding. BiDil not only suggested that there was an association between race and genetic difference but branded race itself as the condition to be treated, and made race the disease; as drug companies began to strategically brand certain medical conditions, in the case of BiDil, race itself became a condition to be addressed through targeted intervention and advertising.²³

Colson Whitehead's 2006 novel *Apex Hides the Hurt* satirizes the racialization of medicine in the United States as it explores the consequences for African Americans of the conflation of business interests and medical science in the name of racial justice. The novel's protagonist is an unnamed African American man who works as a nomenclature consultant – his job is to name or to re-brand

commercial products, anything from drugs developed in the pharmaceutical business to children's toys, a job he does very successfully, winning many awards. His crowning achievement is the name he gives to a new range of bandages – Apex – which have been designed in a range of colours to match the skin-tone of their wearers, marketed with the tagline 'Apex Hides the Hurt'.²⁴ Increasingly disillusioned with his profession, the protagonist stubs his toe in his apartment, and uses one of the plasters he has named, obscuring his wound which continues to fester due to repeated and unexplained toe stubbings and which eventually develops into a serious infection after he steps in some mud near a pig farm on an away day with his colleagues. Unaware of its seriousness due to the Apex, he eventually collapses and is forced to have his toe amputated in hospital. The novel's narrative moves between the before and after of the amputation. After a long and lonely convalescence, the protagonist agrees to take on a new job, the renaming of a small town, to which he travels in order to talk to its residents and to determine what it should be called.

Whitehead's novel is about the creation of meaning through naming, the power that naming wields, and *Apex Hides the Hurt* explores how things from commercial products, to towns, to people themselves are variously made to signify in relation to the names they are given. Whitehead has said that the inspiration for the novel came from his reading of an article in the mid-1990s in the *New York Times* about the naming of Prozac and the profession of pharmaceutical naming,²⁵ and has also stated that the novel is about 'certain forms of multicultural cheerleading [which] are as susceptible to corruption as capitalist boosterism and frontier idealism, two other systems I talk about in *Apex*'.²⁶ This chapter argues that *Apex Hides the Hurt* examines the commercialization both of medicine and of multiculturalism through the novel's imaginary medical aid Apex, the marketing of which relies on the fact that, as in the case of BiDil, the meaning of race and racial identity is nebulous, and the many ways it signifies can be employed to create an aura of certainty and legitimacy where none exists. What Whitehead demonstrates is that where once race was widely held to be grounded in biology, new developments in genetics (most prominently the Human Genome Project), which have asserted that race is not genetic, mean that race must now be signified through language, and this is something that medical science and its marketing rely upon. The novel explores how race is, as Stuart Hall theorized, a floating signifier, and its lack of a fixed signified, the inability for it to be grounded in genetics (as was demonstrated in the case of BiDil), means that it is language, in particular naming, which becomes the primary mode through which racial meaning can be created and exploited.

Making naming the new ‘science’ of race, the novel works as a kind of allegory about racial medicines such as BiDil, as it considers what happens when people are encouraged by medical science to self-identity with something which has no clear or comprehensible meaning, with a proxy for the unknown which is, in essence, biofictional – race. Buying into the racial identities signified by the words and images of medical marketing results, in the novel, not in better health but in illness; race literally becomes the disease in *Apex* as the protagonist’s mysterious physical and mental illness manifest as a response to his gradual realization that his blackness has been leeched of any meaningful significance by the world of commerce. Recovery from his illness is only possible by restoring the links between race, racism and American history, by acknowledging the historical origins of names and language and their power to signify in the present. While this process of restoration is most overtly carried out in the protagonist’s investigations into the black history of Winthrop, the town he is sent to rename, this chapter explores how Whitehead also suggests that a comparable form of historical recovery might also be necessary in medicine. The protagonist’s illness bears striking resemblance to the imaginary disease Drapetomania which was hypothesized by doctor and racial scientist Samuel Cartwright in 1851. The novel Signifies, in the tradition of African American writing as theorized by Henry Louis Gates, on this earlier racial science, intertextually evoking and revising Cartwright’s theory as it links that theory to modern racial medicine. In this way Whitehead satirizes the purportedly anti-racist import of medicines such as BiDil, but also underscores how pharmacogenetics’ reliance on language and linguistic signification to make race mean has a precedent in the overtly fictional ways in which race was made disease in the racist medicine of the era of chattel slavery. By invoking Cartwright’s ludicrous Drapetomania hypothesis, Whitehead not only parodies white scientific racism, through the tradition of black Signification, but foregrounds the long history of the biofictional constructions of race which have shaped, and continue to shape, the public understanding of blackness.

