The Dark Side of Branding:
Language and the Real in Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006)

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The academic world is no stranger to branding: every few years new literary trends and movements are identified. Early 21st century American literature has thus often been defined as "post-postmodernist," a tendency largely marked by a resurgence of realism. Mary K. Holland has identified no less than twenty new brands of "realism" since the 1990s – from "dirty realism" to "traumatic realism" to "metafictive realism" (Holland 31-32). She suggests integrating the study of these new realisms in a wider exploration of the manners in which literature has attempted to account for the changing conceptions of reality, encompassing and confronting both canonic 19th century Realism and contemporary "poststructuralist realisms" (Holland 256). Such an approach would be especially useful in a perusal of Colson Whitehead's oeuvre. While his characteristic "genre-hopping," or revisiting of different literary conventions like the slave narrative (*The Underground Railroad*, 2016) or the zombie story (*Zone One*, 2011) often has a strong satirical dimension, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) can be considered as a full-fledged satire. This genre, however fanciful it might be, is a comment on social reality and remains ununderstandable without some knowledge of that reality. Moreover, *Apex* is a satire of language use in contemporary corporate America: it therefore specifically interrogates the entanglements between language and the real.

The protagonist, an unnamed African American nomenclature consultant, has been a victim of his own trade: his stroke of genius, the name for an adhesive bandage that fits the many skin tones of multicultural America – hence the slogan "Apex Hides the Hurt" – has ironically cost him an amputated toe and a subsequent breakdown. He merely covered the wound with the colored strip instead of having it treated. This storyline, developed in a series of flashbacks, may be symptomatic of the character's compromise with corporate culture at the expense of his physical and mental integrity as a black man. When he is asked, as part of a possible comeback, to arbitrate the rebranding of the town of Winthrop – an allusion, among other references, to John Winthrop, one of the Puritan Founding Fathers – the ad man faces both an onomastic and an existential challenge. The descendants of the former slaves who founded the town want the restoration of its original name, Freedom, while the last scion of the Winthrop family pleads for the *status quo ante*, and the new economic strongman, software millionaire Lucky Aberdeen, lobbies for New Prospera.

Naming, as it shapes and advertises identity, is a performative speech act of the utmost importance in both African American culture and, for totally different reasons, in the field of marketing. As such, it tends to contradict the Saussurian law of the arbitrariness of the sign, tipping the scales on the side of motivation, historical or mimetic. The final *nomen in machina* the protagonist comes up with both prolongs and questions established naming practices in their dual veiling and unveiling of reality.

After analyzing the satirical dimension of the novel and its confrontation with American corporate culture, this paper will draw on specific aspects of the philosophy of language to discuss the motivation of signs in relation to naming strategies and analyze the performatives, performances, and diverse conditions of felicity that naming implies. The former will be indebted in part to the legacy of Plato's *Cratylus* and branding manuals – strange bedfellows indeed; the latter will draw from J. L. Austin's speech act theory, as revisited by philosophers Sandra Laugier and Judith Butler. In both conceptions the real comes to dwell in language, either as a determining factor or as the product of a world-shaping activity. Since *Apex* is a fiction of naming, it provides an imaginary "actual" context for this verbal act. It can also describe the failed encounters between language and the real, the attempts at euphemizing or repressing reality, as well as the shattering irruptions of the real

within discourse. The text may feature different takes on the real, different brands of "realism" that may or may not be totalized into a coherent whole. This cannot but have a bearing on the conception of literature, and more specifically of African American literature, that is enacted in the novel's language.

Satirical Realism

Satire, broadly defined as a humorous or ironic criticism of the vices and follies of mankind, has a special relationship with extratextual reality. According to Derek Maus, satire, especially in the form of Menippean satire, has known a particular fortune under postmodernism, to the point that what used to be a genre in classical Antiquity, has become a "mode," *i.e.* an attitude to the world and the text, in the modern and postmodern age. Contrary to traditional satire, which is often underwritten by a normative viewpoint, the Menippean brand is characterized by its Harlequin-like variety of literary forms and genres, attacks on various philosophical ideas and attitudes to life, and strong hints at the limitations of human understanding (*Jesting* 54). The former genre belongs to the "generative" model of satire, while the latter often illustrates the "degenerative" model, ridiculing all hegemonies through the use of exaggeration or the grotesque (Dickson-Carr 17). An analysis of the satirical dimension of *Apex* can therefore be set within a long tradition that encompasses both postmodernism and its own potential "post". The novel also prolongs another rich tradition, that of African American satire, which Dickson-Carr places under the sign of the degenerative model, in its "unremitting iconoclasm, criticism of the current status of African American political and cultural trends, and indictment of specifically American forms of racism" (16). Some of the rhetorical strategies of black satire that pervade *Apex* are irony, *reductio ad absurdum*, and "Signifying," a vernacular language of masking and indirection developed as a survival strategy during slavery, which can be used in a variety of situations (28).

