

Nina Almayer, Aurora Marion and 'The Cultural Air We Breathe': Character Status and Embodiment in Joseph Conrad's Almayer's Folly and its Film Adaptation as Chantal Akerman's La Folie Almayer.

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Introduction

In his introduction to the fourth Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*, Paul Armstrong argues that the text has 'become part of the cultural air we breathe' (Armstrong, 2006, ix). If Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been memorialised as a ubiquitous marker of late nineteenth century imperialist literature, so pervasively influential that its consumption and routes of reception have become inevitable and unquestioned, as Armstrong suggests, it is also specific bodies posited in terms of gender and colour that have been made visible

as the expected inhabitants of cultural history. The canonized avatar of Conrad happens to be one whose work is exclusively populated by angst-ridden, ambivalent European male colonial agents wringing their hands about Empire and masculinity, so that it is the experiences of straight white men that are given space and capital in the cultural archive.

When Terry Collits, musing on his attempts to understand the "elusive lost object we know as 'Conrad'", describes him as "a writer who found language a frustratingly inadequate means of penetrating the unknowableness of a Kurtz, a Jim, or a Heyst" (Collits, 2005, 19-20), he very casually evokes a Conrad canon populated exclusively by white men. Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness*, Jim of *Lord Jim* and Heyst of *Victory* are so evidently characterful, so acutely drawn and thoroughly rendered, in Collits' view, that they become synonymous with the type of human experience Conrad was trying to articulate. Collits constructs a corpus of Conradian characters as valuable subjectivities explored in his work (those that would encourage us to grapple with his works today), that are entirely white and male. Moreover, he makes them indefinite, generic - "a Kurtz, a Jim, or a Heyst" - as if they are non-specific, context transcendent inhabitants of the literary canon, rather than gendered constructs occupying scripted colonial roles, whose claims to characterhood are preconditioned on their race and gender. Coming across such a heedless elision of the fe-

male characters in Conrad's work reminds me that Susan Jones' call for "the place of women [to] be recovered from the predominantly masculine tendency of Conrad criticism" (Jones, 2001, 37) is work that is necessarily ongoing. Significantly, Conrad's work is not exclusively populated by white men at all.

In this paper, I begin by turning to his lesser-known first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895) to draw attention to the woman of colour at its centre, Nina Almayer, and propose that she is as viable a 'Conradian' protagonist as Kurtz, Jim, or Heyst. Having drawn attention to the feminist, anti-colonial resistance Nina represents in *Almayer's Folly*, I then explore the way she materialises in Chantal Akerman's film adaptation *La Folie Almayer* (2011) where she is repositioned at the centre of the story. I argue that if Nina's extended articulations of her own sense of identity, both sexual and racial, in Conrad's novel offer a breathing space in 'the cultural air we breathe' of the colonial literary canon, then Aurora Marion's portrayal of her in the film adaptation intervenes as a resonant, bold afterlife for Nina that brings her out of Conrad's shadow.

Nina Almayer in Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*

Nina's biracial identity is persistently posed as a threat to the other characters in the novel, as she occupies a putatively troubling position between tangible ethnic cat-

egories. When she is sent to Singapore to live with the Vincks, her racial identity is interpreted as dangerous to the white family unit, as Captain Ford, who brings her back to Sambir, tells her father:

...it is deucedly awkward to have a half-caste girl in the house. There's such a lot of fools about. There was that young fellow from the bank who used to ride to the Vinck bungalow early and late. That old woman thought it was for that Emma of hers. When she found out what he wanted exactly, there was a row, I can tell you. [. . .] What can you do? It is better so. Let her stay with you. She was never happy over there. Those two Vinck girls are no better than dressed-up monkeys. They slighted her. You can't make her white. (Conrad, 1978, 28)