The science of marketing race

The marketing, operation and effects of *Apex*, the ‘multicultural bandage’²⁷ that is named by the protagonist of *Apex Hides the Hurt*, bear many resemblances to BiDil. Invented by a pharmaceutical company wanting to sell more bandages, *Apex*, like BiDil, re-purposes an existing treatment by racializing it in such a way as to make race a matter of consumer choice: ‘The boxes didn’t say Sri

Lankan, Latino, or Viking. The packages spoke for themselves. The people chose themselves and in that way perhaps he had named a mirror. In pharmacies you started to see *that motion* – folks placing their hands against the box to see if the shade in the little window matched their skin.²⁸ Invoking racial difference without explicitly naming it, Apex capitalizes on social understandings of race as it encourages people to essentially choose their own medicine on the basis of how they self-identify – exactly the move encouraged by the makers of BiDil. Such self-identification is encouraged through a marketing campaign which is targeted at particular racial communities; ‘at Oglivy and Myrtle they knew the neighborhoods ... They knew the colors of clientele and zip codes and could ship boxes accordingly.’²⁹ The marketing campaign cynically situates Apex as a force for social good, its invention framed as a step towards inclusivity and diversity, as Whitehead comically shows how the language and imagery of multiculturalism come to be used for corporate ends; ‘in the advertising, multicultural children skinned knees, revealing the blood underneath, the commonality of wound, they were all brothers now, and multicultural bandages were affixed to red boo-boos. United in polychromic harmony, in injury, with our individual differences respected, eventually all healed beneath Apex.’³⁰ Racial difference becomes a branded, corporatized story to be told as a way of personalizing medicine while maintaining a broad, commercial appeal. Apex is a product which everyone, from people in ‘poor countries’ to ‘school nurses of integrated elementaries’ can use so not, as the protagonist puts it using his typical wordplay, to add ‘insult to injury.’³¹ While Apex makes clear that the pink flesh tones of standard plasters reflect a medical system which by default caters to whiteness, the solution it creates is not one interested in addressing inherent racisms or inequalities within medicine. Rather, just as the social and environmental causes of heart failure and differential rates thereof between white and black populations were overlooked by those emphasizing genetic difference through the promotion of BiDil, the advertising of Apex decontextualizes pain and makes it a universal experience, something processed by everyone in the same way despite the racial difference for which it also caters. This is ultimately a move which fails to address the causes of pain and illness, instead covering them over, hiding, rather than confronting, the hurt: ‘the deep psychic wounds of history and the more recent gashes ripped by the present, all of these could be covered by this wonderful, unnamed multicultural adhesive bandage. It erased. Huzzah!’³²

While the protagonist’s firm works on behalf of pharmaceutical companies, there is no discussion of medical science in the novel as Whitehead suggests that medicine and marketing have become one and the same, medical science

subsumed by, if not indistinguishable from, the marketing strategies of the drug companies which often fund it. In the world of the novel it is marketing which is now scientific, and the protagonist understands his job in scientific terms: describing how 'he came up with the names' on the first page of the novel, we are told that 'he exposed them to high temperatures for extended periods of time. Sometimes consonants broke off and left angry vowels on the laboratory tables. How else was he to know if they were ready for what the world had in store for them?'³³ The scientific method which matters is not that which creates the product itself but the method by which it is named. When names go wrong and start to lose their intended significations, 'it was time for the neologists to return to their laboratories',³⁴ and after he becomes ill and is no longer able to work, 'he had this suspicion that all he had inside himself now were Frankenstein names, lumbering creatures stitched together from glottal stops and sibilants, angry unspellable misfits suitable only for the monstrous. Names that were now his kin.'³⁵ Like Frankenstein, he takes little responsibility for releasing 'the logos, his former charges'³⁶ into the world; naming and marketing are not enterprises concerned with human consequences, something underscored by the colonial imagery in which the protagonist also conceives of himself and his 'science'. He imagines his inspiration to come from 'his interior' composed of 'rocks and mountain ranges ... strange flora, saplings that curtsied eccentrically, low shrubs that extended bizarre fronds', 'a territory within himself' from which 'he would bring back specimens to the old world. These most excellent dispatches. His names.'³⁷ The invention of Apex is 'a terrain so far uncharted. Pith helmets necessary.'³⁸ Multinational commerce and to a degree medicine, Whitehead suggests, are neo-colonial in so far as their promise of anti-racist liberation is simply a meaning created by the marketing of products which ironically reproduce the very things they disavow. Yet the protagonist can think of his work in these terms, apparently without any irony, precisely because his job is to control the meanings of imagery and phrases so that they only signify in particular, ahistorical and ultimately superficial ways.

