Abstract

Entrenched inequality within South African society has led to a notable focus within literary criticism on the subject of legitimacy. The perennial question of who has access to narrative representation and how this authority is wielded has informed literary production itself— with some writers, invariably emerging from the elite, attempting to circumvent or undermine the assumed claims of legitimacy which attend the novel. This article discusses how a particular modernist form, narratorial disidentification, coheres around this preoccupation with inequality and legitimacy, overturning idealist accounts of moral agency in history through an emphasis on the determination of the material environment. Narratorial disidentification subverts the normative structure of the novel, assuming that the legitimate subject of society is not narratable within the novel form. Drawing on the work of Warwick Research Collective (WReC), in particular their expanded sense of modernism, this article argues that experiences of social bifurcation in semi-peripheral locations are translated into this form of narrative coldness which seeks to undermine readerly identification and emphasize externality. It indicates how Camus’s The Stranger can be productively re-read by considering the employment of this form by a number of South African novelists—from Nadine Gordimer’s The Late Bourgeois World under apartheid, to postapartheid with Zoë Wicomb’s Playing in The Light and...
Discussing the withdrawal of authorisation from Nadine Gordimer’s biography, the critic Hedley Twidle articulates an internal pressure within South African letters concerning “a history of unequal access to narrative, self-determination, and cultural power” (2018, p. 93). “[T]he latent subject remains the matter of authority”, he writes; “how it is constructed or unraveled, earned or assumed; how it might replicate previous, historically painful modes of being authoritative about others—or how it might refuse or evade them” (p. 93). Given South Africa’s acute inequality, with 10% of the population holding 90%–95% of all wealth (Orthofer, 2016), Twidle highlights what is properly a question of legitimacy: whether social power within this context can be earned or justified and, if so, by what means. In question is the social position of writers, with tensions in the cultural arena recalling authors’ elite statuses, since novel-writing in particular is relegated to privileged minorities with access to education, unimpeded time and the economic means to support literary engagement.

Underlying the question of legitimacy is therefore the material organisation of society. In contexts of what Fanon would term bifurcation (1963), sharp distinctions in rates of exploitation (and, by extension, the value of human life) are rendered inescapably visible in all aspects of society. These contrasts are mediated in the cultural arena, with the elite status of prose heightened. Yet if capitalism is understood as a global structure exceeding the confines of the nation-state, then the pressure which Twidle identifies in South Africa, along with those cultural forms registering the violence of inequality, reappears in other contexts. This is the case, I argue, for the novels I discuss, drawn from South Africa and Algeria. Using the terminology of world-systems theory, these locales can productively be understood as occupying similar positions (“semi-peripheries”), located across and mediating between the wealthy and developed “core” positions of the capitalist world-system and their marginalised and underdeveloped “peripheries” (Wallerstein, 2004). This structure usefully stresses the shared and entangled character of inequality under capitalism, with global capitalism “simultaneously one and unequal; with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality” (Moretti, 2004, pp. 149–150). As the Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC) account of world-literature suggests, this has ramifications both for understanding the diffusion of literary form across diverse localities, but also for understanding modernism and realism as particular and concurrent registrations of this combined unevenness.

This article considers one such affinity of form that I call ‘narratorial disidentification’, in which coldness and distance are encoded into the narration or focalisation of a novel, ultimately serving to undermine readerly identification. It understands this self-consciously modernist form as a response to the pressure that inequality exerts upon writing, so that the form registers the “bifurcated or ruptured sensorium … of the (semi)periphery” (WReC, 2015, p. 16). In this case, inequality generates both the “unsettling frankness” (Messud, 2014, p. 128) of Camus’s narrator in colonial Algeria and the unease produced by Zoë Wicomb’s socially ambitious author in postapartheid South Africa. While the WReC’s account of world-literature focuses on disruptions to realist time and historical narrative as registrations of unevenness, this analysis draws out the impact of bifurcation on the construction of subjectivity in narration, so that the “invisible forces” of the global market, “acting from a distance on the local and familiar” (7), appear to challenge realist representations of individual agency. Adopting a world-literary comparative framework, this article approaches the formal inventiveness of these two texts not merely as the result of authorial influence, but as responses to
structural connections that allow forms to circulate from Algeria to South Africa in ways that are meaningful to each specific environment. It is this structural connection which will also complicate, if not invalidate, Edward Said's well-known charge that Camus's *The Stranger* simply "inherits" or "accepts" the metropolitan racism of its context (Said, 1994, p. 180).