Her 'half-caste' status makes her a disruptive presence that the white family cannot accommodate, particularly when she is perceived as more attractive than the white Vinck girls. Nina is blamed for attracting the attentions of the many 'fools about' generally, and "that young fellow from the bank" in particular. Her skin colour is read as a sign of promiscuity, made to bear the weight of inappropriate male desire; Nina is punished by Mrs Vinck, here, because she can be punished. Her treatment at the hands of the Vincks speaks to who can be spoken to and who can be held accountable for the vices of white men in colonial culture. Her body, which cannot be made white, is appointed the natural bearer of sin, and the

site upon which miscegenation ought to be policed, in a move that also reiterates its non-whiteness. The banker, as an upstanding member of colonial society, cannot be admonished, in case he can still be persuaded to marry one of the Vinck girls. Nina's exclusion points to the imperial power dynamics that Ann Stoler describes, in which "social and legal standing derived not only from colour, but from the silences, acknowledgments, and denials of the social circumstances in which one's parents had sex" (Stoler, 1989, 635). In Singapore, a space she inhabits in order to be made white, a whitening space, Nina and her path through the world are entirely defined by her interracial parentage, which cannot be white-washed.

However, there is a suggestion in Ford's resignation and renunciation of Nina's whiteness that the whole experience has further demarcated her troublingly ambiguous outsider status. In differentiating her from the Vinck girls, in insisting that she cannot be made white, Ford's colonial rhetoric slips, attaching itself to "Those two Vinck girls [who] are no better than dressed-up monkeys". Ford suggests that next to Nina, the white female bodies around her also fail to be 'made white', their civilised European colonial citizenship looking more affected than Nina's. Her non-whiteness is experienced by colonial culture as a worrying contagion. In the image of Nina, who cannot be made white, moving through the whitening space of Singapore, whiteness as a natu-

ral, neutral, invisible identity category becomes glaringly unstable and suddenly alarmingly unattainable for everyone.

While Nina is not white enough for European colonial culture in Singapore, she is presented as far too white for some of the Malay characters in Sambir. Babalatchi, the Rajah of Sambir's "prime minister, harbour master, financial adviser, and general factotum" (Conrad, 1978, 34) relays to his master, Lakamba, the secret details of Mrs Almayer's plot to fake Dain's death. When he describes Nina's involvement in hiding Dain from the Dutch colonial forces, the threat posed by "the white side of her descent" (Conrad, 1978, 38) is at the forefront of his storytelling:

'And where did you say he [Dain] is hiding now?' asked Lakamba, breaking at last the silence full of gloomy forebodings in which they both had been lost for a long while.

'In Bulangi's clearing – the furthest one, away from the house. They went there that very night. The white man's daughter [Nina] took him there. She told me so herself, speaking to me openly, for she is half white and has no decency. She said she was waiting for him while he was here; then, after a long time, he came out of the darkness and fell at her feet exhausted. He lay like one dead, but she brought him back to life in her arms, and made him breathe again with her own breath. That is what she said, speaking to my face, as

I am speaking now to you, Rajah. She is like a white woman and knows no shame.' (Conrad, 1978, 104)

Babalatchi interprets Nina's willingness to speak directly to him, about physical, illicit contact with a man, as an evocation of her whiteness. Nina's voice and unapologetic sexuality mark her as white and shameless to Babalatchi and Lakamba. Again, she is made to bear the mark of sexual indiscretion, as she does in Singapore, because she is out of step with the customs of the Islamic culture in which she finds herself. Not white enough for white society, too white for Sambir, she is perceived by others to be somewhere in-between these worlds and this makes her dangerous.

When Lakamba and Babalatchi try to think of ways to untangle themselves from association with the fugitive Dain, who is being hunted by the Dutch (the Orang Blanda), Nina's race proves a problem for them:

'He must not fall into the hands of the Orang Blanda,' said Lakamba; 'but let him die, if the thing can be done quietly.'

'It cannot, Tuan! Remember there is that woman who, being half white, is ungovernable, and would raise a great outcry.' (Conrad, 1978, 105)

Later, Babalatchi privately dwells on the problem Nina poses: "And there was that half-white woman with threatening eyes. How could he tell what an incompre-

hensible creature of that sort would or would not do? She knew so much that she made the killing of Dain an impossibility" (Conrad, 1978, 108). While Babalatchi clearly experiences Nina's social and sexual confidence as a symptom of her white shamelessness, it is the *half* of her 'half-white' status that makes her 'ungovernable' and 'incomprehensible.' It is not that Babalatchi and Lakamba fear her because of her white heritage, because in the same breath they are plotting to deceive the Dutch colonial authorities who have considerably more muscle, as well as actual fire-power, at their disposal. She threatens them because her racial identity makes her an unpredictable subject who defies categorisation.