The satirical effect is based on the recognition of the extratextual elements that are the butt of criticism or ridicule, which in turn implies a shared social or ideological world. If satire essentially hollows out a space for the real within its linguistic utterance, its mode of insertion, especially if it has recourse to the deformations of caricature, tends to be allusive: it points to the outside world rather than describes it. A related strategy for the positing of "reality" in a satirical or parodic text is the

criticism or debunking of "illusion," whether that illusion is embodied in attitudes, systems of thought or "unrealistic" literary genres. This is what we might call "contrastive realism". The sense of actuality of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* may originate more in its comic demystification of chivalric romance than in the true-to-life dimension of its world of highways, inns, and embedded fireside storytelling. In *Apex Hides the Hurt* a sense of reality accrues from the questioning of an inauthentic use of language.

The social practices and ideology that are ironized upon in *Apex* include a debasement of language in contemporary American corporate culture (Maus, *Understanding* 64). The job of a nomenclature consultant consists in finding names for products, to make them trustworthy and desirable in order to better sell them to the public.

> I name things like new detergents and medicines and stuff so that they sound catchy. […] You have some kind of pill to put people to sleep or make them less depressed so they can accept the world. Well you need a reassuring name that will make them believe in the pill. Or you have a new diaper. Now who would want to buy a brand of diaper called Barnacle? No one would buy that. So I think up good names for things (*Apex* 22).

This wordmongering may seem futile. The black barman to whom he presents his line of work asks, incredulously: "People pay you for that shit?" (22). Yet the importance of nomenclature is revealed by its failures, which can cost companies millions of dollars. The novel mentions a cross-cultural misfire that killed the sales of a luxury car in one country, because "in the local patois, the name they'd given the vehicle was slang for—excrement!" (136). On the other hand, successful names can translate into market shares and tangible profits. A good name is worth money, which also means that names, and by extension language, have become commodified.

Brand fetishism is not limited to the realm of advertising, but pervades the whole social fabric. There are many examples of the protagonist and others finding reassurance in the standardization of consumer culture exemplified by logos and advertising slogans, as for example the avatar of Starbucks in the novel's parallel universe, Admiral Java: "It was not the first time he had been saved by the recognizable logo of an international food franchise, its emanations and intimacies" (37). These food, clothing, or home decoration franchises are "[a]ffirmations of a recognizable kind of prosperity and growth" (39). In a feedback loop the commercial categorizations of brand identities become instrumental in a semiotics of self-

presentation and self-advertising that identifies the subject with the goods they consume.

This dysfunctional semiotics takes on its most extreme visage for the protagonist in a moment of infected-toe-induced delirium, tellingly taking place at the "Identity Awards" ceremony where he has been nominated for the Apex contract. Guests are "reduced to white name tags levitating in the air before they became people again" (Apex 168). Wordmongers become reified into their names, which place them on the board game of social positions, as representatives of an advertising or consulting firm. This "paranoïa-critique" phase expands into an indictment of the lies perpetrated by advertising, and by naming in general: "Of course it began at birth–by giving their children names, parents did their offspring the favor of teaching them how to lie with their very first breath. Because what we go by is rarely what makes us go. GRIFTER. SINNER. DOOMED" (170). The notion that names obfuscate reality births a fantasied emergence of "real" names, culminating in the protagonist being tagged "FUGITIVE" as he flees the room (171). Breaking out into Times Square (like a Mad Man), he is assaulted by the posters and neon lights clamoring brand logos:

> The names here were magnificent, gigantic, powered by a million volts and blinking in malevolent dynamism. Off the chart. The most powerful names of all lived here and it was all he could do to stare. He had entered the Apex. […]
> In front of a newsstand, looking up at the sky as if it were a vast eternal mirror, he saw all the logos and names, and saw himself as some brand of mite lost in the pages of the musty encyclopedia of the world. Galanta and Apex, Percept and Rigitol (181-82).

This passage is rife with satirical irony. The word Apex, which has led him to the acme of success, becomes a symbol of alienation, the culmination of a system of linguistic misrule that entraps him. Concurrently, the larger-than-life words floating over Times Square almost appear as Platonic Ideas, the eternal prototypes of countless products disseminated throughout the land that define not only the material but also the spiritual culture of a globalized America. The individual and his name become infinitesimal, some "brand of mite" in the dual sense of a type and a (puny) trademark. Such logo-centrism is a far cry from the Platonic Logocentrism which, in spite of its essentialist flaws, was accountable to reason and attempted to convey some truths about reality. This nightmarish logo-sphere reads like a cross between Jean Baudrillard's vision of the loss of reality in the realm of postmodern simulation,

and Frederick Jameson's identification of postmodernism as the logic of Late Capitalism.

As already mentioned, one of the key satirical strategies in *Apex* is the African American trope of Signifying. H. L. Gates, Jr. defines its literary use as critical parody, or "repetition and revision, repetition with a signal difference" (Gates xxiv). This highly self-conscious rhetorical scheme is both a means to revise the black tradition from the inside, and a way to talk b(l)ack to mainstream discourses. It often entails the rewriting of narratives that either suppress or rationalize racial discrimination, in a process of renaming that points to the blind spots of American ideology. Part of the pleasure of reading the novel stems from the creation of a parallel universe of different yet recognizable brand names like Unycom (Viacom – 169) or Ekho (Lego – 123), or characters' names, coined for their evocative qualities, which encapsulate in parodic form whole creeds, like Regina Goode (a black queen), Albie Winthrop (Albus means white in Latin) and Lucky Aberdeen (luck as a symbol of ease and election, yet hardly consistent with the work ethic of the old economy). Even though it can be highly metafictional, Signifying points to a whole world of actual social practices and ideological equivocations that it revises and renames.