In what follows, I argue that narratorial disidentification finds its most concentrated expression in contemporary South Africa, due both to its position as one of the most unequal countries in the world (Orthofer, 2016; World Bank, 2018), and to its history of legitimatory discourse setting moralism against the nation's social and material realities (O'Meara, 1983). Within South Africa, the form traverses both apartheid-era texts, such as Nadine Gordimer's *Late Bourgeois World* (1966), and postapartheid texts, such as Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), so that the apartheid-postapartheid distinction falls away with the form's diffusion. Just as the material and social determinants of the form are shown to be similar across the periodisation of South African history, they are also shown to resonate with other locations; this is discernible in the 1940s Algeria of Camus's *The Stranger* (1942). The value of this approach then emerges from this cross-historical and geographical consideration of what it is that disidentification does: how its work of reader-repellence highlights the circumscription of elite agency and an externality to that consciousness, drawing both inside and outside towards the ambit of narration.

1 | MORAL AGENCY AND INEQUALITY, THE STRANGER

In Camus's *The Stranger*, the reader follows the first-person narration of Meursault—a character seemingly unmoved by both the death of his mother and his murder of a nameless Arab. Rather than providing a motivation for his actions and stances, Meursault's dispassionate and alienated account produces contradiction, erecting a barrier to comprehension and identification. The unfiltered presentation of Meursault's thoughts, their "unsettling frankness", produces neither intimacy nor sympathy, with the narrator appearing at turns both "idiotic and noble" but never coherent (Messud, 2014, p. 128). In this way Meursault's narration presents a canonical example of narratorial disidentification, with the formal construction of the narrator-protagonist reflecting a context in which the legitimacy of the author is called into question. The most recognisable feature of this form is its distinctly cold, distanced or unsympathetic treatment of the narrator-protagonist—that is, the narrator, focalisers and often protagonists whose thoughts and perceptions determine the organisation and framing of the novel's plot. The form therefore works specifically against the reader's tendency to sympathise or identify with the governing consciousness or voice of a text.

While identification as a question of the formation and performance of identity reveals a particular intellectual genealogy through psychoanalysis, Marxism and queer theory, *narratorial* identification highlights one affective aspect of reading that derives from its formal construction. Following Rita Felski's description of the reading process, identification comprises those aspects of narrative voice or character that readers are "drawn to" and which produce the "sense of affinity or shared response" that readers tend to experience (2020, pp. 81, 77). While Felski is primarily invested in the decoding aspects of readerly identification, it is the formal or coding aspect of identification, which she calls "alignment", that is the focus here. Effectively synonymous with the work of focalisation and narration, alignment encourages or discourages identification through "varying blends of reliability and unreliability, intimacy and distance" (Felski, 2020, p. 94). In narratorial disidentification, then, readerly expectations of "alignment" through focalisation are disappointed. This is achieved by disrupting realist expectations of coherence, as with the contradictions in Meursault's narrative, but also by suspending the normative function of narration within these traditions.

As Thomas Pavel notes, the novel form is primarily concerned with "relationships between human beings and the surrounding world", with the development of this relationship reflecting historical changes in the location of morality and the subject's capacity for moral agency (2006, p. 3). Equally, in recognising the novel as "a cultural artefact of bourgeois society" (1994, pp. 70–71), Edward Said understands its "normative pattern of social authority [as] the most structured" of all major literary forms (p. 71). The alignment effects in novels, seeing through the eyes of the narrator or characters, therefore means that characters' worldviews and histories reflect and shape the reader's
perspective so that the moral decisions taken make sense. A focus on moral agency thus informs realism’s techniques of verisimilitude. Yet the intelligibility of moral agency is precisely what is lacking in Meursault’s murder of the Arab on the beach. In Meursault’s account, it is the sun that compels his actions, rather than his intent. The sun, which is everywhere in his environment, divides the world into light and shadow, its omnipresence producing a circumscribed space within which agency is exercised. One character notes that “if you walk too slowly … you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too quickly you’re sweating … and then you catch a chill” (16). This regulation of the pace of action and by extension the capacity for self-aware action are at stake when Meursault returns to the beach where he will fatefuly shoot the Arab. He notes that “the heat was so intense that it hurt to stand motionless beneath the blinding sun that rained down from the sky” (51). The sun “dazzles” Meursault (52), so that the beach “pulsates” and “presses him” to go on (53). Feeling that he is “being burned alive” (53), pause and reflection become impossible. He is being impelled towards a murder which reinscribes the Manichean terms impressed upon his environment: light/dark, white/arab, settler/colonised. It is the environment, rather than Meursault, which appears to act, even if Meursault is the organising consciousness of the narrative.