Amidst this context of overdetermination, in which her identity is signified by the people around her in terms of internecine cultural warfare, Nina manages to choose her own path with grace and dignity. At the end of the text she is afforded the space to respond to the discrimination she has suffered. When her father learns of her intentions to flee Sambir to live as Dain's wife, he confronts her with those same ideas of imperial hierarchies that led him to send her to the Vincks in the first place: "tell me, what have they done to you, your mother and that man? What made you give yourself up to that savage? For he is a savage. Between him and you there is a barrier that nothing can remove. I can see in your eyes the look of those who commit suicide when they are mad" (Conrad, 1978, 144). Almayer sees Nina's desire

for Dain as a destructive delusion that will bring about social death. He goes on to appeal to her memory of her time in white society, asking “Have you forgotten the teaching of so many years?” (Conrad, 1978, 144). Nina’s response forms a cutting indictment of colonial culture that is far more compelling than Almayer’s whining: “No,” she interrupted, “I remember it well. I remember how it ended also. Scorn for scorn, contempt for contempt, hate for hate. I am not of your race. Between your people and me there is also a barrier that nothing can remove. You ask why I want to go, and I ask you why I should stay” (Conrad, 1978, 144). Nina is more articulate than any of the men around her, piercing her father’s lexicon of white supremacy to highlight the duplicities and cruelties in his treatment of her.

She is clear, concise and scathing of the violent patriarchal colonial codes by which he has forced her to live:

You wanted me to dream your dreams, to see your own visions – the visions of life amongst the white faces of those who cast me out from their midst in angry contempt. But while you spoke I listened to the voice of my own self; then this man came, and all was still; there was only the murmur of his love. You call him a savage! What do you call my mother, your wife? (Conrad, 1978, 145)

Eloquently owning her desires, Nina positions Dain’s love as the antidote to the anger and racial hatred she

has experienced all her life. She is afforded the textual breathing space to counter Ford's version of events in which "it is deucedly awkward to have a half-caste girl in the house", so that we learn that it was more than 'deucedly awkward' to be 'a half-caste girl' in that house. Most striking is her vehement, acerbic emphasis on Almayer's hypocrisy, which also functions as a sharp defence of Dain, her mother and her own Malay heritage. Her devotion to Dain functions as a declaration of a cultural identity she chooses for herself: "And I mean to live. I mean to follow him. I have been rejected with scorn by the white people, and now I am a Malay!" (Conrad, 1978, 145). Nina frames her choice to be with Dain as a choice to be Malay, a choice to not be white; these are choices that animate her, that make her feel alive. And yet the choice is one of purity in identity, it performs a non-reluctant relinquishing of her in-betweenness.

The space Nina's voice takes up in the text is substantial, and her critique of her father and the colonial culture to which he aspires, and in which she has suffered, is sustained throughout. In a further confrontation with Almayer, as she proceeds to leave Sambir, she reiterates the importance of her own agency when he tries to defend the choice he has made for her:

"I wanted to give you years of happiness for the short day of your suffering. I only knew of one way." 'Ah! but it was not my way!' she replied' (Conrad, 1978, 154).

Nina, who listens "to the voice of [her] own self", and chooses not to be white, who wants to "live [her] own life as [her father has] lived [his]" (Conrad, 1978, 154), speaks to him with clarity and candour again here. The courage and care of these words, in the face of her father's obstinate refusal to listen to her, might recall a familiar scene for many women who have found their choices repeatedly interrogated and dismissed. She stands up to a person who loves her and wants what he thinks is best for her, and speaks with compassion, in the face of a history of his coercion, to say "your path is not my path". She is staking her claim to a course of her own.