This satire of the debasement of language in the commercial culture of postmodern America is further problematized by an uncanny entanglement between corporate names and the body, as made visible by the story of the Apex rebranding. The firm of Ogilvy and Myrtle, the makers of a low-quality bandage strip, wanted to become number two, behind the inaccessible Band-Aid – a name which has also come to connote a makeshift solution that does not go to the root of a problem. The marketing strategy followed three stages: targeted marketing, in the invention of "multicultural adhesive bandages" (87), distributed along a colorimetric scale of twenty hues grossly corresponding to the range of skin tones in the country; the finding of a name, Apex (99); the coining of a slogan, "Apex hides the hurt" (100). Our protagonist is answerable only for the naming: in spite of his claims of agency and responsibility, he was a mere cog in a symbolic supply chain. The success of the product is proof that it corresponds to a deep-rooted social desire: "We come in colors. We come in many colors. And we want to see ourselves when we look down at ourselves, our arms and legs" (88). The racialized body comes center-stage, which may appear as a progressive move towards the recognition and appreciation of

diversity. Yet the phrase alludes more to a form of individual narcissism than real social change: skin tones become a superficial somatic/semiotic system flaunting equality by erasing power differentials.

> In the advertising, multicultural children skinned knees, revealing the blood beneath, the commonality of wound, they were all brothers now, and multicultural bandages were affixed to red boo-boos. United in polychromatic harmony, in injury, with our individual differences respected, eventually all healed beneath Apex (*Apex Hides the hurt*, 109).

The parodic take on the motto *E Pluribus Unum* suggests that advertising has taken over from politics, and virtual equality replaced attempts to promote real equality. There is a tension in the passage between healing and hiding the hurt; the function of a Band-Aid is actually neither. The jump from individual “gashes” to “the deep psychic wounds of history” (90) points to the presence of ideology, whose function is to gloss over the traumas of American racial history and their unwelcome persistence in the present. Whitehead declared in an interview: “Certain forms of multicultural cheerleading are as susceptible to corruption as capitalist boosterism and frontier idealism, two other systems I talk about in *Apex*. Every -ism has its weakness […] Apex isn’t the only Band-Aid in the book” (Selzer 399). Trademark, stigma, trauma: in *Apex* one brand conceals another: “the work of branding is a work of repression” (Cohn 18); in this sense it is an act of historical and ideological erasure.

The Real Is When You Stub Your Toe

The novel stages the return of the repressed through the body, in the repetitive stubbing of the protagonist’s toe. It is as if Whitehead had purposely illustrated the quip attributed to Jacques Lacan, “*le réel c’est quand on se cogne*” (“the real is when you bang against something”), which could be translated for our purposes: “the real is encountered when you stub your toe”.[1] The toe is the polar opposite of the Apex, as low is to high, or the body to an abstraction. The festering infection beneath the adhesive strip morphs into the grotesque, illustrating another form of contrastive realism, “grotesque realism,” which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as “the lowering of all that

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[1] The actual quote is much more complex: “There is no other possible definition of the real than: it is the impossible; when something finds itself characterized as impossible, it is only there that is the real; when one bangs into it, the real, it is the impossible to penetrate (*quand on se cogne, le réel, c’est l’impossible à pénétrer).”* (*Conferences in North American Universities*: December 2, 1975 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published in *Scilicet*, 1975, n° 6-7, pp. 53-63. Tr. Jack W. Stone, p. 2). The Real that is met in the consultant’s toe-stubbing is not the materiality of the world, but the unconscious dimension of his own desire and anguish. I wish to thank Pr. Claudine Raynaud for her assistance with the arcana of Lacanian theory.

is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 19-20). It is a comical reminder of the physical substratum to our linguistic or social constructions.

The protagonist's repeated stubbing of his foot takes on symptomatologic value, like a Freudian slip.

> 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 unknowable. Unnameable (129).
> 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, explain it. Give it a name (139).

This repetition compulsion resembles a key symptom of posttraumatic reaction. Yet it is not merely the body (or the unconscious rooted in the body) asserting its opposition to the character's immersion in an alienating logo-sphere. The consultant is aware that in his naming activity, "[m]uch of the work went on in the subconscious level. He was making connections between things without thinking and then, *bam* on the subway scratching a nose, or *bam bam* while stubbing a toe on a curb" (4). The irony of describing the process of inspiration in terms of his later toe-stubbing nemesis indicates that there is no mind-body dichotomy at work, in which reality or realism would only be tied to the material term. Conversely, the body's symptoms are part of a semiosis: the hurt signifies in itself.

Going back to the witticism, "*le réel c'est quand on se cogne*," it may be another way to express one of the early Lacanian formulations of the relation between the real and the symbolic. Since we have access to outside reality only through our psychic apparatus, unavoidably shaped by language, we may be said to be alienated from the real, except in those occasions when chance – or apparently haphazard – encounters derail our automatic responses and give us a glimpse of said real. The real is when the symbolic reels, often in the irruption of some trauma.

> In his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1978), Lacan took up Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and approached the real in terms of compulsion and repetition. He proposed distinguishing between two different aspects of repetition: a symbolic aspect that depends on the compulsion of signifiers (*automaton*) and a real aspect that he called *tuché*, the interruption of the automaton by trauma or a bad encounter that the subject is unable to avoid (Lerude).