For the protagonist's science is semiotics, 'the science of communication studied through the interpretation of signs and symbols as they operate in various fields, esp. language.'³⁹ His job is to manipulate the meaning of signs by coming up with signifiers (names like Apex) which can be attached to referents (in the case of Apex, multi-coloured plasters) to create signifieds which go beyond the denotive: Apex does not simply signify a particular kind of plaster, but a benign form of multiculturalism and celebration of diversity, a connotation which is used to sell the product.⁴⁰ As he explains to a man he meets in a bar,

'I name things like new cars and toothbrushes and stuff like that so that they sound catchy. You have some kind of insurance policy to reassure people or make them less depressed so they can accept the world. Well you need a reassuring name that will make them believe in the insurance policy'.⁴¹ The names he gives must signify the objects or products themselves but also a particular feeling; the actual meaning of words is less important than how they sound, the associations they convey and the emotions they provoke. Pondering on the name 'New Prospera' that has been suggested by his old firm as the new name for the town he is tasked with naming, the protagonist thinks that Prospera 'Had that romance-language armature, he was pretty sure it was a Spanish or Italian word for something. What it meant in those languages was unimportant; what was important was how it resonated here. The lilting *a* at the end like a rung up to wealth and affluence, take a step. A glamorous Old World cape draped over the bony shoulders of prosaic *prosperity*'.⁴² While the relationship between the names and their objects is very clearly arbitrary in a Saussurean sense – the name Apex and bandages have no intrinsic relationship to each other – at the same time the protagonist recognizes that once established as signs the signifier/signified relation has long-lasting cultural power and significance; 'some might say a rose by any other name but he didn't go in for that kind of crap ... A rose by any other name would wilt fast, smell like bitter almonds, God help you if the thorns broke the skin'.⁴³

Whitehead's novel suggests that semiotics is not only responsible for the commercial success of medicines but that, in the case of Apex (and following from this BiDil), language is integral to the way race functions and signifies in medicine itself. Whitehead's protagonist exploits but also grapples with the fact that race is, in Stuart Hall's terms, a 'floating signifier', a term which has no fixed or definitive signified. Noting how biological definitions of race have been debunked, and how black is not a genetic category, Hall explains that these associations nevertheless remain because

race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its making meaning practices. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection on contracting new ones, to the endless process of being constantly re-signified, made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time.⁴⁴

There is nothing fixed that is signified by the signifier 'race' with the result that the meaning of race is always slippery, shifting and changing; race 'cannot be secured in its meaning', which is what, traditionally, science has attempted to achieve. For Hall, understanding race as operating primarily like a language is the opposite of a scientific, physiological understanding of race – 'to say that race is a discursive category recognizes that all attempts to ground this concept scientifically, to locate differences between the races, on what one might call scientific, biological, or genetic grounds, have been largely shown to be untenable'.⁴⁵ Yet what Whitehead suggests is that, ironically, it is an understanding of race as floating signifier (rather than as biologically grounded reality) which is now being utilized in the interlinked development and promotion of racial medicine. Tacitly recognizing the pitfalls – social, political and scientific – of explicitly claiming race as genetic, Apex exploits the lack of a concrete signified for race by invoking the ideas associated with and clustered around it; mainly bodily and physical appearance, in particular skin colour, but also difference, diversity, identity, biology and language. The result is that 'it was hard to argue against the utility of an adhesive bandage and in those early days of Apex, he, like many citizens, found it near impossible to contradict the reasoning of the multicultural bandage'.⁴⁶ Its reasoning cannot be contradicted because there is nothing definitive or fixed against which it can be measured or judged; always being re-signified and made to mean something different, Apex ironically capitalizes on race's lack of concrete biological grounding by making race a floating signifier.