Finally, Nina articulates her own feelings about being stranded between the two cultural worlds that have been fighting over her identity and ostracising her as a threat:

Between you and my mother there never was any love. When I returned to Sambir I found the place which I thought would be a peaceful refuge for my heart, filled with weariness and hatred – and mutual contempt. I have listened to your voice and to her voice. Then I saw that you could not understand me; for was I not part of that woman? Of her who was the regret and shame of your life? I had to choose – I hesitated. Why were you so blind? Did you not see me struggling before your eyes? But, when he [Dain] came, all doubt disappeared, and I saw only the light of the blue and cloudless heaven [. . .] (Conrad, 1978, 155)

Nina posits her ability to make her own sexual choices as the antithesis to the racialized, gendered life she has lived. She embraces a 'blue and cloudless' future with Dain- though this future seems too pure, too alarmingly innocent a blueprint and too much a refuge-seeker in the love of a man, because it is what she wants, of that she is clear. She acknowledges, though, the influence of her mother's voice, as well as the impact of her father's treatment of her mother. Nina shames her father into accepting his responsibilities as the parent of a biracial child. She holds him accountable for his sexual decisions, for the "regret and shame of [his] life", turning the tables on the colonial culture that blamed her for the indiscretions of "that young fellow from the bank", so that it is ultimately the white man, rather than the woman of colour, who is castigated for considering miscegenation an erasable sin at the climax of this novel.

To find this kind of resonant anti-colonial critique – powerful, piercing, delivered by a mixed-race young woman – in the depths of the colonial canon, reminds us that when we decide to record European cultural history through the work of dead white men, and when we make a further choice to remember that work as being populated by dying white men ('a Kurtz, a Jim, or a Heyst' (Collits, 2005, 20)), we are also making a choice to forget characters like Nina, who are not dead, not white, not male. Nina emerges from within the colonial literary canon to renounce the hierarchies and radical expulsions

by which such racialized cultural distinctions have been built.

Aurora Marion as Nina in Akerman's *La Folie Almayer*

Chantal Akerman's *La Folie Almayer* (2011) offers Nina an afterlife, memorialising Conrad's novel through her character development beyond the text of the novel. Through the film, she materialises on screen as the centre of the narrative, from the disturbing, beguiling prologue to the protracted sequence detailing her 'backstory' mid-way through the film. Her colonial education is made much more explicit here; instead of the Vinck household of the book, she is sent to a boarding school, which, as Marion Schmid highlights, is repeatedly figured as her prison (Schmid, 2014, 27). Schmid describes the opening of the film – in which the 'blue and cloudless heaven' of Nina and Dain's future is translated on screen as a dark, neon-lit nightclub where we find Nina dancing trancelike behind a (badly) crooning Dain – as 'a radical departure from the novel': 'the adaptation, in a more cynical take, has her end up, in the director's own words, as "une danseuse parmi d'autres, peut-être droguée, hallucinée, dans une sorte de bordel" [a dancer among others, perhaps drugged, hallucinating, in a kind of brothel]' (Schmid, 2014, 26). *La Folie Almayer* does not follow a linear narrative strategy, beginning at the end – with Akerman imagining Nina and Dain's life together – and fragment-

ed throughout with scenes that could feasibly take place at any time after Nina's return to Sambir. Within this fractured composition, Nina's story is arguably the most conventionally structured as it adheres to the timeline of her schooling and subsequent expulsion.

Nina's dominance in Akerman's adaptation testifies to her power within the original text, as she is staged on screen as a character in whom we should invest. As Rita Felski writes, this is the kind of significance that is normatively reserved for straight white male characters: "we are accustomed to finding broader resonances in male bodies, glimpsing the sublime in the stories of heroic struggle and drawing existential metaphors out of images of male solitude. We are less used to endowing female bodies with this kind of authority and reading female lives as rich in general resonances" (Felski, 2003, 17). Felski reminds us why it is so important to find the character of Nina at the centre of Akerman's adaptation, moving through the work as its protagonist, a body endowed with narratorial authority by the fixed gaze of the camera. Indeed because as Brian Farlane puts it, "*Film [. . .] is always happening in the present tense*" (Mc Farlane, 2007,21,emphasis original). She is literally made present, appearing before us with a life of her own, that is not defined by the dead white man who first created her.