The scenario of *Apex* grossly corresponds to this view: "Later he decided the specifics were not important, that the true lesson of accidents is not the how or the

why, but the taken-for-granted world they exile you from. In all probability he stumbled over something small and insignificant, as only appropriate for such a shriveled, gargoyle world like *stub*" (*Apex* 130-31). The chance traumatic encounter, or *Tuché*, questions ideology without necessarily being able to replace it with an articulated counter-discourse. The Real may be a mere stub but it can be quite stubborn.

This crude, stub-like reformulation of Lacanian psychoanalysis[2] may illustrate one way of understanding the relations between language and reality after the "linguistic turn" of the 1960s, namely that language and, by extension, literature are enclosed in a discursive bubble and are exiled from the real. In Richard Rorty's words, we should renounce "the claim that we find out about non-linguistic phenomena by knowing more about linguistic phenomena" (Rorty 31). In a sense, not only ideology but all language is a Band-Aid that hides the world in an epistemic cloud of unknowing, which can only be breached indirectly and by chance if at all.

Moreover, the painful symptom in the text is modelled on the Freudian theory of neuroses, which presupposes some psychical reality independent from, or opposed to, external reality (Laplanche and Pontalis 391). In *Apex*, critics have identified the psychical reality behind the foot-stubbing as the protagonist's overwhelming feeling of guilt for betraying his racial heritage. Even though we hardly have any backstory for him, we know of his having benefited from a diversity program at elite Quincy University (70). He is thereafter recognized as a Quincy man, and treated as an equal by powerful people. "Some names are keys and open doors. Quincy was one" (69). This is presumably why he bought so eagerly into the Apex promise of skin-deep equality, to the point of amnesia about his very real toe wound. The amnesia and complicity cover up "the historical harm of slavery" (Cohn 18), as well as the divisions within the African American group, between the inheritors of the "Talented Tenth" such as himself, and the struggling black working class like the Winthrop Hotel bartender and his wife, the hotel's cleaning woman (Leise 292). The character's symptoms are both psychological and allegorical, evincing the difficulties to toe the

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[2] The Lacanian conception of the Real is much more complex and radical than this approximation. The Real is originally produced through the repression of the mother's primal, incestuous demand and its outward projection, later elaborated upon by the Oedipus complex. The Real therefore belongs to the world of primal drives, trauma and anguish whereas our perception of the material world out there can only be apprehended as a projection. "The real of measurable nature is therefore coextensive to the real of sexual trauma – the subject of the Unconscious and the subject of science are one," but the latter's function is to cloak the former (Pommier 124).

color line. The satire is rooted in a double form of realism, psychological and social, yet the articulation of these two realms may be uneasy and stretched.

As perceptively noted by Jesse Cohn, the consultant's guilt and self-loathing is intimately linked with the Oedipus myth. The plot is even more closely modelled on Sophocles' tragedy of *King Oedipus* than on Freud's reappropriation of the myth. Oedipus means "swollen foot," a physical scar of his being exposed as a baby after the Pythia's prophecy that he would kill his own father Laius. Our swollen-toed consultant's naming proficiency can be compared to the solving of the Riddle of the Sphinx, and his success in the corporate world to Oedipus' ascent to the throne of Thebes (Cohn 17-18). Here the mock-tragic dimension of the text comes into play, as classical tragedy represents the fall of a great man, at the apex of his power, through hubris, or excess. Tragic irony is also present in the polysemy of the Band-Aid's brand name. Apex is not a name that naturally fits an adhesive strip: a praise of the product's top quality, it also voices an autobiographical statement – "He landed Apex because he was at the top of his game" (*Apex* 36) – and a patriotic statement, in which America is "the summit, human achievement, the best of civilization, and of course something you could tumble off of, fast fall" (99). This whole passage is star-spangled with multiple ironies. The smooth slippage of "the eye on the top of the pyramid" from a symbol of mystic power to the dollar bill reveals the ambiguities of the American Dream and its debasement into materialism. Besides their hubris, the tragic flaw of the character and his culture is the desire to "hide the hurt" to bask in their glory. The tragic arc is made grotesquely visible when he decides to climb on a table in Winthrop to announce that he will support the proposed rebranding into New Prospera, "when something in him gave way, and his bad leg jackknifed with such speed that he was on the floor in an ugly mess before anyone could catch him" (179). The abrupt rise and fall stem from the same cause as his delirious flight at the Identity Awards: the conflict between a desire to belong and repress the "real" and a slip of the leg that expresses the feelings of guilt and inauthenticity that accrue from a debased use of language.

In this satirical novel, the debased language of advertising is seen as real in its own right and as a shaping force on the contemporary reality of a superficial, commercial society. In an evocative parallel between words and the body, language and ideology are compared to sterile strips that hide and repress unpalatable realities,

yet both realms are vulnerable to the subversive workings of the unconscious. Brand names themselves are depicted both as hollow and full of hidden meanings, some of which ironically debunk the very ethos of the logo-sphere. The mock-tragic reference to fate and self-fulfilling prophecies may induce us to connect with more earthy realities, a lucid social gaze and a preoccupation with the materiality of the world.