The protagonist slowly begins to recognize that not only is race a floating signifier, but that it is a signifier which itself takes many forms and has gone through many iterations precisely because its signified is not fixed. He begins to understand that the names he gives to things obscure more than they reveal, a revelation which crystalizes around the idea of what Apex does, 'a name that got to the heart of the thing – that would be miraculous. But he never got to the heart of the thing, he just slapped a bandage on it to keep the pus in'.⁴⁷ This is the work of racial categorization: it attempts to name and identify people but can only ever do so in crude and ultimately harmful ways because identity cannot be contained or defined by a signifier that has no definitive signified. As he digs deeper into the history of Winthrop, the shifting nature of racial signifiers themselves is brought directly into view:

Colored. The sliver of himself still in tune with marketing shivered each time Gertrude used the word colored. He kept stubbing his toe on it. As it were. Colored, Negro, Afro-American, African American. She was a few iterations

behind the times. Not that you could keep up, anyway. Every couple of years someone came up with something that got us an inch closer to the truth. Bit by bit we crept along. As if that thing we believed to be approaching actually existed.⁴⁸

These attempts to name something that does not really exist – racial difference – underscore the linguistic, rather than biological, ways in which race is brought into being, and thus ultimately the fictional nature of the concept of race itself. The novel suggests that racial marketing exploits this, with the result that medicine comes to be more reliant on language and signification to establish racial meaning, than on genetics. This was certainly the case with BiDil where, having acknowledged there to be no genetic basis for race, the drug's developers then utilized the slipperiness of signifier and signified to obscure the fact: the language of the patent for BiDil used the terms 'black' and 'African American' interchangeably,⁴⁹ and its reliance on self-identification operated as a 'fig leaf that covers a broad array of implicitly biologized conceptions of race.'⁵⁰ *Apex Hides the Hurt* suggests that recognizing the raced body as, in Hall's terms, a schema composed of stories, anecdotes, metaphors and images, rather than as defined and determined by biology,⁵¹ has material, physiological effects. For the protagonist of the novel, looking 'behind false names, beneath the skin we gave them', behind skin colour and appearance in the case of the marketing of race (which reveals that race cannot be biologically grounded), results in a malaise that cannot easily be cured.

Signifyin(g) science: Historicizing race as illness

The protagonist's gradual realization that he has been involved in medicalizing and commercializing race as an identity which has no clear or definitive meaning makes him physically and mentally ill. His illness is seemingly mysterious, having no obvious or given cause; 'one day he stubbed his toe. In retrospect there was some inevitability tied up in said stubbing, so he came to believe that his toe wanted to be stubbed for reasons that were unknowable. Unnameable.'⁵² From the initial wound, the protagonist continues to hurt himself; 'the toe had been strangely magnetized by injury so that whenever there was something in the vicinity with stubbing polarity, his toe was immediately drawn to it',⁵³ in what appears as a case of self-harm, something which he acknowledges only by detaching himself from that part of his body; 'he decided his toe had developed an abuse pathology, and kept returning to the hurt as if one day it would place

the pain in context.⁵⁴ After ignoring the injury he becomes 'weak and feverish,'⁵⁵ coughing, shuddering and panting until he collapses and is taken to hospital to have the toe amputated. Yet this does not cure his illness; once out of hospital 'his foot throbbed in phantom pain' and he is left with a limp and 'it had been brought to his attention that his limp was psychosomatic.'⁵⁶

