As the title suggests, this article bears some relationship to Henri Lefebvre’s analysis on the ‘production of space’ even if the context is very different. My topic is the representation of social and interior space – interior in the sense of what we might call psychological depth – in some of the early fiction of one of Zimbabwe’s great writers, Charles Mungoshi. I explore how his literary representations of space (what Lefebvre calls ‘representational space’) feed off and into simultaneous discourses on space (‘represented space’) – in the present case the socio-political discourse of modernity.¹

The fiction I consider in this article was written at different times before independence in a climate of intensifying apartheid politics and at the height of political repression and war. These circumstances inevitably gave issues of literary representation a high political charge. In Mungoshi’s case, the question of representation of space further takes the form of an inquiry into literary form, or more precisely into the effects of the use of ostensibly ‘imported’ literary forms. One of the striking features of Mungoshi’s fiction is his use of recognisably modernist techniques, and the effects of this ‘translation’ of modernism into a black Zimbabwean situation is the central concern of my article.

In what follows, I will demonstrate first, that his stories present social landscapes where zones of ostensible modernity and tradition are at one and the same time strictly separated and overlapping; and second, that they portray black subjectivity as deeply complex and even obscure unto themselves as to their motives, drives, desires and feelings. These may seem banal enough conclusions on their own but they are less so when placed in their proper context. My argument is that Mungoshi’s representations both incorporate and react against then-current powerful discourses on modernity and that the employment of modernist literary techniques was a central part of this.

First, however, I want to make a remark on theoretical terminology and method. In his *Rewriting Modernity*, David Atwell uses Ortiz’s term ‘transculturation’ to frame his discussion of instances of cultural production in South African history in terms of a negotiation of – and often a struggle for – modernity. In the South African setting, from the early settler days to the development of full-blown apartheid, he argues, modernity (that ‘notoriously baggy’² concept) presented itself as a package of values, phenomena and practices that were seen as having European origin and which were reserved for South Africa’s white population. For the Black South African writers Atwell discusses, the division created the unsettling experience of being excluded from an *a priori* inclusion in modernity to which there was at the same time no alternative. ‘There [was] no escape clause’, Atwell writes, ‘from the encounter with modernity, unless one [was] to accept isolation or eccentricity’.³ Black South African writers in response sought to appropriate the literary and cultural forms that were associated with it and use them to assert their own modernity. ‘Transculturation’

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³ Atwell 4.
in this context names the authors’ practices of turning foreign literary forms into vehicles capable of expressing black South African concerns and identities in a process that involves ‘destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms’.  

The value of the concept ‘transculturation’ for Atwell’s analyses is clear and given that both the topic and the claim of this article are quite close to some of his, it would seem suitable to adopt his terminology. Two theoretical reasons make me hesitate, however. First, it is not always clear to what extent ‘destruction’ or ‘entirely new terms’ figure in his analyses. Atwell’s discussion of the Soweto poets’ appropriation of lyric poetry (and their subsequent turn to epic as a more socially effective genre) is a case in point. Atwell demonstrates how the poets in times of increasingly aggressive apartheid co-opted a genre and gave it a new significance. ‘The answer to the question of why the tradition was useful’, Atwell writes,

is surely that the performance of the ‘overheard utterance’ was a defence against the programme of radical humanization that had been under way in apartheid for a generation or more. The lyric poem, in other words, conveyed a distillation of agency to the distinctive human subject, and the instillation of a contemplative (and sometimes angry) voice – these were powerful, appealing weapons in the prevailing climate.

It can be noted that Atwell’s conclusion does not mention what is ‘destroyed’ in the process of transculturation, nor what the ‘entirely new terms’ entail. Rather, the process seems to demonstrate the taking over and articulating of a promise that the literary genre arguably embodies (of having a voice, being a human agent) but that the overall prevailing ideology of apartheid – that perhaps influences the distribution of reading material and the interpretation of literature directly or indirectly or both – forbids black subjects. Charles Mungoshi’s appropriation of literary modernism is equally difficult to discuss in terms of destruction and reconstruction. For these reasons, although my reading of Mungoshi’s literary space will follow Atwell quite closely in some respects, and despite his claim that ‘translation’ is a weaker concept, I will discuss it as a matter of ‘translating modernity’.