The sun’s determination of the field and pace of action therefore corresponds to its division of the world, its rendering of an environment of contrasts. This aspect of the colonial environment is captured in Fanon’s account of bifurcation. He describes colonial Algeria with reference to South Africa’s racial divisions:

The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa … The colonial world is a world cut in two (1963, pp. 37–38).

Bifurcation also characterises the colonial city as a semi-peripheral zone, lying at the intersection of the global division of labour in which the production of wealth in particular locales (core) is dependent on the marginalisation and underdevelopment of others (periphery). Since European imperialism provided a means of drawing previously unintegrated locations into the market, these locations are marked by pronounced racial divisions, maintained in service of profit (Bhattacharyya, 2018). In this sense, the semi-peripheral vision of Algeria and South Africa which is captured by Fanon’s image of bifurcation is capitalism’s unevenness rendered visible, translated as it is through racialisation and inequality. While this pronounced unevenness or bifurcation can be recognised in the narrowness of perspective associated with an unreliable narrator, its effect on agency, so prominent in The Stranger, is the domain of narratorial disidentification, delineating the circumscribed space within which action takes place.

The relationship between elite agency and the material environment encapsulated by narratorial disidentification can also be clarified by discussing its obverse: how inflated notions of agency serve to obscure the material relations that underpin uneven or bifurcated societies. To illustrate this, we can look to South African history, where bifurcation, aggrandised as it was by apartheid’s racial segregation across almost all forms of human life, was maintained through legitimatory discourses which emphasised (elite) moral agency. In this sense, the initial work of apartheid intellectuals was to stake a moral claim to the project of apartheid in order to legitimise it. They represented apartheid as a “complete, moral vision of social division”, where separate racial communities would develop self-sufficiently and autonomously (Norval, 1996, p. 171)—thereby contrasting it with the preceding Union government’s piecemeal segregation laws, which were viewed as inherently exploitative (Dubow, 1995, 2014). While the moral claims of this social vision were in reality contradicted by the clearly exploitative (and financially lucrative) character of apartheid, liberal opponents of the regime tended to ignore the centrality of market demands to the development and maintenance of segregation, opposing it on idealist and moral grounds. As Dan O’Meara noted, these liberal accounts depicted the regime as the product of “rigid, reactionary and racist ideals of a monolithic ‘Afrikanerdom’” (O’Meara, 1983, p. 1). By depicting apartheid as the triumph of an insane and immoral ideology, liberals effectively adopted the Nationalists’ mystifications, obscuring the capitalist accumulation which made it both possible and profitable. Liberals could thus extol a firm belief in the “modernizing and integrative imperatives of economic development” (O’Meara, 1983, p. 1),
while portraying themselves as both detached and capable of changing society through moral commitment alone. The idealism of both the Nationalist and liberal accounts thus overstated the grounds for moral agency and produced an environment scrubbed of its material determiners, confining political action to the boundaries of the nation and denying the demands of the global market and its international division of labour.

South Africa’s history, then, reflects the entangled relationship of material and social inequality to moral discourses, and the paradoxical tendency of these discourses to inflate elite agency while disavowing complicity. In the novels I examine, the foreclosure of moral agency is therefore what distinguishes narratorial disidentification from mere unreliability. It is not just that bifurcation produces a narrowness of perspective in the elite, but that their privileged status is by necessity bound up with the mechanisms which produce social division. Given the elite status of novelists within this context, disidentification presents a formal negotiation of the problem of elite consciousness and agency, allowing for its representation while radically foregrounding its limitations. While this estranging of the elite individual represents some development of consciousness about revolutionary agency (Marcuse, 1979), the denial of identification, the distance and coldness of the form, means that the reader’s sympathies are pushed beyond the narrative in their search for a moral agency, as though readers are being told to look outwards, beyond the narrator. It is this externality which holds the promise of a legitimate subject.

