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Skin Colour, Surveillance and Subjectivity: Deconstructing Race in Jan Mark's *Useful Idiots*

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Although discussions of race in children's literature tend to focus on realist narrative fictions, fantasy has rich potential for critically examining the concept of racial difference. Useful Idiots (2004), a young adult novel by British author Jan Mark, acts as the focus of my analysis because it is a fantasy novel that offers readers a highly innovative and unconventional exploration of the social discourses that construct and perpetuate racial hierarchies. Using David Lyon's theories about modern surveillance, whiteness studies and Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism as a theoretical framework, this article argues that Mark inventively interrogates numerous assumptions that underpin race in modern society by depicting a character who, throughout the course of the narrative, gradually becomes a racialised subject. The portrayal of this process constitutes a highly effective and original representation of what it means to be considered 'the other'.

Key words: *Race, whiteness studies, grotesque realism, surveillance, Useful Idiots, Jan Mark, Bakhtin, racialised body, fantasy, defamiliarisation.*

Critical discussions of race in contemporary children's fiction revolve almost entirely around the depiction of race relations in realist narratives. Multiculturalism has been the primary focus, with children's narratives (and critical responses to them) addressing what Donnarae MacCann terms 'the warfare waged against specific groups of people – armed warfare, plus aggression implemented through forced labor and forced acculturation' ('Editor's Introduction' 341). MacCann's emotive language reflects the politicisation of race in the modern era, suggesting that the project of addressing racial discrimination is both difficult, in that racist ideology is entrenched, and an ongoing task. Current political discussions about multiculturalism in Europe have revolved around its perceived failure (in October 2010 German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, publicly announced that multiculturalism had failed in Germany

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and her remarks were later echoed by David Cameron in his first speech as British Prime Minister in 2011), and given this context, it is unsurprising that critics of children's literature have maintained a focus on representations of race in realist narrative fictions—as these offer an immediate and explicit reflection of real world social relations. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum argue, with reference to realist narrative fictions, that multicultural children's literature in Australia has 'broadly reflected the fortunes of multiculturalism as a cultural and literary concept' ('Positioning Otherness' 133). As a result, Australian children's literature has often adopted an advocacy role, by which it 'interrogates social policy it finds implicitly racist' (133). (Debra Dudek refers to this type of literary activism as 'critical multiculturalism'.) The perception, therefore, is that the discourse of literary realism provides the most effective platform for exploring the politically-charged concept of race and agitating for social and political reform (which is not wholly unexpected, since the more metaphoric mode of fantasy is necessarily further removed from reality than is realism).

Fantasy remains relatively overlooked in critical discussions of race, which is an unfortunate oversight because the genre offers multiple possibilities for the interrogation of race as a category of identity. This is not to say that race has been completely ignored within the criticism of fantasy narratives. Indeed, a comprehensive body of work has developed in response to specific fantasy texts, such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007). The ideological representation of race in this particular series has garnered extensive attention, as evident in the work of Giselle Anatol, Brycchan Carey, Elaine Ostry, Jackie Horne, Marek Oziewicz, and Marion Rana. Analysing the metaphors of race found in Rowling's books, this research remains divided as to whether or not the series promotes anti-racism or implicitly perpetuates racial hierarchies.

In contrast to the often specific textual context of this scholarly research, my purpose here is to address some of the more innovative strategies available to authors of fantasy literature for interrogating dominant cultural assumptions about race. Precisely because fantasy is at one remove from reality, it allows authors to experiment with the representation of Otherness. This point has been eloquently explored by Angela Smith in an essay which argues that Paddington Bear, in his status as British immigrant, functions as a figure of racial Otherness in Michael Bond's classic children's series (2006). Smith suggests that fantasy offers a very effective way of critiquing dominant cultural ideology because it defamiliarises the real world and prompts readers to reconsider (or think imaginatively about) normative patterns of behaviour. This is also the case in Jan Mark's young adult novel *Useful Idiots*, which will provide the focus of my analysis in this article. A defining feature of *Useful Idiots* is that it draws the reader's attention to whiteness as a racial identity—the recognition of which is a crucial step in the process of deconstructing racial hierarchies and promoting genuinely intersubjective race relations.

