

# Light on shades: complex constructions of identity in the poetry of Chris Mann

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**Chris Mann openly acknowledges the importance for his writing of the Zulu concept of the shades. This paper examines his use of this key aspect of Zulu spirituality and argues that its presence in his poetry allows him to affirm a consciously-created African identity. By doing this, it will be suggested that Mann both subverts the rigidly physical categorizations of racial politics and creates a third space in which he places himself at once between and beside 'the assumed "polarities" of conflict' (Bhabha 1999).**

In one of his earliest poems 'Whistling in the dark' (1977, 16-17), Chris Mann evokes a dinner party at which the conversation 'turns to them' (l.4). The poet speaker, refusing to collude with the unthinking acceptance of the colonial binaries of self and other conveyed by this telling use of the third person plural, attempts to counter it by wearily responding 'once more, that we are they and they/ are we' (ll. 22-23). Faced then with 'perplexity/ and indignation' (ll.23-24), he can only regret that

Even with the window open  
and the rock of a calm mountain  
filling half the night,  
neither side can allow  
myself to be me. (ll. 28-32)

The shifting pronouns in these pained and painful lines clearly reveal that issues of South African identity are seemingly inextricably bound to what

Malvern van Wyk Smith calls the 'complex dialectic of appropriation and resistance' (1990, 66).

Mann's concern that his society will not permit him to live as himself goes to the heart of contemporary debates about identity which reiterate that the sense of self is crucial to the discovery of both meaning and experience since, as Ricoeur observes,

Our life, when then embraced in a single glance, appears to us as a field of constructive activity, borrowed from narrative understanding, by which we attempt to discover and not simply impose from the outside the narrative identity which constitutes us. (1991, 32)

Identity then is the story of the self as told and created by that same self. Unfortunately, the previous legislative entrenchment of racial injustice within South Africa has polarized and prolonged the colonial dichotomies between self and other, settler and indigene, to the extent that local identity is often imposed by these socially-constructed roles rather than discovered by any act of individual will. Within this restrictive dialectic, Mann finds himself defined as a settler regardless of whether his individual consciousness accepts or rejects such definition.

This is perhaps not as surprising as it may at first seem. Critics like Bhabha (1994) have complicated our understanding of the colonial paradigm by suggesting that the subaltern, a standard designation for the colonial subject constructed both by European discourse and his or her internalization of that discourse, may serve as an agent of resistance against rather than of compliance with the very discourse defining such a person's subordination. Bhabha, in particular, raises the possibility that mimicry, which he defines as 'at once both resemblance and menace' (1994, 86), may be used to create a third space which

is part of an unceasing process or movement that is at once in-between and beside the assumed “polarities” of conflict, unsettling any essentialist or foundationalist claim to the “originary.” (1999, s.p.)

By contrast, the figure of the settler is in critical terms still inescapably a monolithic emblem of oppression. Yet, Bhabha’s argument in relation to the oppressed may surely be brought to bear on the identities of the oppressors as well. In *The location of culture* (1994), for instance, Bhabha states that cultural identities cannot be ascribed to pre-given, irreducible, scripted cultural traits but involve the continuing interface and exchange of cultural performances since ‘terms of engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively’ so that ‘the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing’ (1994, 2 & 5).

This sense of identity as fluid and resulting from a performative engagement with the world is clearly apparent in Chris Mann’s use of the concept of ‘shades’. He first came on it while studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. In a speech given at the National University of Singapore in 2003, Mann described this as ‘a strangely exhilarating and disorienting’ time during which he sees himself as having been ‘a deeply unsettled person’ wishing to remake himself independently of what had come to be perceived as a profoundly limited and limiting cultural identity. During this liminal period of flux and frustration, he first encountered Axel-Ivor Berglund’s *Zulu thought patterns and symbolism* which deals, among other things, with the concept of the *amadlozi*, ancestral spirits whose presence in various forms saturates the belief system of the Xhosa and Zulu people of South Africa. For Chris Mann Berglund’s work came as a revelation. As he puts it himself, it was as if ‘a gate in the wall opened one afternoon’ (2003, s.p.).

In discussing the shades, Berglund avoids using the word ‘ancestor’ claiming that in English this suggests ‘ascendants who are dead’ (1976, 29). Instead he elects to use the word ‘shade’ feeling that this better expresses the Zulu sense that those whose bodies have died may still be experienced as living

realities by those open to their influence. The term 'shade', however, is also a direct translation of the Zulu word *isithunzi*, used to evoke a much larger and less clearly defined spiritual concept which incorporates the *amadlozi* but is by no means limited to them. Doke and Vilakazi's *Zulu-English Dictionary* (1948, 893), for instance, translates *isithunzi* as referring firstly to the literal shades and shadows cast by the sun, secondly to moral weight, influence or prestige, and thirdly to the soul or personality. Thus, Berglund suggests it is possible both for living people to operate as shades and to be conscious of the shades as forces operating from within rather than from without. As one of Berglund's informants says,

They are in the head. When I dream they are in the head, causing me to see the dream. I see my eyes being closed. I do not see things outside [me]. I see the things that are inside [me or my head]. That is where they are when they cause dreams. They are inside. (1976, 115)