Branding as Poetry and Performance

During his crisis of conscience at the identity Awards the consultant finds himself facing abstract yet urgent questions about language:

> What he had given to all those things had been the right name, but never the true name. For things had true natures, and they hid behind fake names, beneath the skin we gave them. […] What is the word, he asked himself, for that elusive thing? It was on the tip of his tongue. What was the name for that which is always beyond our grasp? What do you call that which escapes?" (182-83)

The social satire is supplemented by a deeper, more philosophical exploration of the interconnections between language and reality. Since the novel takes as the object of its criticism the very act of naming, it must probe the possibility of finding the right name for things, and that of the elusive quality of a reality that might escape nomination. Of course, the fact that he articulates these issues while in the throes of a toe-induced delirium casts doubt on the validity of the questions and the possibility of obtaining satisfactory answers. We might still wish to assail these windmills, through a consideration of the act of naming as a poetic act on the one hand, and on the other as a performative speech act. The former approach interrogates the possible motivation of the sign, whereas the latter probes the social effectiveness and consequences of the act of naming.

Gestures of naming and unnaming have been of primordial importance in African American history and literature since slavery. The obliteration of African names and their replacement with those of plantation owners can be seen as one of the initial traumas of bondage. Black subjects have historically resorted to a reverse form of unnaming and renaming, by either erasing the former master's name, as in the case of the Nation of Islam's "X" sign, or more commonly by choosing a different patronym, as did Frederick Douglass after Emancipation. Name-calling and Racial slurs are also brands that purport to impress the power of the majority over minorities: the N-word performs "reification by slander" (Benston 5), which may be countered through various strategies of resistance, self-affirmation, legal redress or resignification.

The protagonist's presence at the heart or apex of the corporate naming machine can therefore be seen as subversive; it turns the tables on a power structure that often leaves black people more named (or nameless) than naming – except of course if you buy into the multicultural boosterism advertised through Apex, and believe that subversion is no longer needed. In his early days in the nomenclature business, the consultant discovered that the names evoked "a magnificent and secret landscape. His interior. […] He had a territory within himself and he would bring back specimens to the old world. These most excellent dispatches. His names" (34-35). Not only did this fantastic landscape, reminiscent of science-fiction or Western exploration, impose its existence on the advertiser; it also defined his identity. The coiner is also a poet, and the discussion of corporate naming becomes a self-reflexive, albeit ironic, meditation on literature. One common point between poetry and nomenclature is that they try to find proper names for things.

At this juncture one is reminded of one of the key myths of the philosophy of language, Cratylism, or the belief in the motivation of names discussed – and dismissed – in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*. Socrates is asked to arbitrate between Hermogenes, who stands for total linguistic conventionalism, and Cratylus, who advocates the "correctness of names." After refuting the relativism of Hermogenes' nominalism, which would according to him render it impossible for a name to have a fixed meaning, he proposes the fiction of a nomenclaturist, a demiurgic maker of names or lawmaker (Plato 389d). The motivation of names can derive from etymology – Zeus is "the God through whom all creatures always have life" (*di on zen* – 396b) – or mimetic sound patterns – the *rh* sound materialized by the letter *rho* (ρ) conveys the idea of flux and motion (426e).

The professional breakdown of the moniker New Prospera reads both like a poetic comment and a Cratylic elucidation, as it revolves on etymology and sound-patterns:

> Had that romance-language armature, he was pretty sure it was a Spanish or Italian word for something. What it meant in those languages, that 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 (*Apex* 52).

In Plato's dialogue, Socrates finally dismisses Cratylism, arguing that the hypothetical motivations of signifiers point to contradictory views of reality, and are not to be trusted. Knowledge must start from the things themselves in order to test the truth value of names and propositions (Plato 439a). In *Apex*, the relation between word

and thing is less an attempt at elucidation than a harnessing of cultural connotations that tries to give the illusion of *quidditas*, the nature of the object. The meaning of the Latinate word Prospera is immaterial, compared to its evocative power in the target culture; the interpretation of the feminine final *a* seems arbitrary, and the branding industry is full of recipes and fashions that preclude any motivated relation between the signifier and the signified (*Apex* 51).

Cratylism is both an ideal and a temptation for poets and nomenclaturists, the desire to find the proper, or "true" name. The veiled references to some of the key debates in the philosophy of language, like the opposition between realism (according to which words express realities) and nominalism or conventionalism, broaden the scope of the satire, without altering its fundamental course. What could be an honest mistake, a belief in the motivation of certain words, ultimately reads like a rather opportunistic form of self-justification, a demiurgic impulse meant to provide an illusion of usefulness and power. The nominalist motto "a rose by any other name is still a rose" is interpreted in the light of self-interest: "Some might say a rose by any other name but he didn't go in for that kind of crap. That was crazy talk. Bad for business, bad for morale" (*Apex* 5).