His self-inflicted toe injury partly represents an underlying desire to feel something in the emotionless, atomized life he leads – an individualized existence which is the result of his adherence to the ideals of the marketing business which instrumentalizes emotion for commercial ends. The protagonist has no real identity; not only does he have no name, but little information is given about his past or family life, other than the fact that he attended an Ivy League university called Quincy. Instead, the beginning of his story is a kind of blankness; 'he had no purpose, he had no vocation. He had a job, which he lost, and so he answered the ad in the paper.'⁵⁷ This matter-of-fact tone is the product of a personality that is emotionally detached: he cannot feel his own emotions and denies them, or only sees them through the lens of marketing; 'he hadn't met that special someone but he went out a lot, made reservations at approved restaurants. Occasionally he extended a hand across the table to spark a soulful gaze. Friends of his set him up with their sisters. He had a kind of vibe he projected. Wage earning. Self-actualizing. Nice catch.'⁵⁸ The protagonist takes his boss's description of him 'you *are* the product'⁵⁹ to heart. His concern lies more with perception than with true feeling; 'when it came to gifts, it was the appearance of thought that counts,'⁶⁰ in a world where he sees everything as sellable; just before his toe becomes infected as he walks in the countryside, 'for a few minutes he allowed himself to be swayed by the sales pitch of nature.'⁶¹ His saturation in marketing means that his whole sense of self is hollow if not non-existent, and his illness emerges as a response to the branding of self – symbolized by his use of Apex which while purportedly covering hurt (through personalized branding) ultimately causes him more pain by allowing his wound to fester.

Yet Whitehead makes clear that the illness is primarily a manifestation of a racial identity crisis brought about not only by the lack of any definitive signified for race, but by the detachment of race from racism, of identity from history and of language from context, detachments that the world of marketing has encouraged and promoted. The depersonalization that results in his toe stubbing is caused by the repression and denial of black history, a history which is present but ignored in the language that he manipulates. From the '*Hey and Hey, man*'⁶² that he and his white colleagues greet each other with, to his blasé approach to working with them 'no skin off his back,'⁶³ the protagonist ironically ignores

the original signifieds of the language and phrases he uses. Once he arrives in Winthrop, however, the racial and racist associations of language become harder to ignore as he slowly begins to uncover the town's history. Originally founded by two freed slaves, the town's original name, Freedom, is changed soon after to that of the white, barbed-wire mogul Winthrop, who decides to settle there. Its present difficulties have arisen as Lucky Aberdeen, a millionaire software developer originally from the town, wants to change its name to New Prospera, but is opposed by the Winthrop family and the town's mayor Regina Goode, who is descended from one of the freed slave men and wants to revert to the name Freedom. The protagonist initially adopts his old way of thinking as he favours New Prospera, a name without historical or contextual significance, rejecting the name Freedom because he considers it 'so defiantly unimaginative as to approach a kind of moral weakness'.⁶⁴

Yet a momentary loss of balance which causes him to fall over forces him to reconsider, and he begins to understand how language signifies race and racialized history in ways which continue to determine relationships in the present. The newspaper reporter who interviews him about what he intends to call the town signifies the protagonist's blackness with the headline 'CONSULTANT VOWS TO "KEEP IT REAL"',⁶⁵ while Lucky asks his advice about a name for his new business venture without any apparent irony, 'Do you think Charred and Feathered would be a good name for a chicken joint?'⁶⁶ Lucky can only ask such a question because the violence of America's history of black enslavement has been all but erased by earlier forms of marketing. The Winthrop family, having made their fortune in barbed wire, fear the loss of the town's Winthrop name to the software millionaire, as the town is flooded with corporate chain stores, the Winthrop library becoming an Outfit Outlet clothing store, and the international food franchise the Admiral competing with the bar of the Winthrop hotel. Yet Whitehead suggests that these corporate brands are simply the modern-day heirs of the likes of Winthrop, which has operated much like a corporation, the library holding the official, heavily biased history of the town commissioned by the Winthrop family, while the hotel is run by a black couple who are directly descended from the town's first inhabitants and who only have two days off a year. A name that appears to represent tradition is in fact a cover for historic racial violence; 'maybe there were some Indians or something' Albie Winthrop muses, considering the origins of the town, 'but they didn't have a road'.⁶⁷ The protagonist comes to identify with the position of the freed slaves Goode and Field who founded the town (and whose names it is clear were not freely chosen) who understood that 'to give yourself a name is power. They will try to give you

a name and tell you who you are and try to make you into something else, and that is slavery'.⁶⁸ In ceding the power of naming to commerce, the protagonist has done willingly what Field and Goode were forced by Winthrop to do – give up an identity formed through self-determinism and self-naming, in favour of being named in a way which erases experience and history.