From this perspective, it is worth remembering Edward Said’s forceful assertion that Camus’s text merely reproduces the racism of its colonial environment in its depiction of the nameless and faceless Arab that Meursault murders (1994). For Said, a legitimate subjectivity external to the narrative does not exist—indeed, there is no dialogism or externality in sight. So while this section has presented Camus’s Meursault as a prototype for understanding narratorial disidentification, the discussion now turns towards clarifying the mechanics of disidentification within the semi-peripheral and bifurcated context. We will then return to the question of externality in The Stranger, but first this article considers narratorial disidentification in three South African texts, presenting the case for an elusive dialogism beyond the repellence of the narration.

2 | MODERNISM IN THE LATE BOURGEOIS WORLD

In Nadine Gordimer’s 1966 novel, The Late Bourgeois World, Liz, a disaffected white suburbanite living through increasing government repression, provides a first-person narration of the life and death of her ex-husband, Max Van den Sandt, a white anti-apartheid activist. She recounts the futility of Max’s political project, particularly a failed act of sabotage, his planting of a bomb intended to “help blow the blacks free” (19). The novel ends with Liz deciding to aid the banned Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) by redirecting their funds through her senile grandmother’s bank account—an act of resistance comparatively passive and secondary. Indeed, she merely complies with a PAC activist’s request, expecting neither information, trust nor mutuality, with political contribution only possible in this distant and minor way.

Gordimer’s narrator is characteristically cold, disengaged and unsympathetic, fitting squarely into the realm of disidentification. Critical responses have indexed the intensity of frustration and anomy that the narration inspires by ungenerously interpreting it as a flaw in the novel’s realism. To Cornwell, Klopper and MacKenzie, Liz is merely “a typical Gordimer narrator: cold, knowing, even smug, but frustrated, desperate, full of self-loathing” (2010, p. 11). They characterise the novel as a “bleak and unforgiving narrativ[e],” lacking the “intimate… textures of real life” (pp. 11: 12). Yet the antipathy and distance which critics identify is not simply a flaw, but a distinct feature of the novel’s modernist style. Consider its opening:

I opened the telegram and said, ‘He’s dead-‘ and as I looked up into Graham Mills gaze I saw that he knew who, before I could say. He had met Max, my first husband, a few times, and of course he had heard all about him, he had helped me get to see him when he was in prison. ‘How?’ he said, in his flat
professional voice, putting out his hand for the telegram, but I said, 'Killed himself!' – and only then let him have it. (7)

Here, the correspondence between Gordimer’s novel and Camus’s *The Stranger* are immediately clear on the level of plot and sentiment: like Meursault, the narrator receives a telegram notifying her of a death, one to which we expect her to respond emotionally. Instead, as David Atwell (2020, pp. 283; 275) notes, the tone is “flat, clinical, observant and ironic” (p. 284), recalling the “detached narration” (p. 283) of *The Stranger* in its “sardonic matter-of-factness” (p. 284) and “hyper-observant, estranged perspective” (p. 283).

The disidentification of the narrative is similarly tied to the determination of the environment, in this case “the late bourgeois world” of the title, in which the model “good citizens” are depicted as a group of shoppers “gathering together their weekend purchases”, and who have “never had any doubt about where their allegiances lay” (1982, p. 27). The decision to support the apartheid regime is thus conflated with the quotidian act of shopping, so that the determination of the market which produces this racialised elite is shown to foreclose resistance ahead of its entry into consciousness. Liz and Max, both unwilling members of this bourgeoisie, are thus both limited agents. This is evident both in the failures of Max’s activism and the secondary role that Liz’s activism eventually takes. Narratorial disidentification in the midst of this lack of agency thus draw the reader towards the sense of exteriority represented by the PAC activist whom Liz ends up helping. Life and reality are indeed elsewhere, outside the world of narration, so that it is entirely apt that the narrative is not “charged with ... the intimate ... textures of real life” (Cornwell et al., 2010, p. 12). In *The Late Bourgeois World* narratorial disidentification reflects the limitations of realist narration within this context, producing a novel that “performs the useful function of confessing with maximum honesty its own poverty and the poverty of its times” (Hesse, cited in Atwell, 2020, p. 283).