Aurora Marion's contribution to Nina's embodiment (making her matter) has not received the credit it de-

serves. There is a sexualizing and exoticizing undercurrent to the descriptions of her in reviews of the film which place value on her appearance rather than her craft. Nicholas Rapold calls her ‘frustratingly stiff’ (Rapold, 2012, par. 7) in his neo-colonially titled *New York Times Review*, “‘Trapped in a Jungle and a State of Mind’”. His only praise for Marion is based on her appearance, and even this is framed negatively, as he argues that “the vibrant beauty of Nina (the new face Aurora Marion) seems almost an affront” (Rapold, 2012, par. 6). Marion’s contribution to the film is measured in terms of her desirability, which is in turn categorized as troubling. She is to Rapold the personification of what Laura Mulvey famously termed ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness*’ (Mulvey, 1975, 11, emphasis original). There is no indication in his review of what Marion is doing as Nina, or even of Nina as a role that requires the *doing* of performance.

The language Michael Atkinson employs in his review of the DVD release of *La Folie Almayer* in the December 2016 issue of *Sight and Sound* is even more demeaning to both Marion and the character of Nina. He writes of “‘the film’s payload of South-East Asia exotica, its superbly crafted old-school melodrama complete with a ravishing half-blood temptress (Belgian-Greek-Rwandan beauty Aurora Marion)’” (Atkinson, 2016, 96). Nina is erased, as is Marion’s effort to embody her as a character separate from herself as Atkinson effectively labels Marion ‘a ravishing half-blood temptress’. Aside from

the inaccuracy of Atkinson's writing, as neither Conrad nor Akerman ever position Nina as anyone's 'temptress', Atkinson's focus on Marion's personal heritage makes his use of 'half-blood' particularly offensive. There is something about the world of Conrad, or 'the bush of Conradistan' (Atkinson, 2016, 96) as Atkinson calls it, that allows the lexicon of colonialism to creep into public discourse, that apparently makes it socially permissible to describe Aurora Marion as a 'Belgian-Greek-Rwandan beauty', rather than an actor, or to call her 'half-blood' or 'temptress'. This is an example of how insidiously a 'Conradian' vocabulary empowers certain bodies to speak while excluding others from cultural production. According to Atkinson, Aurora Marion does not take up space in the film, in the canon of Akerman's work, in the canon of Conrad adaptations, or in 'Conradistan' as a maker of meaning, but as an Other.

In leering tones, he recounts Nina's return to Sambir as an adult as "“fierce, hateful and full-bodied””(Atkinson, 2016, 96). This reference to the difference between the child actor playing Nina when she is taken from Sambir and Aurora Marion playing her when she returns, suggests (cynically and sinisterly) the ogle-able *full body* of a woman, versus that of a young girl. That Nina's emotional characteristics as 'fierce, hateful', denoting Marion's expression of Nina's internal state, are conflated with her 'full body', is a further example of the way her performance is repeatedly read in terms of her

appearance and sexual attractiveness. Atkinson's use of 'full-bodied' functions as another political marker keeping Marion outside the scope of cultural production, a reminder that what she expresses as Nina will not be valued under the male gaze as anything more than being present as a permissible erotic object.

But in another way Marion's 'full-bodied' Nina is exactly what makes the film such a productive feminist adaptation. Nina's presentation in the film does "connote to-be-looked-at-ness", but as a resonant body that fills the screen, occupying the attention of the audience and conveying a "stor[y] of heroic struggle and [. . .] existential metaphors" (Felski, 2003,17) of pain, despair and isolation, just as Felski has described. The way Marion's embodiment of Nina has been marginalised in reviews of the film points to the roles women of colour are allowed to occupy in "the cultural air we breathe", and the cultural capital denied to certain bodies as the colonial archive is recirculated.