The common starting point for whiteness studies, an inter-disciplinary theoretical discourse that emerged during the 1990s and which analyses the social and cultural privilege attached to white identities, is that whiteness largely

functions as an invisible category of identity. By remaining invisible, it thereby instantiates itself as normative. Richard Dyer argues that a significant amount of power is attached to this normative status: 'As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people' (1). *Useful Idiots* explicitly contests the positioning of whiteness as an 'unmarked' standard. It depicts a futuristic world where markers of racial difference have been all but eradicated. Major geographical changes have occurred to the Earth because of rising sea levels and these geographical shifts have produced similarly significant political, cultural and social transformations, notably the emergence of Europe as the world's most powerful nation state (of which the novel is wary). This political alliance is predicated on the total erasure of national and cultural difference, and provides the social setting for a narrative which revolves around the protagonist, Merrick Korda, and his interactions with a small indigenous community known derogatively as 'Oysters'. Officially referred to as 'Inglish' (a phonetic rendering of 'English'), this racial group is identified as white skinned and of Anglo-Saxon origin – but in the novel's futuristic world the group has reverted to the position of inferior, racialised 'other'. The novel thus hinges on an inversion of the race relations that have characterised European civilisation to date.

Mark's construction of white, British subjects as an ethnic minority is both nuanced and witty, as it involves a playful interrogation of the 'civilised'/'primitive' dichotomy. The novel does not seek to rewrite the history (and supremacy) of white identities, but it suggests that the process of domination/subordination has come full circle, and thematically implies that racial harmony will never be achieved until this historically dominant group recognises that whiteness is an ethnic identity just like any other. The aggressively colonialist behaviour of this particular community has eventually led to its downfall:

And no one asked why, after peace was restored and the Isles reabsorbed, the obsessives had turned their backs on prosperity, health, progress, had retreated up hills and into swamps in exchange for the right to call themselves English, castigating their fellow countrymen for betraying the cause and accepting integration. Their language had conquered the world, it was conquering space; everywhere that mankind spoke, it spoke in English; the word lived on. But that was not enough for the rebels; they had to *be* English.

Or Inglish, as it was derisively written. (231)

This passage of narrator-focalisation clearly draws on the type of racist discourses employed in relation to the subjects of immigration and asylum, constructing a stark opposition between the Inglish and the non-Inglish (which in this case are members of the European nation state). The linguistic 'othering' of the Inglish invokes the 'civilised/primitive' binary that is deployed in racial discourses designed to assert the superiority of one race over another. They are described as having 'turned their backs on prosperity, health and progress', insinuating that

they are Luddites in their refusal to partake of the benefits offered by technology. Their reference to the retreat ‘up hills and into swamps’ is a comic allusion to the racial slurs and epithets that reinforce the Otherness of marginalised racial groups by metaphorically implying that they live in primitive, uncivilised spaces and by hinting that such individuals have an affinity with animals or other non-human life forms that typically inhabit such environments which are generally thought to be unfit for humans. Of course the irony in *Useful Idiots* is that the English do literally live in a swamp, which prompts readers to consider how language itself functions in constructing and maintaining racial difference. Importantly, the paragraph concludes by engaging with the concept of racial performativity: ‘But that was not enough for the rebels; they had to *be* English’. The language used in this sentence is subtle, in that the verb ‘be’, which is typically used to denote something that exists in actuality, refers to a phenomenon that is, in effect, contrived (an interpretation facilitated by the use of italics). The inference is therefore that the ‘Englishness’ of the English is not a natural attribute of identity but an aspect of cultural production.