One episode provides an ironic disclaimer to the belief in sign motivation and the resulting existence of one true name for each product. The consultant is asked to come up with a rebranding for a children's building game that is the equivalent of Lego. The Ekho firm has decided to put on the market a more politically-correct version its early success, Ekho Village, the prototype of a small town that had been popular in the Fifties. The wordsmith's suggestion is to keep the old name, since "Ekho Village was a reverberation of America that did not grow faint with time. It was always there to play with us" (123). The pun on *echo* does reverberate throughout the text. Ekho is a recognizable take on an existing brand, evoking the pleasures and ingenuity of parody. The newly "integrated" version of small-town America also duplicates the multicultural pieties of Apex, with the same superficial result. The rebranding operation also ironizes on the main plot of the novel, the renaming of the town of Winthrop. Finally, it evokes a conception of language in which repetition replaces substance, and meaning is constructed through synchronic and diachronic echoes. In a word, a Saussurian structure activated by networks of semantic differences. Should we then conclude that realism, literary and philosophical, implies

renouncing the dreams of an intimate entanglement between language and the real? Yet if names cannot be said to reflect or express outside reality, we have been made aware that the performance of naming does have worldly effects and consequences, which might pave the way for another conception of the relation between name and thing, beyond the opposition between pure conventionalism and hardline Cratylism.

How to Do Things with Names

British philosopher J. L. Austin broadened the scope of the philosophy of language when he expanded his inquiry from the truth value of statements to the multiple ways in which language can shape reality. He described performative utterances as actions effecting a change in the real world, as when exchanging marriage vows, or bequeathing an inheritance in a testament (Austin 5). He later distinguished other effects of language, the "illocutory" force of an utterance being its intentional purpose, like warning or supplication, whereas the "perlocutory" force represents its effective impact on the addressee, such as persuasion, fright, or seduction (101). One of the examples that Austin gives of the performative is an act of naming, *viz.* baptizing a ship (5). The success, or "felicity" – as opposed to the truth of descriptive propositions – depends on social and linguistic conventions, including institutional positions. A marriage is valid only if the official has a valid license, and if none of the newlyweds is already married. The branding game is such a speech act: its utterances derive from institutionalized marketing agencies and are approved by the clients; their illocutionary intent is to seduce the public by appealing to its fantasies and desires; and their success depends on the public's welcome in the marketplace of corporate identities. The "right" name is therefore the name that sticks because it encounters the public's expectations about the brand and its own ideological makeup – the commercial equivalent of reception theory in literature. "Felicity" rather than truth is of the issue. This sheds a new light on the opposition between the "right" name and the "true" name that we encountered earlier (*Apex* 182). So when the wordmonger states that "New Prospera-ness stirred them and agitated them in a fundamental way. In that deep-down place where true names reside" (158), it may just prove that he has lapsed into his old ways and has not learnt from his former demise. Or it may point out that since names are the products of conventional speech acts, the only truth that they can reflect is that of desire, the emotional and ideological

investments of their targets. Do the “right” name and “true” name really overlap? This is the intellectual and existential challenge the protagonist is confronted to when he is asked to become the arbiter of toponyms for the town of Winthrop.

In her own take on Austin’s work, Judith Butler replaces the conventional situations of speech acts within a broader power network: the institutional framework of performatives is never divorced from state or economic power, while linguistic conventions draw attention to the fact that the subject never initiates their *parole*, but inherits it. Specific occurrences of hate speech and name-calling actually bring to the fore any subject’s “linguistic vulnerability” (Butler 1) to “the power of the name”:

> One is, as it were, brought into social location and time through being named. And one is dependent upon another for one’s name, for the designation that is supposed to confer singularity. […] This suggests that such a subject in language is positioned as both addressed and addressing, and that the very possibility of naming another requires that one be first named (30).

The ironies of our protagonist’s namelessness become all the more significant. The latter might point to the generality of satire, a collective rather than individual indictment; it might correspond to a form of hiding and dissimulation, in keeping with the theme of inauthenticity encapsulated in the Apex strip; there might be an intertextual filiation with the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) who, after renouncing “his vain desire to achieve an empowering name” (Benston 6) claims “the impossibility of naming or arresting meaning” (9); but the figure of the unnamed namer might also allude to a demiurgic fantasy encased in the reference to the Tetragrammaton of the Hebrew God, “I Am That I Am,” a form of transcendental namelessness (4). This dream of the subject’s sovereignty is also achieved through the erasure of a patronym that would connect him to his family, ethnic origins, and linguistic vulnerability – of which the wounded toe is a reminder.

One of the interesting forms of “realism” in the novel is that, without exiting the realm of language, it lays emphasis, in a metafictional manner, on the constraints and power struggles that bear on the act of naming. The illocutory and perlocutory forces that names mobilize within the novel duplicate those at work in the extratextual world, and between world and text. The initial situation looks more like a procedural model than a likely occurrence, even though it is not devoid of plausibility. The deadlock in the rebranding of the town stems from the legal peculiarity in its charter that the choice of the city name is decided by a city council composed of three members, rather than a democratic vote of all the inhabitants. This special provision was

introduced in the statutes in an identical situation in the historical past, to ensure that the two black founders of the town could have a majority vote over the white industrialist whose power was on the rise. The present deadlock allows giving a representation to the three worldviews encapsulated by the three names. As the bartender reminds the consultant, “This is my home” (Apex 23), not a simple commercial product. The identity of the town partially defines the identity of its people, so the choice has consequences. The three names are motivated, not by mere cultural or “poetic” connotations but by history: each represents a different take on the local and American past, and a different allocation of onomastic power.