Some critics have in this way failed to appreciate the modernist project underlying Gordimer’s work. Here modernism needs to be understood in the expanded sense adopted by the WReC, so that it doesn’t just describe a range of formal features distinct to a Euro-American literary formation, but rather designates a greater diversity of formal features that register the lived experience of capitalism’s combined and uneven development (WReC, 2015, p. 51). The correspondences between *The Stranger* and *The Late Bourgeois World* are thus not merely those of artistic influence, but also material registration in which the social position of the novel is that of an elite cultural form, with the writer “inhabit[ing] a ‘core’ relative to a ‘periphery’ within the (semi-)periphery itself” (WReC, p. 55). This perspective allows for a fuller reading of the modernism of the postapartheid novels discussed below. If critics’ tendencies to misread these novels reflect a need for a more materialist and global practice, they equivalently suggest a valorisation of individual agency which reflects assumptions about the transition from apartheid to postapartheid and the role of the national elite. While the extent of social and economic continuity across this periodisation has not yet been adequately addressed in literary scholarship, the persistence and development of narratorial disidentification in postapartheid underlines its capacity to cross both the boundaries of race and the distinction of coloniser/colonised. In this way it portrays a space of agency circumscribed not merely by the machinations of an imperial or colonising elite, but by an economic system that transcends the nation, just as it bears down on the individual subject of narration.

### 3 | POSTAPARTEHID CONTINUITIES: BITTER FRUIT AND PLAYING IN THE LIGHT

South Africa’s subordination to international capital is reflected by the extent of inequality in the country, despite the end of apartheid’s political regime. With the top 10% of the population holding 90%–95% of all wealth and 80% owning none at all (Orthofer, 2016), its continuing structural dysfunction highlights, amongst others, the profoundly material basis of apartheid’s racial organisation of society, a lack of substantial economic redistribution and reform, and dependence on international markets. Under postapartheid economic policy white South Africans retained ownership of “the best land, the mines, manufacturing plants and financial institutions”, allowing the racialisation
of economic inequality to persist into postapartheid (Bond, 2014, p. 146). National elites were also allowed to "export vast quantities of capital" (Bond, 2014, p. 146), so that unequal exchange and the continued export of surplus reinforced this highly unequal internal organisation. What economic mobility was extended to previously disadvantaged groups (through affirmative action policies and government jobs) primarily benefited "the rising black middle class", assimilating these groups into the pre-existing economic structure, and "in effect deepen[ing] the inherited class inequalities" (Alexander, 2013, pp. 137,134). As Sampie Terreblanche and Neville Alexander both conclude, where the distinctly racial character of socio-economic inequalities was eroded, a "symbolically important, ever-widening gap between the ‘black’ rich and the ‘black’ poor" has become evident (Alexander, 2013, p. 141; see also Terreblanche, 2002, p. 29), so that South Africa is transforming "from a rigid racially divided society" to "a highly stratified class society" (Terreblanche, 2002, p. 33; see also Bond, 2014, p. 149). The expectation that dismantling apartheid's legal framework without substantially redistributing or reforming the economy might prove sufficient for changing the society reflected, in part, the continued salience of the idealist and moral framing of apartheid that O'Meara identified in the 1980s. In this context the idealism of what one character in Bitter Fruit describes as "Mandela's Wonderland" (Dangor, 2004, p. 268) becomes apparent, and narratorial disidentification in postapartheid South Africa turns towards charting the disappointing outcomes of elite social mobility, with a circumscripton of moral agency corresponding to the country’s "bounded" position within the world-system (WReC, 8).