The choice of this ‘weaker’ term, as Atwell labels it, is not entirely defensive. Ato Quayson has made ‘translation’ the key term in his theoretical elaboration of the transfer of languages (words and phrases) and literary-cultural features (tropes and genres) from one cultural context to another and from one discursive domain to another. Importantly, in his view, the languages or domains in question need in no way be equal for translation to happen; in fact, as the piece of biography Quayson provides as background for the development of his concept reveals, they seldom are: everyday life in the African colony, he notes, was often conducted in and through several different indigenous languages, but

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4 Atwell 18.
5 Atwell 149.
6 Atwell 18.
the language of education was always European, in my case English. This meant that we always had to go through a process of translating the language of the commonplace into the language of reason and vice versa.7

(It may be noted in passing that this everyday experience of continuous translation is also Mungoshi’s. Like Quayson, he was educated in both vernacular and colonial languages – Shona and English – and is immersed in different cultural traditions, he writes in both English and Shona, and is used to ‘translating’, in Quayson’s wider sense, the requirements and demands of different languages and cultures. As he has said in an interview, writing in both languages produces different results: ‘The Shona experience would be slightly different from what I would write in English’.8) If it may be objected that little is gained by ridding oneself of a difficult task to embrace a term that appears close to vacuous, then so be it; the motivation is that it makes for a better match between theory and case study.

A second reason for employing Quayson’s theoretical framework, is that it has built into it, as it were, an awareness of the significance of discursive thresholds in the material it investigates, and self-reflexive knowledge of its own analytical delimitations. By bringing attention to the ‘translation’ between different discursive domains, Quayson manages to focus and jointly discuss the complex relations between different fields of activity and meaning such as ‘literature’, ‘political discourse’, ‘culture’, and ‘society’ without eliding their differences and collapsing one into the other. His discussion of the ‘threshold’ figure of the ‘culture hero’, in urban myth, in fiction, and political rhetoric bears this out in brilliant detail.9 Such analysis serves both as a healthy qualification and a reminder for criticism that makes claims for the social value of literature. It also foregrounds its own speculative dimension. The social component Quayson isolates or the relationship he uncovers is the result of extrapolation and analytical abstraction. His is a reading for the social, rather than either through it or of it.10

For the present article, Quayson’s ambition can only be taken as a call to further declaration of scope and expression of modesty. I will make a claim for the cultural and social value of Mungoshi’s writing as potential; I will not express views on what role his fiction has played. Mine is a reading for the social dimension of his fiction, not an empirical study of its social function. In what follows, I will look at how Mungoshi, under harsh circumstances, channels and modifies features of recognisably European modernism into Zimbabwean (Rhodesian) fiction in a way that could be called social, if not properly political, writing. Using a few short stories from the collection Setting Sun and the Rolling World as examples, I will demonstrate that Mungoshi ‘translates’ modernist techniques into a literary aesthetic that allows him to go beyond reductive and prevailing discursive divisions of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ space, and to present black Zimbabwean literary characters as opaque,

7 Ato Quayson, Calibrations: Reading for the Social (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003) xii.
8 Carol Sicherman, “‘We Have Still to Shed a Few of Lucifer’s Feathers … ’ Interview with Charles Mungoshi’, ed. Raoul Granqvist, Canonization and Teaching of African Literatures (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990) 125.
9 Quayson 30-55.
10 Quayson xv.
psychologically deep, and, by implication, not easily mappable for a colonial administration that had every intention to survey its subjects and exclude them from modernity.

The arrangement and control (including the symbolic control) of different spaces were key concerns in the Rhodesian colonial state from its beginning. Scholars like Terence Ranger and Jocelyn Alexander have shown that the settler state developed out of efforts to consolidate, regulate and administer the land stolen from the native Africans. Once a state, Rhodesia developed and legally enshrined racial segregation and in this way created what Mahmood Mamdani has called a ‘bifurcated state’. The result of the laws were that Africans were forced to move to reserves, that vast spaces were allocated to white farms, and that the emerging urban space was marked as white. The black population was seen as possible visitors to the city, but not full-blown city-dwellers.