A technique closely associated with fantasy literature is defamiliarisation, the art of representing familiar phenomena in new or strange ways in order to disrupt the reader’s usual manner of perceiving the world. Holman and Harmon suggest that ‘because our senses are forever falling into rigid habits and empty routines, we need art periodically to wake us up by making the familiar suddenly seem strange—and the process of estrangement is defamiliarization . . .’ (130). Although realist texts can also employ modes of representation that defamiliarise what is usually recognisable, the genre of fantasy tends to use this strategy as a primary means of communicating both story and significance. Fantasy thus defamiliarises the world as we know it, using fantastic events, characters and settings to comment upon, or stand in for, social reality. Mark makes good use of this strategy, especially in her examination of the relationship between racial identity and technology. Technology plays an important role in the novel—both in terms of how it is used to evoke human progress and how it affects individual subjectivity. The future world of *Useful Idiots* is distinctive from the present on two fronts: the changing geography of the Earth’s surface, and advancements in technology that have eradicated much of the disease and sickness which characterise human life in our quotidian world. These technological advancements have resulted in an environment that is under constant surveillance, yet the novel resists the familiar association of the racialised body with heightened electronic monitoring. Instead of demonising surveillance technology as a form of excessive and unjust social control, Mark offers a more nuanced representation of the effects of technology on individual subjectivity. Through Merrick’s focalisation, the impact of surveillance on subjectivity is explored—and this is achieved by contrasting Merrick’s own experience of surveillance with the absence of surveillance that he encounters while on the English Reserve. The novel thus defamiliarises the reader’s expectations regarding what would be considered (in relation to our everyday world) excessive

surveillance, as Merrick is so accustomed to being surveilled that the Oysters' lack of such technology produces in him feelings of anxiety and destabilisation.

The subject of surveillance is intimately connected to race. Critical discussions of surveillance (which gained momentum in the early 1990s) are, according to John McGrath, 'almost always framed in terms of crime prevention (now very much extended to terrorism prevention) and privacy rights' (2). The 'crime prevention' aspect of surveillance involves monitoring 'suspicious' subjects – and as McGrath asserts, 'suspicion is often dependent on skin colour' (22). That surveillance operates by targeting specific groups is crucial to the work of David Lyon, widely recognised as a pioneer of surveillance studies, who contends that a primary goal of surveillance is 'social sorting' (*Surveillance Society; Surveillance as Social Sorting; Surveillance Studies*), a process which involves the specific targeting of racial groups (*Surveillance Studies* 63). In this context, Mark's decision not to make the Oysters the target of governmental surveillance is an interesting and enlightened one, because it enables her to explore the effects of surveillance on individuals in terms of their compliance with it. When Merrick first enters the Briese Moss (the English Reserve) with Frida, an aboriginal dancer he has befriended, it is the lack of surveillance (amongst a range of things that he perceives as different) that causes most consternation. 'There seemed to be no code, no key, no scanner. He could not get into his own apartment, even into his own height, ['height' refers to the level of the building] without pausing for the doors to recognise him. He looked round for an eye but if one existed it was very well concealed' (156). Merrick's initial experience of Frida's home is thus represented as one that is characterised by lack, through the repeated use of 'no' and emphasis on what is missing ('no code, no key, no scanner') in his focalisation. A discussion with Frida ensues, in which Merrick's point of view is countered by Frida's:

'But *anyone* could get in.'

'Who'd want to?'

'You have no crime?'

'One of the advances we've elected to live without? No, the advance we've elected to live without in this instance is surveillance. My apartment in the city – the one I've been living in while I've worked at the Ayckbourn – it has a record of every person who has ever lived in it, how many times they went in and out, who they brought with them, how long they stayed, a record of every visitor, maintenance worker, every ancillary robot – it must be like that where you live, where you work. Nobody needs that information but it's there, it keeps growing. And when you go to the theatre, the parc, to a shop – if anyone wanted to they could access every building you'd ever been in from the moment you were born, and when, and for how long. The same for me when I'm in the city, but not here. That's part of our charter, we choose what to record of ourselves' (157–58).