The town was founded after the Civil War by a group of freed slaves, under the leadership of two men, Abraham Goode and William Field, and was called Freedom. Even though at first the wordsmith denigrates the name for its naïveté (76), he later recognizes its affirmative potential. “What did a slave know that we didn’t? 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. And to say, I Am This–that was freedom” (206). The name of the settlement implied an act of sovereignty, as it encapsulated the former slaves’ new-found dignity and mastery, the freedom to name themselves and to name their community. Like all Frontier toponyms, it was also an unnaming, not only of the Native place names but also of their former bondage.

Then came Sterling Winthrop, who made his fortune “in barbed wire, not too bad a gig at the end of the nineteenth century. Land Grants, land grabs, you needed something cheap to keep everything in, and keep everything out” (60). The move to rename the city corresponds to a common American topological habit of naming places after a settler or industrialist, a man who has the power to print his mark on the land, to put the city “on the map” (25). The name, like a brand name, is ludicrously disseminated everywhere, in a hubristic claim of dominance.

> He was in the Winthrop suite of the Hotel Winthrop on Winthrop Street in Winthrop square in the Town of Winthrop in Winthrop County. He didn’t have a map of the area, but he told himself that if he ever got lost he should look for the next level of Winthrop, Winthrop to the next power, and he would find his way (13-14).

Such naming power establishes a form of aristocracy in a supposedly egalitarian society, and is linked to a history of colonization and land usurpation. While the name of Winthrop is associated in the novel with nineteenth-century capitalistic boosterism

and the ideology of Manifest Destiny, its historical connotation reaches back to the Puritan past, and the famous sermon "Model of Christian Charity" pronounced on the ship Arbella by Founding Father John Winthrop. It featured the classic image of American exceptionalism, "the city upon the hill." This country branding constitutes an ironic counterpoint to the text's preoccupation with city naming, as well as a Signifying act on American history, through a figure whose vaunted advocacy of religious freedom was counterbalanced by a rather intolerant, inegalitarian, authoritarian worldview (Leise 295). What is more, the trademark of Winthrop wire was a W-shaped barb that amounted to a signature, as it was used to fence land and "draw a line" (73). Apportioning land and apportioning language are similar operations, entailing a limitation of *Freedom*. The two black men on the city council had the means to resist the rebranding; yet one of them, Goode, sided with Winthrop, presumably because the safety and prosperity of the town were better assured under the aegis of a powerful white man.

New Prospera follows two other American onomastic trends: the addition of "New" to Old World locations, to assert both a connection with the past and an almost messianic elevation, on the model of the New Jerusalem; and the projection of religious or material wishful thinking onto the place that might become the theater of such prosperity. Software magnate Lucky Aberdeen's power as a new Prospero is also sneakily suggested, with its magic might, its illusory nature, and its colonization of Caliban's land. The new name born of marketing agents' skills is expected to prevail by all, even the consultant himself. It seems to follow the trend of history and fit the new digital economy like a glove. "From a clinical nomenclature perspective, this was a no-brainer. These people were already living in New Prospera whether they knew it or not" (174). Even Mayor Goode was about to follow this lead at the ambush meeting that was supposed to rename Winthrop before changing her mind and going it alone with a bid to reinstate Freedom (73). She later comments to the consultant: "Well, I have a choice. And I choose the truth" (116). We are faced again with this notion of the truth of names, which becomes even more elusive since each of the three versions of history and reality is accurate in some way and has a constituency in town.

The wordmonger is actually going to propose an unexpected fourth name – impose, we might say, since his contract stipulates that his choice shall stand for one

year before any change can be effected: he has created the legal framework to enforce the felicity of his illocutionary act. The impulse to suggest a different name came from his delving into the lesser-known parts of town history: he discovered a rift in outlook between the two founders, Goode and Field, also nicknamed the Light and the Dark, one the “optimist-prophet type,” the other “the downer-realist figure” (141). Here realism is contrasted with idealism: “You understood deep down that what Field had to say was the world’s truth, but you were going to pick Goode every time. It was easier that way” (197). The specific African American tonality of this contrast is conveyed by the characters’ patronyms, harking back to the difference between house and field slaves, with the latter bearing the brunt of oppression and therefore having a “truer” knowledge of the peculiar institution (Leise 288). In the literary field, this anti-idealism often characterized realist and naturalist literature, from Zola to Dreiser and Crane. In a sense, the consultant’s final choice, a revival of Field’s own proposal for the city’s name, represents an advocacy of both a vision of America and the literature that conveys it best: “Struggle.” “Freedom was what they sought. Struggle was what they had lived through” (*Apex* 210). One may only guess the perlocutory influence of such gloomy reminder on the city dwellers. As Mayor Goode tells the consultant: “Can you imagine thinking that would be a good name for a place where people live?” (207). The protagonist’s rationale for this unpalatable branding might not be as disinterested as he claims. Imagining Field’s motivations, he seems to unveil his own motive and the figure he unconsciously wants to cut: “Let lesser men try to tame the world by giving it a name that might cover the wound, or camouflage it. Hide the badness from view. The prophet’s work was of a different sort” (210).