The material ordering of space along race lines was accompanied by a cultural coding of space in a register of modernity. ‘Settler discourse’ as Anthony Chennells has called it, both justified and reinforced the categorisation of Rhodesians by associating cities with white, ‘modern’, architecture, administration, and lifestyle, and the village with black, ‘traditional’ belief, customs, and spirituality. Reality, not surprisingly, was more complex and the ideology on modernity was persistently proven wrong by the actual doings of people. Cities relied heavily on black servants and workers, and through the colonial period, as Theresa Barnes and Elizabeth Schmidt have shown, there were steady flows of black Rhodesians journeying between city and village. These commuting men and women put the spaces of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ into contact, established specific forms of modern life in the city and altered the ‘traditional’ ways of the village. The urban *mapoto* relationships, which ranged from romantic love relations to unveiled prostitution, and the commercialisation of bride-prices, are only two examples of changes this migration brought about. The state was no doubt aware of the urban dependence on black workers but did its best to uphold the distinction, for instance by refusing to equip townships with amenities such as electricity, sanitation, recreation halls, etc, that belonged to a properly ‘modern’ way of life. ‘Settler discourse’, Chennells remarks, registered this *de facto* presence of black people in the cities through paradox: while the idea of modernity presumed that everybody could become modern – at least in theory – black Rhodesians who entered urban space were figured not as participants in modernity but as victims of deeply foreign civilisation processes that

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14 Alexander 22; Vambe 152.
16 Vambe 152.

threw them into a ‘limbo of false appearances, immorality, debauchery and brutality’.  

The stratification of physical and social space went hand in hand with more disciplinary forms of government. The conflation of ruling and civilising that Achille Mbembe has singled out as a typical feature of colonial rule was a fact also in Rhodesia, and the state adamantly surveyed the cultural education of its black subjects. The school was the primary arena for such efforts and while the majority of black students were not allowed to reach the upper levels of education, certain individuals did. At these levels, literary and cultural tuition played significant parts. Mungoshi has recalled how he was taught in English – the language of ‘reason’ – from secondary school on and how his interest in European literature was formed during his school days.

An equally important but more ambiguous role was played by the Literature Bureau, a government body set up in 1953 under the Ministry of Education to address the fact that black Rhodesia was becoming a culture of ‘literacy without literature’. The Bureau’s task was to foster reading habits and promote and regulate the publication of black Rhodesian writing and it did this by organising competitions, handing out prizes, publishing dictionaries, and by gradually taking on the role of a literary agency for literature in Shona and Ndebele. It also ensured that black Rhodesian fiction kept to the acceptable topics and was written in an indigenous language. Politics and religion were not, nor was English an acceptable language for fiction (Mungoshi had his Anglophone fiction published by British and German publishing houses).

Mungoshi emerged on the writing scene against this general backdrop and in a period of intensifying political struggle against the Rhodesian state, with heightening political segregation and strict surveillance and control of all black literary expression. Political and social segregation took two major forms: the first involved the shaping of geographical and social space according to current ideologies, the second the discourses and ideologies themselves. For authors like Mungoshi, being able to work in the country and be published (as he was, both in and outside the country), meant being pragmatic: adapting to conditions of strict censorship while at the same time trying to stay true to literary visions (even if this did not safeguard the writer: Mungoshi’s *Coming of the Dry Season* was banned in 1974). It was also a period of inward-looking and soul-searching literature, according to Flora Veit-Wild, who has called Mungoshi’s generation the ‘lost’ generation of Zimbabwean literature, remarkable for thematising the cultural alienation and crises of authority that ensued

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19 Sicherman 112.
21 Veit-Wild 72-3.
22 Veit-Wild 72; Sicherman 113.
23 Veit-Wild 220.

from the encounter between so-called traditional social forms and colonial modernity.\textsuperscript{24}

In Mungoshi’s early stories, the crises are intimately related to the arrangement and coding of social and mental space, and terms inherited from ‘settler discourse’s’ register on modernity play a significant part. In ‘The Brother’, a boy about to begin school travels to the city to visit an older brother who is supposed to be his guardian. Excited, and bringing with him letters from their father and his brother’s wife, the boy boards the bus. The meeting turns out to be a disaster; the brother has turned into an alcoholic adulterer who brings home an under-aged girl and coerces her into having sex. The decadence of the older brother’s urban lifestyle contrasts sharply with the moral life of the village, and from the first glimpse of the brother’s dwelling, the difference is brought home:

They sat on the sofas in the living-room. There were some magazine pictures of naked women hung on the walls. For some reason, Tendai had expected to see some pictures of his brother’s recent wedding. There were just those naked women, a big portrait of his brother in dark glasses, like a black pop star, and some out-of-date calendars displaying more naked women.\textsuperscript{25}

In the story ‘Coming of the Dry Season’, the difference between rural life and urban decadence is equally stark. The protagonist is a young city-dweller who has promised his mother to return to her village once his salary has been paid. But when the money comes, he squanders it in an extended drinking bout, buys a girl for the night (at least that is what he thinks) and forgets his mother until he is too broke to travel to her village. After the weekend, he receives a letter that she is dead.