The importance of this concept for Mann's developing selfhood is clearly shown by the fact that it is an awareness of the presence of his familiar shades which allows him to constitute himself in opposition to a visiting Greek poet, probably Seferis, in 'After the visit of a Greek poet to the Transvaal' (1977, 14). In this poem the visitor is silenced by absence; the historical, botanical, personal and literary materials from which he has constructed both identity and a voice are negated by 'the sunswept plains' (l.1) of the highveld. Looking for asphodels, he is blind to the spiky blue African lily beside him. Unable to hear the sounds of melancholy Cetshwayo, brave Woltemade or 'long-teated Tutula' (l.13) which haunt the mind of the poet speaker, the displaced Greek returns to Europe 'troubled by the silence of the dead' (l.8).

Later, in 'Cookhouse station' dedicated to his sister Jackie, Mann urges attentiveness not only to what can be seen at any given moment but to what might be seen if one took a more diachronic perspective. He thus emphasizes that this small rural halt, so easily dismissed by those who travel *through* rather than *to* it, can be restored to vivid life by the proper acknowledgement

not only of its contemporary inhabitants whether 'migrant workers with their blankets' (l.18) or 'the girl/ the trainee soldiers whistle at' (ll.20-21) but also by

the shades of those who once lived there,  
squatting in the cool of the blue-gum tree,  
at ease in the fellowship of the after-death. (ll.27-29)

Without acknowledging these last, in particular, Mann suggests that the travellers' interaction with the place is so devalued that it corresponds to that of the archetypal colonial; the passengers on the train so restrict their experience that they may as well not have 'passed that way at all' (l.32).

'In praise of the shades' (1977, 26), another early poem, expresses Mann's awareness of the *isithunzi* even more explicitly. In this poem the poet speaker hitches a ride with an elderly Zulu man who unembarrassedly acknowledges the constant companionship of these spiritual guides. After disembarking from his battered vehicle, the speaker too pauses to evoke those *isithunzi* linked to him by either blood or ink, saying,

And they have always been our companions,  
dressed in the flesh of the children they reared,  
gossiping away from the books they left,  
a throng who even in the strongest light  
are whispering, "You are not what you are,  
remember us, then try to understand." (ll. 25-30)

Significantly, Mann's interaction with these shades is neither passive nor reverential but an active and critical engagement within the disparate elements constituting his sense of self:

They come like pilgrims from the hazy seas  
which shimmer at the borders of a dream,  
not such spirits that they can't be scolded  
not such mortals that they can be profaned,  
for scolding them we honour each other,  
and honouring them, we perceive ourselves. (ll. 31-36)

The concept of the shades thus allows Mann to both personalize and animate what Manuel Castells refers to as the historical, biological, spiritual and domestic building blocks of identity (1997). In this way he is freed to accept, reject, confront and rejoice in his polyphonic inheritance, recognizing as he once put it in an interview with Robin Malan, that our souls are not singular or immutable entities but 'communities of shades' (In Mann 1992, 7).

Certainly the shades throng Mann's poems. Sometimes his lines reverberate in traditional Zulu fashion with the experiences of his father. In 'A field in Italy' (2002, 38-42), for instance, Mann records a visit to an Italian family who sheltered his father during the Second World War. In examining his motives for the visit he says,

I've come to this field in Italy  
in search of this presence.  
This shade. My father's.  
The soldier, cricketer, hero  
who died when I was four. (IV, ll.36-40)

By the end of the poem he is able to conclude:

I sense he is with me, of me  
much more than before.  
I am ready. To see him home. (VIII, ll. 8-10)

At other times he challenges tradition by celebrating living shades: his family, whose 'tears and questioning, ... rancour and embrace/ bring home where I have been, and who I have become.' (2002: 32). *South Africans*, a set of what Mann calls portrait poems, was published in 1996 and explores with buoyant delight in particularity a range of disparate yet recognizably local identities from Bob de Boer 'who built the room in which I wrote/ I wrote the poem in which you live' (ll. 20-21) to Piet Velile Jek 'dressed in a tie and frayed white shirt,/ a seal-black waistcoat and a Homburg hat' (ll. 3-4).

For Roland Barthes the proper name is the gathering place of meanings, 'the sum, the point of convergence' of adjectives and attributes.(1974, 179) and certainly the dialectic contained within Jek's two given names reflects his divided life as both 'Spry-bushbuck-of-Hintsa' (l.10) and subservient braaier of chops for Mann's grandfather in

the era of the unrepentant baas,  
the white South Africa of khaki shorts,  
radios that crackled and the war up north  
of blacks born years before the rinderpest  
lifting their hats to farmers in lorries  
thundering across the cattle-grids to town. (ll.13-18)

Mann recognizes Jek's power in lines which consciously echo the rhythms of the traditional *imbongi* or praise poet: 'Ah! Centre-pole-of-the-homestead!/  
The-bender-that-never-breaks!' (ll.46-47). Thus by choosing to see Jek as moulded by both his ancestral *amadlozi*, who define him as Velile (the one who is apparent or has appeared), and by Mann's grandfather and his peers, who have presumably been responsible for the name Piet, Mann is enabled to interrogate the settler shades tormenting him. He does this repeatedly, finding increasingly that their presence does little to structure or give meaning to his daily existence. In 'New lands' (1982, 30), for instance, he seems to dismiss them almost entirely:

I search my European bones and find  
the patchwork quilts and eiderdowns retain  
no chants, no dances from their origins.