In Achmat Dangor’s Bitter Fruit (2001), a multivocal focalization shifts between various characters, concentrating primarily on the members of the Ali family: Lydia, Silas and their child, Mikey. It charts the disintegration of the family, from Lydia’s psychological breakdown to Mikey’s eventual murder of his mother’s rapist and his friend’s abusive father. While the multivocalism of the novel suggests a departure from the first-person narration which has up till now appeared necessary to narratorial disidentification, Bitter Fruit remains indebted to The Stranger both conceptually and formally. While Achmat Dangor has expressed an abiding interest in Camus’s novel (1990), The Stranger also appears within Bitter Fruit, with Lydia needing to retrieve a signed first edition copy of it along with a stolen gun from her son’s room. The gun will be instrumental in Mikey’s eventual murder of two people, so that The Stranger, among other modernist influences, is given particular prominence. And while the form of narration has shifted to multivocalism, Camus’s influence registers most clearly in the unfiltered narration of interiority and the contradictions that this produces. Narratorial disidentification here thus produces characters which are unreliable, ambiguous and impotent, complicating the postapartheid dream of social mobility through the establishment of a multiracial elite.

From an outsider’s perspective, the Ali family “symbolize[s] the future of the new South Africa” even more than “the image of a smiling Nelson Mandela” (p. 111). Having fought in the struggle against apartheid, Silas Ali works in the upper echelons of the new democratic government, with him and his family positioned as photogenic representatives of the new democratic elite (p. 95). Yet the triumphalism of this framing is systematically undercut not only by Mikey’s vengeful murders, but by the novel’s relentless focus on the psychological minutiae of characters’ thoughts which undermine moral clarity and produce contradictions that refuse readerly identification. While Lydia, for instance, is largely discussed as the hero of the novel in early feminist accounts that emphasize her attempt to deal with trauma of rape (see Gunne, 2009; Mack, 2011; Miller, 2008; Strauss, 2005), her apparent dignity and strength are equally undermined by the solipsism, sexual jealousy and resentment characterising much of her thought. This reflects a wider concern in the novel, where individuals attempt to process the historical trauma of apartheid, while concurrently being absorbed into a new bourgeois reality of social isolation and neurotic self-absorption. The intimacy of focalization shows them to be capable neither of empathy nor building the new society that was promised. Silas, for instance, while charged with adjudicating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), is primarily absorbed by the intractability of familial conflict, a mid-life crisis, his classification as “coloured” and the fading of his sexual prowess. These ruminations are turned over and over in ways that are destructive and, eventually, futile, offering, however, a distraction from the compromises that characterise his job and the encroaching social and material reality of the “new” South Africa.

The persistence of marginalization in the new regime thus exists as an exteriority to the narration of psychological conflict which dominates focalization. Early in the novel, Silas, absorbed by the trauma and neuroses of his family
life, hears a knock at the door. Responding to the knocking, he fills with irritation at the prospect of “a beggar’s pleading voice” or “someone selling brooms in order to survive” (p. 43). His exasperation is notable: “he was not responsible for all the poverty and misery in the world, and would they go away, for fuck’s sake, as he was facing the crisis of an inscrutable son and an inconsolable wife” (p. 43). With notable bathos, the beggar or broomseller never materialises. But this apparition, recalling the large population of indigent people whom Silas and his government have not been able to serve, torments the statesman. The psychological insistence of this externalised figure in turn highlights a sense of immobilisation among postapartheid elites concerning their incapacity to bring about meaningful social change. Those excluded from “Mandela’s Wonderland” thus press down upon the narration of the text, so that this exteriority emphasises the decadence of the nationalists’ dream.

While clear lines of influence link both Dangor and Gordimer to Camus’s novel, Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* (2006) declares none. Nevertheless, its formal affinities to the other novels under discussion indicate the commensurability of its position within world-literature. Formally, Wicomb’s novel draws the most attention to its narration, staging a third-person narrative which initially appears to be focalised through one character, but later turns out to be written by another. Thus, Marion, the daughter of parents classified as coloured under apartheid, but who have passed as white, discovers the truth about her parents while developing an uneasy friendship with her coloured upwardly mobile employee, Brenda. Coldness and emotional distance are foregrounded by the novel’s focalisation. But at the end of the narrative, through a process of delayed decoding, the reader realises that it is actually Brenda who is the probable narrator of the novel (see Hoegberg, 2018; Van der Vlies, 2010). At this point the reason behind the emotional distance of Marion’s apparent focalisation is exposed. Brenda, despite being presented as a foil to Marion’s racism and emotional detachment, does not emerge as a particularly sympathetic character once she is exposed as the dominant voice of the narrative. What is initially assumed to be a coldness attributed to Marion is now shown to be at least partially the provenance of Brenda. In her final monologue, just as the delayed decoding is exposed, her presumed status as postapartheid hero of the text is undermined:

Writing my own story, I know, is what someone like me is supposed to do, what we all do, they say, whether we know it or not, but Christ, what story do I have to tell? ... Mine is the story of everybody else in Bonteheuwel, dull as dishwater ... why would anyone want to write about them, invent something around such tedious lives? ... Now your father, there’s a story—with his pale skin as capital, ripe for investment... (217–218)

Here, Brenda’s decision to tell the story of Marion’s family and their passing is placed in opposition to the injunction that she write “[her] own story” (p. 217). Finding little value in this, she represents the coloured community from which she emerges as fundamentally without interest, a homogenous grouping of “dull” and “tedious” lives (pp. 217, 218). By contrast, value is to be found in John’s story, with his “pale skin as capital” (p. 218), indicating that her motivations, shorn of any pretense of humanism, are primarily financial. This extractive logic is compounded by the ways in which Brenda has collected the story we read. Approaching John while Marion is overseas, Brenda collects their family’s story through interviews while the old man slips into a state of neglect. Marion returns to find him covered in bruises, smelling of urine and not having changed his clothes in weeks (2008, pp. 210–211). The anticipated ending, which might have emphasised the liberatory character of Brenda’s sudden exposure of narrative mastery, is undermined, with the reader denied identification with any of the characters in the novel.4

Similar to *Bitter Fruit*, social bifurcation is emphasised by a beggar knocking at the door, materialising in this instance, but only to identify himself as “Nobody baas [master]” (p. 181). Indeed, while the narrative foregrounds the negotiation of racial mythology and difference through Marion and Brenda’s friendship, it recurrently gestures towards the ways in which class constructs this frame. Thus, the novel opens with Marion stumbling upon a dead guineafowl, the black-and-white speckled bird that became an icon for the “new [postapartheid] multiculturalism” (Wicomb, 2018, p. 142), and promptly leaving it for her servant to deal with. “Why had she left the bird for Maria to dispose of?” she later asks herself (p. 178). “What had Maria done with it? Soup for her family of ten, fifteen? ... she
knows nothing of Maria and her family. In fact, she hasn’t actually seen Maria for months” (p. 178). The only image she can muster is that of an apparition: a “paper-thin, arthritic old woman ... steered by a Hoover across Marion’s gleaming floors” (p. 178). Maria is not quite flesh and blood, she is “Nobody”, animated solely by the labour she performs. This ghost aptly frames the beginning and end of the narrative, delimiting the conflict between its protagonists as a figment of a claustrophobic elite consciousness, and insisting that legitimacy be sought without.

4 | ELITES AND THE ENGINE OF HISTORY

Narratorial disidentification therefore not only registers the gap between the elites and the masses, but responds to a history of elites claiming the legitimacy of their social position under entrenched inequality. In this sense the double fraughtness of legitimacy is encoded not only in narrowness, an incapacity to represent or imagine the life of the majority, but in the active production of the narrator-protagonist as repellent or unsympathetic. Narrators might be invested with some clarity of vision, but this does not allow for identification nor offer any solution to intractable social problems. In postapartheid, the impoverished majority remain outside the frame of vision, yet from the position of non-description they haunt the narration. Nevertheless, the generic necessity of externality cannot be attributed to the individual narrators or characters of the texts. The point about narratorial disidentification is not that the characters who frame these narratives are particularly deficient, but rather that the realist form of the novel, with its normative structure of identification, cannot capture the contradictory and constrained agency which attends inequality. Where Gordimer’s protagonist is white and clearly a beneficiary of apartheid’s socio-economic engineering, Dangor and Wicomb’s characters are repellent precisely because, as the beneficiaries of postapartheid social mobility, they betray the moral idealism that envisioned their active participation in ending inequality, as if a new elite could provide a happy ending to exploitation and social conflict.