The treatment for the protagonist's illness is thus not a cheap bandage but a reckoning with language, and with the power of the naming, word-play, puns and double entendres that have characterized his sense of self. While the protagonist can only begin to recover from his illness by recovering the original significations of names and of language, by connecting his experience to that of former slaves Goode and Field, Whitehead also models an alternative mode of signification through which the linguistic and ultimately fictional forms of racialization – in particular that which is evident in contemporary racialized medicine – are brought to the fore. *Apex Hides the Hurt* Signifies in the tradition of African American writing as described by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates defined Signifyin(g) as a trope and sign of the Afro-American tradition, a form of double-voiced discourse characterized by 'the open-endedness of figurative language, rather than its single-minded closure'.⁶⁹ Consisting of formal revision and intertextuality, repetition and pastiche, Signifyin(g) defers meaning by altering the meaning of signification itself; 'whereas signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations'.⁷⁰ Such free play is the opposite of what Whitehead's protagonist has attempted to achieve in his work. He has aligned himself with what Gates terms 'white meaning'⁷¹ and as Stephanie Li argues, he has a 'conception of language as based upon singularity; there is only one signifier for each signified'.⁷² Yet the novel itself Signifies in the black tradition in various ways as several critics have noted. Howard Ramsby II links the unnamed, isolated and intelligent narrator of *Apex* to a long tradition of comparable narrators in the work of African American writers including Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed and Charles Johnson;⁷³ Li notes that *Apex* signifies on many tropes of *Invisible Man*;⁷⁴ while Leise writes that 'Whitehead's Signifyin(g) form reverberates with the language of slavery'.⁷⁵

However, the novel not only revises and Signifies on older African American writing and the familiar tropes of the tradition but Signifies on nineteenth-century medical science. The mysterious symptoms with which the protagonist suffers bear a close resemblance to the disease of Drapetomania which was invented in 1851 by doctor and racial scientist Samuel A. Cartwright. In a report

'On the diseases and physical peculiarities of the negro race' published in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, Cartwright set out what he saw as the 'anatomical and physiological differences between the negro and the white man'⁷⁶ before explaining 'the diseases of the negroes' including 'pulmonary congestions, pneumonia,'⁷⁷ 'fevers'⁷⁸ and 'negro consumption'⁷⁹ but also the mental illness 'Drapetomania, or the Disease Causing Slaves to Run Away'.⁸⁰ Taken from the Greek for 'runaway slave' and 'madness', Drapetomania, Cartwright hypothesized, could be diagnosed by the 'absconding from service', and was 'as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation'⁸¹ which could be cured by a method of governance that keeps the negro in the position of the 'submissive knee-bender', a position which he claimed was set out for black people in the Bible.⁸² 'They have only to be kept in that state, and treated like children, with care, kindness, attention and humanity, to prevent and cure them from running away',⁸³ Cartwright wrote; although it is frequently noted that the 'treatment' prescribed for runaway slaves was the removal of a toe.⁸⁴ In this way, Cartwright, who was one of the most widely known and respected physicians of the American south, laboured to defend the Southern contention that Negro slavery was morally right and socially and economically justifiable.⁸⁵

Whitehead's protagonist's toe injury is reminiscent of the injury sustained by Kunta Kinte who in Haley's *Roots* has half his foot cut off in order to stop him trying to escape. Yet it is also a sign that he is suffering from Cartwright's fictional disease Drapetomania. Just before the peak of his illness and his collapse, he attends the Identity Awards (the award ceremony for his industry), as he has been nominated for 'Best Name – Medical'. He runs away from the ceremony because he is feverish and on the verge of delirium, as not only his body but his mind becomes overwhelmed by his realization that names can be false, misleading and obscure the truth, 'What is the word, he asked himself, for that elusive thing? It was on the tip of his tongue. What is the name for that which is always beyond our grasp? What do you call *that which escapes*?'⁸⁶ The name he imagines being given to himself in this moment of confusion is particularly significant; 'he heard them call his name as he slipped out of the room. FUGITIVE'.⁸⁷ That the protagonist's desire to escape the superficial and damaging industry he has hitherto supported is made reminiscent of earlier African American attempts to escape slavery, and that both are conceived of as a kind of illness, is curious. Whitehead's comparison suggests that the protagonist is not only trying to escape his industry but his blackness – a 'condition' that he has ignored and emptied of signification but which cannot be escaped.⁸⁸ By Signifyin(g) on the way black people's desire for self-determination and freedom