“Struggle” cuts three ways. By insisting on an ongoing process it spells out a refusal of all fixed identities and denominations; moreover the agonistic nature of the process precludes any irenic reading of American history, that would gloss over class and race conflicts (Leise 297). It is the “anti-Apex” (*Apex* 210) in more ways than one: an antidote to national self-congratulation and the ideology of progress, it also has a biographical dimension for the character, as a compensatory move to his former hubris and cooptation into corporate America. Stepping in Field’s shoes, he chooses the contrarian field slave’s ethos over the Goode house slave’s gradualist compromises. Yet in so doing, the unnamed namer surreptitiously calls himself a

"prophet," with the attendant overtones of preachiness and moralizing. This is possibly why a text that seems to advocate social realism is not written in that mode; even the well-intentioned denunciatory move in literature and social criticism is the butt of satire. After all, idealism and optimism, together with the urge to sugarcoat reality, are also part of reality; they can be debunked as illusions but the dream of absolute realism might itself be illusory. The protagonist is not cured in the end, as "his foot hurt more than ever" (212). He is still struggling with the nature of reality, as we all are.

According to philosopher Sandra Laugier, the philosophies of ordinary language, in the wake of J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, have paved the way for a new form of consideration of the entanglements between language and reality. Even though the positivist "correspondence theory" that supposed the transparency of language to reality is no longer acceptable, due to the fact that both the speaking subject and their experience are shaped by language as much as they shape it, our ordinary language remains attuned to the real in practical and ethical ways. We learn words in certain contexts and expect ourselves and others to project them in other contexts. Even though nothing guarantees this, the fact that it happens most of the time within a given culture, or what Wittgenstein called a "form of life," allows us to share a world and agree on some common ground of "reality," even though no final consensus need arise and visions of the real must be accepted as always provisional (Laugier 114-15). Since discussing language is also to a large extent to discuss the real it points to, as well as, *per* Judith Butler, the powers and forces that pervade it, we do not need to step out of language to address reality. The fact that fiction usually has recourse to ordinary language, as opposed to the rarefied idioms of science and philosophy, may therefore not constitute such a handicap to its probing our relation to the real. According to M. K. Holland, "today's realisms offer multiple, contradictory possibilities of partial truths, and confounding evidence of the quantum world we may theorize but cannot experience" (Holland 255). The two main avenues of exploration she identifies in contemporary realist moves are a metafictional bend, and "sustained and multifaceted efforts to construct an unprecedented intimacy, even continuity, between language and the material world" (257).

Even though Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* evinces some skepticism as to our ability to know the "true" behind the "right" names, the novel shows a preoccupation with the real and puts forward various forms of realities and realism, which do not necessarily coalesce into a coherent picture or attitude, but point to the ethical imperative of striving for a correct vision. The satirical impulse of the novel humorously debunks the humbug culture of commercialism and branding: by deriding the fake it points towards the social and ideological culture of contemporary America, especially its materialism. This "contrastive realism" works hand in hand with Signifying, the form of critical parody that is rooted in the black vernacular and draws attention to the persisting racial exclusions at the heart even of contemporary multiculturalism. The metafictional dimension of the novel could be identified especially in parodic inroads into the philosophy of language, like the opposition between Cratylism and conventionalism, the former option representing a temptation in both poetry and advertising to search for motivated signs, which is another type of "realism". The institutional context of the naming activity allows probing the performative dimension of language, and the very real power relations that condition its deployment. The irony surrounding the consultant's final choice of "realism" (Struggle) against the illusions of idealism (Freedom, New Prospera) implies that any claim to "tell it like it is" in fiction may be a naïve throwback to nineteenth-century literary variants of the "correspondence theory," but that the imperative remains to sift through the signs, under the guidance of the body, in a form of "embodied knowledge". The racialized body, being the stake behind the erasure of Apex, becomes a touchstone of the real. But there is no dichotomy between body and language, since the symptom is both physical and signifying – as is fit for a fictional toe.

Several critics have identified an additional metafictional level in the novel: a meditation on the "postsoul" aesthetics with which Whitehead has often been associated. "The postsoul aesthetic […] centers on a conscious effort to alter the semiotic codes of race that are prevalent both within and outside the African American community" (Maus, *Understanding* 67). It eschews the rigid, quite essentialist definitions of blackness enacted by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 1960s in reaction to the negative stereotypes extant in majority culture. Both toponyms of Freedom and Struggle could be interpreted as the two city

fathers' widely different bids for self-definition in response to the ordeal and dehumanization of slavery: anachronistically speaking, they were "soul" gestures. Cohn connects Oedipal guilt in *Apex* with the fact that since African American cultural symbols have now been coopted and commodified by mainstream capitalistic culture, the postsoul ethos may be marked by a sense of inauthenticity and betrayal.

His criticism is two-pronged. On the one hand, it addresses aspects of the "postsoul condition" in popular culture that are susceptible to the sirens of corporate culture and a facile multiculturalism, which are also the target of the novel's satirical darts. On the other hand, it detects in Whitehead's works "Oedipal anxieties" about "African-American literary and cultural ancestry" (21). On this point one may beg to differ: the literary familiars that the novel evokes are more Ralph Ellison and Percival Everett than the Black Arts movement, so the postulation of guilt or haunting concerning the author appears as a useless hypothesis. As for the protagonist, it is his cynicism that makes him a perfect vehicle for satire. Were it not for his melancholy disposition, his self-interested social mimicry and linguistic virtuosity would make him the ideal embodiment of the rhetoric of critical parody that is Signifying, the trickster-like Signifying Monkey. In Apex hides Ape-X.

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