Returning to Camus’s *The Stranger*, what can this discussion of narrative disidentification in South Africa contribute to our reading? As I have demonstrated, the form relies on the reader being repelled outwards, towards a sense of externality. From this perspective, criticisms of Camus’s novel which highlight the political limitations of Meursault’s narration can be reconsidered. Edward Said is, of course, correct when he identifies “the blankness and absence of background in the Arab killed by Meursault” (Said, 1994, p. 179) as a reproduction of the racist conventions of a “long tradition of colonial writing on Algeria” (p. 180). However, this does not mean that the novel as a whole simply “inher- its and uncritically accepts” (p. 180) the conventions and environment which produce these legitimatory discourses. Rather, the anonymity and blankness of the murdered Arab combined with the disidentification of Meursault’s narration serve to reproduce this perspective without the alignment of realist verisimilitude. This is not to claim Camus’s politics as anticolonial, or indeed invested in externality to the extent of a writer like Wicomb. Camus’s depictions of French Algeria are recognised as riddled with ambivalence—both “mythologiz[ing] his impoverished pied-noir community” and “attempt[ing] [a] refutation of colonialist ideology and the colonial reality” (Breen, 2019, p. 211). Rather, the estranging and repelling effects of Meursault’s narrow and partial first-person narration serve to emphasise an outside or exterior to his consciousness and, by extension, the colonial elite’s perspective. The reader is given no access to the Arab’s consciousness. His presence, as a figure that is unintegrated and incomprehensible to Meursault’s consciousness, further emphasises the predetermination of the environment in which Meursault acts, its bifurcation of light and shadow, coloniser and colonised. What critics have then recognised as the novel’s attack on morality, its “absence of any settled moral truth” (Weightman, 1972), is a response to a context in which inequality is justified through moralist discourse, but where individual moral agency is effectively limited by material structures. This reading thus equivalently recalls the fault-lines of Said’s own thinking on imperialism—it’s conception as a “political dispensation rather than a process of accumulation on a world scale” (WReC, 31). In this way, the confines and limitations of elite consciousness, immersed as it is in a world that remains beyond its understanding or mastery, is inseparable from the idealism of nationalist thought that denies the nation’s merely relative autonomy within the global market.
The case for narratorial disidentification therefore builds on a recognition of capitalism as a structural driver of society—one which is global in its reach. The cultural impact of capitalism's combined and uneven development thus produces “formal and structural affinities” across texts in diverse national contexts, so that a “general and global structure of feeling” is reflected (WReC, 82, 145). In the three novels I have discussed, the bounded relation between centre and periphery and its production of inequality in the semi-periphery undermines the nationalist-idealist conceptions of agency that are implicit in realist narrative. While future work might consider the potential political agency suggested by narratorial disidentification, the form's emphasis on externality nevertheless asserts that even if national elites were better subjects—nicer, we might even say—this would not in itself solve the problem of social inequality. The revolutionary engine of history, as Marx noted, lies elsewhere.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
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ENDNOTES
1 This is implicit in theories which read the novel as a bourgeois form (Armstrong, 1987; Watt, 1995) associated fundamentally “with the rise of capitalism” (WReC, p. 16), and Pierre Bourdieu's positioning of writers as occupying “a dominated position ... which is itself situated at the dominant pole of the field of class relations” (1983, p. 319).
2 The theoretical development of identification, as an initially psychoanalytic term (see Muñoz, 1999, pp. 7–15 for an account) means that the term is often used to discuss discursive and performative aspects of identity formation (see José Esteban Muñoz’s Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics in this regard). This differs from the account offered here in which narratorial disidentification is put forward as a formal-experiential encoding of the affective nature of reading itself.
3 My use of "coloured" refers to an apartheid racial classification which encompassed a wide range of creole identities, "a mix of Khoisan, East Indian, and European ancestry" (Durham, 2012, p. 652).
4 Critics have seized upon partial readings that rehabilitate Brenda to a position of possible identification: ignoring the outwardly negative traits of her authorship in favour of depicting her character as a young, active and socially mobile representative of the new South Africa (see De Michelis, 2012; Hoegberg, 2018, p. 498; Propst, 2014, p. 210, p. 71). This is discussed further in my forthcoming article for Research in African Literature (2022).

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