was historically medicalized by racial science at this moment in the novel, Whitehead suggests that the historic pathologization of blackness continues to signify in African Americans' life experience; that the way race was made illness in the development of BiDil is merely a continuation of older attempts to medicate race, a repetition that the self-conscious Signifyin(g) technique is well placed to highlight. Gates notes that an aspect of Signifyin(g) in the nineteenth century was the parody and troping of white writing and racism by black authors – 'blacks ... were quite capable of establishing the necessary distance between themselves and their condition to signify upon white racism through parody'⁸⁹ and recent scholarship by Britt Rusert has shown how nineteenth-century African American writers responded to the race sciences of their day through practices of collage, assemblage and juxtaposition.⁹⁰ Frederick Douglass, who responded to the work of racial scientists including Josiah C. Nott, George Glidden, Louis Agassiz and Samuel George Morton in *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered* (1854), argued that there were several ways to approach the absurd assertion common among these thinkers that the negro was not a man; 'there are many ways to answer this denial. One is by ridicule; a second by denunciation; a third by argument.'⁹¹ Whitehead chooses all three; by comically Signifyin(g) on Drapetomania, Whitehead draws attention to this tradition of satirizing race science in African American writing, and positions himself, and *Apex*, in a comparable Signifying relation to contemporary racial medicine.

Whitehead's parody of racial medicine, in the Signifyin(g) tradition, calls attention to fictive traditions in science which have sought to shape public understanding of blackness. As Rusert puts it, 'by the 1850s, science and fiction often merged through the fantastical and bizarre claims of racial science'⁹² and Cartwright's Drapetomania in particular illuminates 'the site where antebellum racial science veered into the realm of fiction.'⁹³ *Apex Hides the Hurt* not only Signifies on earlier texts of racial science but on the relationship that these texts had to contemporaneous writing by African Americans. Rusert suggests that the 'science fictions of antebellum race science were simultaneously challenged by early black speculative fictions, which deployed science itself to imagine alternative histories of enslavement and freedom.'⁹⁴ *Apex Hides the Hurt* does something similar with the racial medicine of its day – the pharmacogenetic development of BiDil. By satirizing and Signifyin(g) on medicines like BiDil, Whitehead signals that not only are they the medical descendants of diseases such as Drapetomania and that the black body remains to a degree trapped by such biofictional creations, but that contemporary fiction itself can play a role in bringing those 'science fictions' to light, just as earlier African American fiction sought to do.

Identifying (with) blackness

While the novel reveals blackness to have been pathologized by medical science past and present, a pathologization from which the protagonist attempts to escape, the protagonist cannot escape the question of the meaning and value of blackness. How should a black person self-identify in a world where race has become a brand and been branded as illness? Is blackness a valid or useful way of (self)identifying when its biofictional shaping in medicine and beyond is ever present? These are questions with which Whitehead's protagonist must grapple during his convalescence in Winthrop, but they are also questions raised by BiDil. In basing the drug on people 'self-identified' as black, its developers set the tone for its marketing but also for its prescription; the drug encouraged black people to decide for themselves whether they needed it and in so doing made race, in Kahn's terms, 'an individual problem and a personal responsibility, and therefore of no concern to the political community at large'.⁹⁵ Operating much like personalized medicines where there is an onus on individuals to take responsibility for their own self-examination and self-improvement,⁹⁶ BiDil forced black patients to decide what their blackness meant in biological terms and to determine whether it had value in a medical context. The support that the drug received from black organizations and publics led some scientists and sociologists of science to argue that the drug's invocation of race could not be easily argued against. Francis Collins, writing in 2010 in a popular book on personalized medicine, stated that 'though we might ultimately hope to see race eliminated as a consideration in human society, an insistence on that outcome right now would cause us to ignore health disparities, and to offend many individuals for whom self-identified race is an important part of their personal identity'.⁹⁷ The belief of some black people in the identity that the drug exploited for commercial ends becomes the justification for the drug's deployment of race itself: Pollock contends that 'racialized medicine achieves its durability not from the power of racist ideology on the one hand or mechanistic understandings of bodies on the other, but because many people – in government, in social activism, in medicine, and beyond – have coalesced around it as a way to articulate their visions of what to do'.⁹⁸ She asks why scholars have focused on scientific and political critiques of race but have been 'reluctant to grapple with why prominent civil rights and black health actors have backed the drug'.⁹⁹ For Pollock the diverse positions adopted by black theorists and black organizations are complex,¹⁰⁰ and indeed studies have shown that black people are much more

ambivalent and divided over how to position themselves in relation to racial medicine than has sometimes been acknowledged.¹⁰¹

