

Race in a Bottle

At a ceremony announcing the completion of the first draft of the human genome in 2000, President Bill Clinton declared, "I believe one of the great truths to emerge from this triumphant expedition inside the human genome is that in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same." Yet despite this declaration of unity, biomedical research has focused increasingly on mapping that 1 percent of difference, particularly as it relates to race. This trend is exemplified by the drug BiDil. Approved by the FDA in 2005 as the first drug with a race-specific indication on its label, BiDil was originally touted as a pathbreaking therapy to treat heart failure in black patients and help underserved populations. Upon closer examination, however, Jonathan Kahn reveals a far more complex story. At the most basic level, BiDil became racial through legal maneuvering and commercial pressure as much as through medical understandings of how the drug worked. Using BiDil as a central case study, Kahn broadly examines the legal and commercial imperatives driving the expanding role of race in biomedicine, even as scientific advances in genomics could render the issue irrelevant. He surveys the distinct politics informing the use of race in medicine and the very real health disparities caused by racism and social injustice that are now being cast as a mere function of genetic difference. Calling for a more reasoned approach to using race in biomedical research and practice, Kahn asks readers to recognize that, just as genetics is a complex field requiring sensitivity and expertise, so too is race, particularly in the field of biomedicine.

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