I listen to my African sinews  
and hear, as faint as the whistle of birds  
in reed across a vlei that can't be crossed  
the praise-poets reciting the dead, bringing  
the old into the presence of the new. (ll. 28-35)

Thus brought himself from the old world into the new, Mann decided in the eighties to acknowledge the centrality of his African identity by willingly adopting the name Zithulele, ironically meaning the silent or taciturn one, which had been given to him by the Zulu of the Valley Trust among whom he

worked for many years. His consciously-chosen hybrid name, Chris Zithulele Mann, thereafter becomes a symbolic inversion of the antagonistic binaries imposed on Jek. By deliberately altering his name, a profoundly important indicator of identity, Mann hopes to make real his own assertion that in this century 'many and probably a growing number of people are saturated by shades that originate in other cultures' (1992, 9), a view echoed by De Toro who suggests that

today with the blurring of boundaries that once surrounded totalizing discourses...we can only position ourselves with regard to a nomadic subjectivity in a nonhierarchical space, where discourses are being constantly territorialized, deterritorialized and reterritorialized. (1995, 39)

Ironically, Mann's largely intuitive grasp of this new approach to issues of identity is perhaps most apparent in poems which evoke the shades of the past rather than those of the present. Sensitive, as always, to the complexity of contemporary South African life, Mann is aware that he cannot simply appropriate for himself the voice of the colonial subject because to do so would be to become complicit in the very colonial strategies that he continually resists. As Robert Young (1990, 165) points out: '[in] any attempt to turn the other into a self, the anti-imperialist perspective has to come to terms with the fact that the very project of imperialism was to do the very same thing.' So, in 'Saying goodbye to the Romans' (2002, 28), Mann neatly reverses the colonial antinomies of his own experience by evoking the almost forgotten shades of his own once-colonised *amadlozi*. His persona, an ancient Briton, considers the Roman withdrawal from his country in a monologue shifting from joyous celebration, 'it was so exhilarating to be free' (I, l.10), to a weary realization that the withdrawal of the oppressor can never be more than symbolic since 'to advance,/ we'd have to take Rome into our hearts' (III, l.4). In these lines Mann thus suggests, but crucially avoids insisting, that, as he has been shaped by African shades, so too may European ones have moulded the consciousness of his black compatriots.

In 'Sterkfontein ancestor' (2002, 14), Mann similarly sidesteps the complex human interactions which fissure the present to reach across three million years and touch a hominid skull 'chipped stick-like from the oozing limestone of a cave' (l.2) and find in this common ancestor of all humanity, 'our Earth Madonna, and shade released from stone' (l.25). Mann's use of the word 'Madonna' is obviously intended to evoke a complex cluster of Christian associations, which remind the reader that he has openly stated that while 'my vocation is poetry ... my faith is Christian' (2003, s.p.).

For Mann then, Christ is always a crucial shade. In 'Nightscapes' (1981, 40), for instance, when the poet faces a dark night, the kind that 'blows a little void around our souls' (l.8), he attempts to counter 'the darkness roaring through the dark' (l.4) by reaching first for books and then for friends and fellow poets like MacLennan and Fatyi and 'the precious irregular web' (l.13) that is his family. When these fail him he turns to a Christ whose Judaeian circumstances in an occupied land mirror his own all too closely:

My Master, alone and fasting, the lamps  
of army pickets, conquered towns below  
and burning, burning as he walked the dross  
of human dreams away to bring new sweetness near.  
(ll.17-20)

In loving all these disparate shades and granting that they breathe his breath, Mann finds new powers of endurance:

I hear a bustling in the void,  
my soul perceives its peopled self, finds strength  
to keep the wrenching darkness back a while. (ll.21-23)

In a country with a past defined by opposition and rejection, Chris Mann thus uses the concept of the shades to blur boundaries and offer a 'third space' in which new and less divisive South African identities may be moulded. He recognizes that after almost five hundred years of co-dependancy, the voices

of South Africans are unavoidably composite and this allows his poems to enrich his readers' own sense of identity since, as Ricoeur observes:

...to understand is to understand oneself in front of the text. It is not a question of imposing on the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self. (1981, 143)

It is this awareness that is clearly expressed in the concluding stanza of Mann's 'Parliament of shades', an as yet unpublished poem, in which the speaker observes that

Democracy will always be shallow  
until it is ensconced within our souls.  
We cannot make peace with each other  
until we make peace with our shades.

South Africans of settler descent face an uncertain future in a world where, as Mann reminds his readers in 'Rini bougainvillea' (2002, 37), only 'what is indigenous survives' (l. 17). However, he also offers hope that those who allow the shades of Africa to sing within them may, against all odds, endure and become 'like the bougainvillea/ indigenous within its niche' (ll. 15-16).

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