From Merrick's initial point of view, the dearth of technology in the Oyster Reserve confirms one of the binary concepts associated with racial hierarchies: 'civilised' versus 'primitive', in which 'primitive' is attributed to subjects

positioned as racial Other. Merrick, like other non-English people, uses the Oysters' refusal to participate in technological development as a reason for constructing them as inherently inferior, yet Frida's comments constitute an elegant rebuttal of such an assumption. She transforms the entire tenor of the conversation, moving it away from concepts of civilisation (or lack of it) to an assertion of rights and agency. Frida is patently aware that the collection of seemingly unimportant personal data has the potential to be (mis)used in ways that might limit individual freedom. The lack of surveillance technology in the Briese Moss is therefore not an accident, but a premeditated and legal assertion of individual rights, as indicated by her reference to 'our charter'.

Frida and Merrick's discussion reflects the nature of debates about surveillance, which pivot on issues of crime prevention and safety versus the protection of individual privacy. The irony of Frida's words lies in Merrick's inability to conceive of himself as a target of surveillance, which is exactly what he becomes over the course of the narrative. Merrick's dismay at the lack of surveillance technology on the Reserve arises from his previous compliance with such technology, which, the novel suggests, is simply a normal part of his life. While surveillance can be perceived in negative ways, as an invasive tool of Big Brother-like institutions or agencies, it can also be viewed in a positive light, as intimated by Merrick when he tells Frida of the crime-prevention benefits of such practices. Lyon's description of the ubiquity of surveillance in the modern world offers an effective rationale for Merrick's complicity:

Today's social and economic world is so deeply permeated by surveillance practices and processes that it is simply impossible to know about all that happens using personal data, let alone respond intelligently or imaginatively to it.

... Few stop to think what the surveillance might mean or where the data go. They simply acquiesce with the system. Indeed, if people did hesitate, let alone withdraw willing cooperation, everyday social life as we know it today would break down (*Surveillance Studies* 164).

It is not until Merrick becomes a target of surveillance that his views change. The development of Merrick's subjectivity is a central thematic concern of *Useful Idiots*, and the novel uses a number of innovative techniques to demonstrate changes in his perception of himself and relationship to society. Merrick's self-discovery revolves around the gradual recuperation of his own English ancestry. These origins are not immediately noticeable, causing the overtly racist Professor Ehrhardt to characterise him as a subject that has 'obviously assimilated' (83). An indication of this 'assimilation' is Merrick's surname, which was shortened at some point in his family's past in order to make its ethnic origins less visible: intended to hide such indicators of cultural and racial difference, this practice was once common amongst new migrants in countries like Australia or the USA. Merrick's successful sublimation of his Aboriginal ancestry is further emphasised by his invisibility as a subject. A repeated motif throughout the narrative is how other characters can never seem to remember Merrick, and he is constantly having to remind them who he is and where they have met before. Frida, of

course, who is used to others constructing her body as racialised and Other, has no such problem and remembers him immediately (103).

Merrick's transformation from a subject who is socially invisible to one who becomes the specific target of surveillance highlights the paradox of racialised subjectivity: that of being simultaneously invisible and visible. In both cases the lack of visibility or excess of visibility produces an abject or damaged subjectivity. The act of being constantly forgotten suggests that Merrick's subjectivity is disempowered. However, his development into a 'person of interest' and surveillance target is similarly disempowering, as it produces a paranoid subjectivity that is fearful and chaotic in response to the idea of being constantly watched.

Merrick's gradual acquisition of the status of 'surveillance target' culminates in an assassination attempt but, again, Mark evades a polarised representation of surveillance technology as intrinsically evil. This is partly because Merrick is never able to pinpoint with any confidence exactly who (or what) is trying to target him. The suggestion is that it may be a corporation or governmental authority, but this is never completely confirmed, although whoever is responsible has access to data about Merrick's movements at home, at work and in public spaces. The negative construction of technology as an invasive recorder of personal data is also mediated by Merrick's own video-recording activities. Merrick makes a video diary of the creation of his own pearl, a testament of what he has endured and the substantial pain involved. Although this record is eventually stolen, along with the pearl, the process of making the record is constructed as significant, as it is this very process that enables the development of Merrick's subjectivity, profoundly altering his perceptions of self and other.