This coding of village and city in terms of a morality so consistent with ‘settler discourse’, is partly offset, however, by a more complex rendering of space in which locations are related to, or even folded into, one another. When he can no longer stand his brother’s behaviour, the young protagonist in ‘The Brother’ leaves his house, goes to a nearby church, and finds behind it a few trees under which he sleeps contentedly.\textsuperscript{26} In ‘Coming of the Dry Season’ the guilt-ridden protagonist reflects on his mother’s death and recalls how intensely he hated her requests for money and favours. In the social geography Mungoshi’s stories present, pockets of ‘traditional’ space and its accompanying moral behaviour may be found in the city, and the codes of village life have already been transformed under the impact of urban modernity, even to the extent that it estranges its members. Instead of repeating the clear-cut demarcations of ‘settler discourse’, Mungoshi’s fiction shows the transformation of social space to be complex, and only partially tied to geography.

Mungoshi’s fiction, then, both registers and transforms the codes connected with the geographical and social production of Rhodesian space. He inherits elements of a white discourse on modernity according to which black people are not true urbanites but fall into ruin in the city, and in this way sides with a number of black (and white) authors who, in Rino Zhuwarara’s words, made the ‘wickedness’ of the city a ‘favourite theme’ during the early decades of Zimbabwean (Rhodesian)

\textsuperscript{24} Veit-Wild 154.
\textsuperscript{26} Mungoshi 59.
But he also refutes the binarism of this discourse – not by abandoning its structuralising terms, but by complicating them, by showing that city and village exist in relation without distinct boundaries.

If Mungoshi’s fiction both relies on and intervenes into Rhodesian discourses on social space in the way it represents city, village, and the relation between them, it also produces its own literary-aesthetic space with important social implications. Through literary form, and in particular through the use of narrative voice, Mungoshi’s fiction projects for his characters an inner space that is deep and not fully explainable.

Formally and stylistically, Mungoshi’s fiction blends features of Shona cultural signification with recognisably modernist elements. The inclusion of animals in the stories, many of which have symbolic meanings – a symbolism which is sometimes explained (revealing the international character of the implied audience), sometimes presumed, and whose conventional meanings are quite often, one would guess, manipulated by the story – is an example of the former. Another is the use of present tense, which, Mungoshi has remarked, is occasionally the result of ‘translating from a Shona thought to English’. Mungoshi’s modernism, on the other hand, can be seen in features like the fragmented narrative form and the use of free indirect discourse – which mark both his English and his Shona fiction. It is the latter in particular that offers a flexible medium for projecting a sense of psychological depth.

The crises of authority in Mungoshi’s stories not only concern already powerful figures such as the father, the mother, the grandfather, or the brother; just as often they involve the protagonist who falls into self-doubt. In many cases, the crises are brought about by sudden shifting moods and impressions with no simple external or internal cause. In ‘White Stones and Red Earth’, for instance, the protagonist travels home on the bus from school to his village to attend the funeral of his brother. He is filled with unease, and he is startled out of his half-somnolent state by a comment on birds that circle in the sky some distance ahead:

As the bus got nearer the blob became a cluster, then a slow-moving circle of birds. ‘Vultures’.

The voice startled Bishi. And before he could determine who of the old people in the front of him had uttered it another one said: ‘Carrion’. And these two sounds seemed to bewitch the bus which became even quieter.

Carrion.

Of course he knew all about vultures …

The passage, it could be noted, first dramatises the unsettling zooming-in – from blob to cluster to bird – that it presents. Next, the naming of the vultures (which may or may not carry specific Shona or Zimbabwean symbolic meanings) creates an atmosphere that overtakes the bus. Finally, the sensation of unease is explicitly tied to

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28 Sicherman 121.
30 Mungoshi 38.
a half-formulated thought. As in a passage by, say, Joyce – who Mungoshi has explained he was influenced by31 – or Lawrence, sense impression, language, emotion, and thought are connected in ways that are associative and obscure rather than linear and transparent. This kind of stylistic performance, of connection across sense and thought, creates psychological depth in the character. It points to but does not fully illuminate the circuitous processes through which human beings function.