Apex Hides the Hurt suggests a non-homogenizing way black people might begin to position themselves within the fraught and contested landscape of racial medicine. Like those at whom BiDil is aimed, the protagonist is caught between the apparently competing poles of individualism and community: racialized medicine encourages a personalized approach to sickness based on a seemingly individualized and tailored solution, as it strategically invokes racial groupings and a homogenized black community. While the protagonist's illness is to a degree caused by his isolation from black history, Whitehead suggests that the solution does not lie in the straightforward identification with 'the black community' or blackness. For what the novel's protagonist ultimately uncovers is the complex and fractured history of the founding black community of the town he is tasked with renaming. On the verge of giving up on names altogether, 'they should have kept the place nameless'¹⁰² he thinks, he discovers a fourth possible name for the town – Struggle – which had been originally suggested by one of the town's two black founders but the existence of which has been erased. Struggle is the name suggested by Field, the suspicious and cautious man whom the town's first residents nickname 'the Dark'¹⁰³ due to the contrast between his temperament and that of his co-founder Goode, known as 'the Light'. Field 'didn't have anyone. He'd lost his family back on the plantation'¹⁰⁴ and advocates that the community avoid white people wherever possible, whereas religious Goode, as his name suggests, tries to see the positive and do his moral duty in every situation. The historical erasure of the suggested name Struggle in favour of Freedom (which is presented as the 'black' option for re-naming the town) simplifies the complexities and tensions within the black community, which the novel suggests has always been a site of contestation and difference.¹⁰⁵ The protagonist decides to name the town Struggle, and to identify with Field, not only to recover this lost history, but to signal the fact that black identity is a site of struggle; blackness is never (and has never been) unified or singular but shifts and evolves much like the signifier race itself. As Derek Maus has asserted, for the protagonist, listening to the Dark 'requires being open to more critical and less superficial interpretations of signs',¹⁰⁶ a way of reading blackness that Whitehead puts forward as a means of getting closer to 'the heart of the thing'.¹⁰⁷

It is this way of reading and understanding blackness which might speak to debates about the uses of race in pharmacogenomics and medicine. The

protagonist's eventual 'reading' of black history and community, which embraces the deferral of meaning that characterizes Gates's conception of Signification, suggests that attempts to pinpoint blackness in static terms are destined to fail. Moving beyond the limiting and circumscribed forms of identity offered up by brand consultants and by extension science, the protagonist comes to realize he will never be 'fixed' as his illness continues following his decision to name the town Struggle, 'his foot hurt more than ever'.¹⁰⁸ Black life is struggle, Whitehead suggests, an experience and identity characterized by ongoing suffering caused by racism past and present as well as the struggle for self-definition and struggle against the definitions and constraints that others attempt to impose on black people:

You call something by a name, you fix it in place. A thing or a person, it didn't matter – the name you gave it allowed you to draw a bead, take aim, shoot. But there was a flip side of calling something by the name you gave it – and that was wanting to be called by the name that you gave to yourself.¹⁰⁹

An understanding of race as an intrinsically plural, diverse and disparate narrative, as a site of contestation and struggle, might give those health professionals and scientists who would diagnose on the basis of skin colour pause, while enabling black people to resist the basic options presented to them and to look beyond what appears to be right or good or anti-racist in medicines like BiDil. While it is the lack of a clear definition of 'black' which is exploited in the development of race-based medicines, the solution appears to be not to fight for a singular or fixed definition, but to redefine and re-signify the multiplicities of blackness in ways which challenge the ahistorical and apolitical presentation of race in science. The following and final chapter of this book examines how a newer, emerging strand of genetic science – epigenetics – might offer the opportunity to do just this as it brings focus to the impact of racism (past and present) on the body, as a means of accounting for racial inequalities in health.