Useful Idiots thus destabilises the relationship between race and surveillance. The novel's exploration of the impact of surveillance technology on individual subjectivity circumvents the typical categorisation of racialised subjects as targets of suspicion in a surveillance environment. Instead, the narrative places the Oysters outside of the surveillance sphere and reflects on the nature of complicity. In depicting Merrick's evolution from 'invisible and unnoticed' to surveillance target, Mark thus enables Merrick to experience the process of 'othering' as it is performed by surveillance technology – and his dawning consciousness of what it means to occupy the subject position of alienated Other.

The process of 'othering', which plays a fundamental role in the construction of the racialised subject, is also addressed in the novel's unconventional representation of the body. This unconventionality is achieved through the interrogation of white skin as a normative standard in the Western world – because in this social setting white skin is considered both abnormal and hideous, implying, although it is never directly stated, that black or coloured skin is now the standard. The novel takes a provocative approach to the racialised body, problematising common assumptions about the relationship between race and the human body. Physical differences between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations are extremely marked, because the Oysters have chosen

to eschew the innovations in biotechnology that were used to change or alter the human body in order to free it from disease and ageing:

As their forebears had seceded from the Union so they had seceded from health programmes, clinging to the miseries their ancestors had suffered on the grounds, presumably, that they were English afflictions ordained by evolution. Physical pain, deformity, injury must be endured, not cured, and the evidence of that was in their bones and on their faces. Their sight deteriorated, their hair fell out, their teeth grew crooked and decayed, they died before they needed to, and for what? For the satisfaction of being able to go to the grave saying, 'I am English' (231).

In one sense, therefore, the differences between the Oysters and non-Oysters are decidedly physical, because the bodies of the Oysters are ravaged by disease and visible signs of ageing. Such a distinction serves to emphasise 'biological' racial difference. However, the extract of narrator focalisation above clearly highlights the role of culture in producing this physical difference: the Oysters have willingly chosen to forego such technological advancements for the sake of preserving their cultural identity. This representation accordingly subverts and interrogates common assumptions about race in a real world context. Indigenous health is an issue of major concern in post-colonial societies such as Australia, Canada and the United States, where indigenous populations suffer rates of disease, substance abuse and mortality that are far higher than in the non-indigenous population. *Useful Idiots* plays with this notion, however, because the Oysters' obvious lack of healthcare is not a matter of economics or education (as it is in the real world), but a deliberate assertion of racial/cultural identity.

The construction of white skin as aberrant in *Useful Idiots* highlights the cultural relativity of concepts such as beauty, attractiveness and even what constitutes normal height (the Oysters are considered 'small' because they only grow to a maximum of 180cm). The Oysters' white skin is a potent symbol of difference, and is referred to in pejorative terms by members of the non-English majority, such as Professor Ehrhardt: 'You know what Oysters are like, smaller, unhealthier – not surprising, given the environment. And so *white*, positively fungal...' (83). The derogatory association of the physical Oyster body with fungus, and specifically with its connotations of disease, a lack of hygiene and rapid, out-of-control multiplication, inverts the popular social construction of non-white subjects as dirty. Joel Kovel's 1970 study, *White Racism*, made dirt integral to his analysis of how white people conceptualise racial difference. He suggests that non-white people are connected to the dirt that comes out of the body:

... the central symbol of dirt throughout the world is faeces, known by that profane word with which the emotion of disgust is expressed: shit... when contrasted with the light colour of the body of the Caucasian person, the dark colour of faeces reinforces, from the infancy of the individual in the culture of the West, the connotation of blackness with badness (87).