In ‘The Hero’, to take another example, Julius, a young student, is expelled from school after giving what he thinks of as a ‘daring’ speech about the food served there. He returns to class to say goodbye to his friends and feels like the hero of the story’s title when they gather around him. His secret love, Dora, is misty-eyed. Being a protégé of the principal, the protagonist is also convinced that he has the tacit support of the ‘Old Man’ and is only expelled to gratify the headmaster. In this way, he construes the act as proof of his capacity and courage rather than his disobedience. When he stands on the road outside the school compound his mood changes, however:

Later, he was standing on a little rise of the very long road to his home. He held his untidy little bundle of clothes in his right hand and with the left he shaded his eyes as he looked along that road. He felt as bad as when he had missed a ball on the football field. What he had done he felt, had been very childish. It was not as big as he had thought. He had achieved nothing. He saw Dora’s look as he left the classroom – he had lost her too. Now somebody else was going to take her. She would not care about him now. He felt something catch in his throat.32

Julius sees the futility of what he has done, and is suddenly certain that Dora’s tears have been tears of pity. In this scene too, there is nothing palpable that effects the change. It is an almost atmospheric transformation: an act of seeing, of, possibly, reflecting on the long way home, on the distance between home and school, and the realisation of the effort it has taken his family and him to get him there. The text does not say, and speculations are in fact the effects of the textual form that simulates psychological depth in a character; what is depicted is Julius looking along the long road.

In his discussion of the ‘colonial aesthetic’ of European modernism, Simon Gikandi argues that the modernist reinvention of the arts not only reflected the technological and socio-economic transformations under way in Europe but also registered a failing belief in the imperial world that had backed up relatively stable notions of self, of historical progress, and of a world which was possible to grasp cognitively. Africa, both in the forms of reified images of Africa and as a source of alternative artistic techniques, became one of the means through which modernist authors and artists could both chart these failures and renew their aesthetic languages – and even seek aesthetic visions of wholeness.33 In African colonial states like South Africa and Rhodesia the situation was in many cases the reverse, but it was also

31 Vambe 220.
32 Mungoshi 97.
similar in some ways. Modernity presented itself as a multi-faced ideological coding of social space that combined ‘modern’ with ‘white’ or ‘European’ and set them off against ‘traditional’, and ‘black’ or ‘African’. Black South African authors and artists, as Atwell’s examination shows, rendered their modernity legible – indeed used artistry to make claims as to being modern – through the selective adoption of artistic and literary techniques of European origin and merged them with local or indigenous ones – some of which were, then, previous loans from European artists. The appropriation (Atwell’s ‘transculturation’) was sometimes marked by a certain time lag: for South African poets in the 1970s, the lyric poem grounded in a Romantic tradition became a highly relevant vehicle for expressing a kind of modern subjectivity that went against the apartheid regime’s efforts to dehumanise black subjects. In the case of Charles Mungoshi, writing in 1970s Rhodesia in a political and cultural climate similar to that of South Africa, a modernist narrative technique was the appropriate means of registering and answering a crisis of social order and self. By using modernism’s favourite themes, Mungoshi could capture the experiences of individual failure, crumbling authorities and the self-doubt of the modern colonial subject. And adapting modernist formal techniques allowed him to present characters with unquestionably modern psyches – characters whose innermost thoughts and feelings are complex, opaque and connected in unpredictable ways. Modernism, in short, offered to Mungoshi when it was translated onto Zimbabwean soil a notion of individuality where inner space (one could perhaps say an imaginary space) was not completely saturated by discursive elements or simple binaries (‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’) from the colonial regime. For the process of appropriation at stake here, as I suggested above, ‘translation’ is a better term than ‘transculturation’. Mungoshi was (and is) a writer used to translating his thoughts and texts in the ordinary sense of moving them from Shona into English and vice versa. He is also used to translating in Quayson’s wider and more social sense of navigating between idioms, registers, literary devices, and culturally embedded notions with very different cultural status and power. In contrast to Atwell, I do not see this navigation and the cultural transfer this involves in terms of ‘destruction’ and ‘reconstruction on entirely new terms’; for me – and I suggest, for Mungoshi – the operative mode is rather one of transformation. Despite these differences, my assessment on the process as a whole is close to Atwell’s. Like him I hold that the appropriation is not a ‘conservative’ taking over of a given technique but an active adoption of it in order to give shape to new experiences and desires in the form of literature.