The symbolic association of blackness with evil and whiteness with purity and goodness is pervasive within Western culture, and has enjoyed an enduring tradition in fantasy literature for children, where evil characters are typically

associated with blackness—for example, the Orcs in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the evil force known simply as ‘the Dark’ in Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* sequence (1965–77). *Useful Idiots* thus attempts to dismantle this paradigm linguistically, as it creates a negative image of whiteness by connecting it with mould and decay. A similar strategy is evident in Malorie Blackman’s *Noughts and Crosses* (the first part of her *Noughts and Crosses* trilogy), which depicts an interracial romance set in a world where dark skin is considered racially superior to white. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs contends that Blackman’s novel offers what may be considered a rather simplistic inversion of real-world racial hierarchies, but her desire is to expose the arbitrary acts of power that function to exclude and marginalise racial minorities, with a view to provoking ‘discussion around the genesis of modern-day radical fundamentalist groups’ (245). *Useful Idiots* has a somewhat different agenda. Rather than simply inverting standard racial paradigms, it innovatively uses point of view and focalisation strategies to examine racial difference—firstly positioning Merrick as a subject who voyeuristically gazes at the hideously grotesque body of Frida as she dances; and then allowing him to experience the feeling of possessing and inhabiting a racialised body, as he grows a ‘pearl’ in his wrist. The Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing the depiction of the racialised body in *Useful Idiots*. Through its carnivalised inversion of the racial hierarchies that currently operate in the Western world, the novel situates itself in opposition to various forms of authority and normativity—most obviously those social structures that situate whiteness as a standard against which all other skin colours must be measured as ethnic, but also in the construction and development of Merrick’s subjectivity. As the narrative progresses, he is positioned in an increasingly conflicted relationship with governmental and social authority.

Within the tradition of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin termed the distortion of the natural into ugliness or caricature ‘grotesque realism’. Such distortion is readily apparent in Merrick’s first glimpses of Frida’s body, which he intently watches as she performs a ‘traditionally aboriginal’ dance on stage:

The auditorium darkened; the orchestra, positioned in a kind of gully in front of the stage, began playing; the red curtain went up like an eyelid. Pale lights spread across the silhouettes of rocks and out of the shadows advanced a squat shape, scuttling and creeping like crab. Did it move on its feet or its hands? Was that probing, hesitant limb an arm or a leg? Where was its head? In the mass of its cramped, warped body a dead-white face looked up suddenly and caught the light (22).

A key element of the grotesque body, writes Bakhtin, is that it ‘ignores the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body’ (317), presenting ‘another newly conceived body’ (318). The monstrosity of Frida’s body, as perceived by Merrick, arises out of its destabilisation of the boundaries between human and animal. He describes her as ‘thin and arachnid, too many joints’ (22), and her presence inspires uncertainty and ambiguity, as indicated by the series of questions that rush through his mind as she dances. Her body disturbs his

concept of how human bodies should look and move, and creates an image that is horrifyingly strange but also visually compelling. He cannot stop himself from staring at Frida's 'abnormal' and grotesque body, which epitomises difference and otherness. Later, as Merrick watches Frida remove her stage make-up, 'he could not stop his eyes slithering towards the mirror, where more and worse was being laid bare . . . With helpless disgust, Merrick looked away . . .' (28).

Frida's body exists at the intersection of multiple discourses and meanings, producing a proliferation of significance. On an overt level, as is evident from Merrick's focalisation, her body combines animalistic and human qualities in the 'primitive' movements and gestures she makes during the dance performance. His use of the pronoun 'it' is especially revealing, as it demonstrates his perception of her as inhuman and intrinsically Other. However, the novel's innovative use of defamiliarisation simultaneously produces a range of other meanings. Frida, as a white woman, is performing a dance that is being watched by Merrick and the other spectators as if it is an ancient cultural artefact, a primitive practice of a culture now in decline. That Frida is white disturbs the conventional association of whiteness with civilisation, prompting a revaluation of the civilised/primitive binary. Merrick's description of Frida's movements as she dances – which he describes with horror – soon make it clear that she is actually performing ballet ('One number required her to balance on her pointed toe for fourteen interminable minutes . . .' [322]). This representation of ballet, conventionally positioned as a high culture art form, as an archaic and therefore barbaric mode of expression – as evident from the disgust expressed by members of the audience, who view the act of standing on one's toes for such a long time to be 'unnatural' (322), even 'subhuman' (322) – thus has a polysemous function, which is achieved through the dialogic relationship between the novel's fantasy setting and consensus reality. The image of a white woman dancing ballet is refigured as an 'ancient' cultural relic, destabilising concepts of beauty, aesthetics and high culture through Merrick's focalisation, which is used to present this performance as abnormal, hideous and grotesque.

The transgressive and ambiguous potential of the grotesque body is a vital component of its representation – yet this function is often absent in texts produced for children and adolescents. John Stephens argues that the carnivalesque mode is used in children's literature to offer 'characters "time out" from the habitual constraints of society', at the same time providing 'a safe return to social normality' (*Language and Ideology* 121). *Useful Idiots* is therefore unusual in its embrace of the carnivalesque's subversive agenda. Within grotesque realism, this manifests as a depiction of the body that is inherently transformative, encompassing both life (birth) and death (decay). The grotesque body, writes Bakhtin, 'is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed' (317). *Useful Idiots* achieves this duality and plurality in its representation of Merrick's body as he grows his own 'pearl'. Although the English are disparagingly referred to as 'Oysters' from the opening pages of the novel, the origins of this name are not properly explained until much later in the narrative. Merrick discovers that several hundred years ago, insect

populations began to increase and move into new regions, and a particular horsefly became prominent in the marshlands where the English community lived. These insect bites often became infected and resulted in the (indigenous) body's production of a calcified 'pearl', which eventually erupted from the skin. The scarcity of these pearls meant that they soon became increasingly valuable – to the extent that some unscrupulous dealers deliberately injected the horsefly venom into indigenous subjects. The actual pearls themselves, and the related name for the English, 'Oysters', therefore function as a potent symbol of racial difference and exploitation.

Merrick's decision to 'grow' his own pearl marks a turning point in the novel's representation of racial Otherness. As mentioned previously, Merrick's own racial status is liminal, as he has English blood but lives as (and passes for) a member of the non-indigenous majority. However, his focalisation and point of view clearly position him in opposition to the English, as indicated by the horror he experiences while viewing Frida's body as she dances and his perception of her home as alienating and primitive. Once he infects himself with the insect venom and begins the process of growing the pearl, in order to obtain proof of the pearls' existence and origin, Merrick's body undergoes substantial trauma, and as this happens his point of view dramatically changes as his own body becomes grotesque and he embraces the Otherness of the Oysters.

The ideological shift in what constitutes a 'grotesque body' – from Frida's racialised body to Merrick's own body, which becomes racialised during the process of growing the pearl – is crucial to the novel's thematic significance, which pivots on Merrick's dawning consciousness of what it means to be conceived as the Other. The grotesque body is a body in processes of exchange, and sometimes of transgression of the individual self. Bakhtin posits that it represents the point at which the individual body penetrates and intersects with the outside world and with other bodies. The transgressive potential of Merrick's body as it grows the pearl is repeatedly emphasised through the analogy of a pregnant woman about to give birth:

'Like being pregnant,' Joris had said. This then was the quickening, the moment when the mother felt the baby move for the first time and knew that she carried a living creature. This moment was nowhere near so joyous – what he carried was not alive – but this was his first consciousness of something being in there, beginning to displace the bones it grew among (316).

Merrick's sudden awareness of the physical transformation that has occurred, and is occurring, in his body, which in essence involves a foreign presence, is symbolically complex. In choosing to go through the process of creating a pearl, Merrick has voluntarily elected to undergo a harrowing and painful experience that has, until now, been experienced only by Oyster subjects. The pearls are equated with racial exploitation in the novel, so Merrick's gesture of enduring the same experience is significant on both a literal level, in that it will act as demonstrable proof of the practice, and a symbolic one, as an act of empathy, in that his body will suffer the same pain as many Oysters before him. This

interpretation is then destabilised somewhat by the repeated parallels drawn between Merrick's body and that of a gestating woman. The correspondence disturbs the racial symbolism, equating Merrick's body with the feminine—a similarly potent figure of otherness—and contributing to the novel's carnivalised mode of representation and production of multiple layers of meaning.

Useful Idiots offers readers a sophisticated and innovative deconstruction of race that goes far beyond the type of pro-tolerance racial advocacy that is usually found in children's fiction. Mark's exploration of the subject of racial difference within a fantasy setting puts to good use the capacity of fantasy to provide readers with a defamiliarised depiction of the world that they know, and demonstrates that by presenting familiar phenomena in strange ways it is possible to interrogate and subvert established social paradigms. Through her focus on race in *Useful Idiots* Mark employs a number of highly inventive strategies to prompt readers to reevaluate the insidious ways in which racial difference is constructed and perpetuated in modern society. The most prevalent of these is a refusal to examine race in conventional ways. The novel is not interested in creating a sympathetic portrayal of racial marginality, which has been the practice in realist children's fiction that deals thematically with race. Indeed, *Useful Idiots* sets out to confound such a tendency by presenting a world that is overtly characterised by racial inequality. The novel is more concerned with destabilising the construction of whiteness as a normative racial standard, which it achieves by representing whiteness as aberrant and repulsive and hence emphasises the socially constructed nature of racial categories of identity. In itself, this technique simply inverts the racial hierarchy that dominates the history of the modern world, but Mark's skill as a novelist lies in her employment of focalisation and point of view strategies, which in this case are used to gradually transform Merrick into a racialised subject. His gradual awareness of what it is like to occupy a position of Otherness, whether as a target of governmental surveillance or because he possesses a 'deviant' body which symbolises racial difference, is the cornerstone of the novel's success. This encourages readers to reflect critically on the processes that construct social institutions that actively exclude the participation of racialised subjects.

The narrative closure of *Useful Idiots* is a testament to Mark's skilful frustration of conventional assumptions about race, appropriate story endings and even the concept of childhood itself, in terms of what is considered to be a suitable form of thematic or ideological closure in books for young readers. When Merrick makes his way to the Briease Moss (the Aboriginal Reserve) at the end of the novel, the Oysters show him little empathy. Rather, they view him quite simply as a man in possession of something extremely valuable. After being captured and drugged, he is eventually rescued by Frida, but she, too, proves to be motivated by self-interest rather than altruism. She and Merrick have sex, but this supposed demonstration of affection and trust is illusory because, at the moment of climax, Frida bites the pearl out of Merrick's wrist and when he wakes in the morning she has disappeared. This ending refuses to engage in

the construction of Frida as Merrick's salvation, which, drawing on discourses of the noble savage or of indigenous subjectivity as equated with spirituality, would have positioned her in accordance with a stereotypical notion of ethnicity. Instead, this resolution draws attention to the similarities between Frida and the group of non-Indigenous individuals in positions of authority (government agents such as Mirandola) that has covertly manipulated Merrick and various other 'useful idiots' in order to engineer a situation that will further disenfranchise the indigenous population: both are practitioners of deceit, motivated entirely by self-interest. The great triumph of this novel is its ability to shape such closure into a positive experience. Merrick has been used, manipulated and deceived, but as he emerges from the marshes singing an old English folk song, 'In Nottamun Town', it is clear that he is a changed man. Bradford et al (*New World Orders*) note that the novel uses a version of the ballad which was collected in Cecil Sharp's *Eighty English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1974) and Merrick's act of remembering its words in entirety (he has previously only managed to remember half of it, as he lay in the stacks convinced that he was about to die) signifies that his experiences with the Oysters have helped to uncover a long-forgotten part of his English cultural and racial identity. The process of becoming Othered has fundamentally altered his perception and enabled the recovery of fragmented memories from his past. Unlike many other novels for children and adolescents that simplify race by reducing it to a social issue or a problem that can be 'rectified' by providing sympathetic portrayals of ethnicity, *Useful Idiots* acknowledges the complexity of race within social relationships and offers readers a highly innovative and unconventional exploration of the social discourses that construct and perpetuate racial hierarchies.

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