Marion's testimony of her own connection to the source text reads as a breathing space in its own right from the cultural air the *New York Times* and the *Sight and Sound* reviews prescribe. When I asked about her first impressions of the story, Marion recalled that

It felt so close to me. So close to my mother's story.
Her story that I carry in me. [. . .] My mother was

one of the first half cast child[ren] that was made out of love and not rape. Her mother is Rwandan and her father was Belgian. She was born in 1949 in central Africa when mixed race couples were forbidden. When she was about to be five years old her parents looked for a school. She wasn't accepted anywhere. Nor in White catholic school nor in schools for black people as she was neither [. . .]. So her parents sent her to Belgium to her father's village where she would be somehow accepted bearing her Belgian father's name, but still neither black or white. She was only five years old when she was sent somewhere far away from anything she knew so far. Like Nina was. Nina is my mother, my mother that carries her own story as she carried me. ('Interview with Aurora Marion', 3)

So her parents sent her to Belgium to her father's village where she would be somehow accepted bearing her Belgian father's name, but still neither black or white. She was only five years old when she was sent somewhere far away from anything she knew so far. Like Nina was. Nina is my mother, my mother that carries her own story as she carried me. ('Interview with Aurora Marion', 3) Marion articulates the way her own racial identity and family history infused her understanding of the character, while the resonances she brings to her portrayal of Nina highlight the violence behind Atkinson's use of the term 'half-blood'. When we think about the way she describes the role, her performance comes to represent the condensation of the brutal history of oppression and injustice behind such words.

One of the most striking examples of Aurora Marion's performance is a wordless sequence mid-way through the film, at its very centre, that follows Nina as she leaves the boarding school and journeys back to Sambir. We see her exit the school gates, breathe deeply (inhaling a different cultural air to the colonial one that has been smothering her), unclip the tight bun in which her hair is fastened, light a cigarette and begin to walk (Figure 1).



Figure -1: Nina leaving the colonial boarding school

She moves with purpose through Phnom Penh at night, past families, market stalls and neon lights, the camera fixed on her in profile as if we walk alongside her. In the daylight she walks towards us through busy traffic, before stealing an apple from a market stall, relieving herself in an alleyway and scoffing a bowl of soup (Figures 2 and 3). As Marion Schmid writes of these scenes, “the anachronistic presence of modern cars and DVD stores [. . .] not only evinces the director’s lack of interest in the accuracies that would be demanded by a period-style historical reconstruction, but displaces the film’s absolute vantage point into our own present from where Conrad’s investigation of colonialism and its discontents will be revisited” (Schmid 2014, 25). Nina materialises in our own world, populated by real people who barely see her while our gaze remains fixed on her. When a car drives in front of the camera, obscuring Nina from view because she is not the centre of the world she inhabits, we wait for her, peering round the car until she comes back into view because she is the centre of the cinematic world that we are inhabiting. She is present, presented, a presence through Aurora Marion’s ‘full-bodied’ performance. Schmid argues that “Marion’s stubbornly determined gaze and her rigid, almost hieratic bodily posture and swift-paced walk tracked by the camera “speak” the young woman’s isolation in the pulsating Asian metropolis, where, just as in the white boarding school, she remains an outsider” (Schmid, 2014, 28).



Figure 2 - Nina's journey through Phnom Penh



Figure 3 - Nina's journey through Phnom Penh

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ing. She is present, presented, a presence through Aurora Marion's 'full-bodied' performance. Schmid argues that "Marion's stubbornly determined gaze and her rigid, almost hieratic bodily posture and swift-paced walk tracked by the camera "speak" the young woman's isolation in the pulsating Asian metropolis, where, just as in the white boarding school, she remains an outsider" (Schmid, 2014, 28). In this sequence, Akerman's camera speaks for Nina, speaks as Nina as an extension of her embodiment; the materiality of her narrative — eating, smoking, urinating — owns the screen. The lack of dialogue throughout this section and the extended focus on Nina's actions encourage us to imbue her movements with meaning, to find resonance in her body. This silence appoints Nina as exactly the sort of Conradian character that Conrad scholarship has so emphatically insisted is white and male ('a Kurtz, a Jim, or a Heyst') (Collits 2005, 20).

The sequence culminates in Captain Tom Li's Cinderella-like discovery of Nina's discarded sandal, before the camera pans across the port to the slumped figure of its owner waiting for passage back to Sambir. She utters her first spoken words in the film, "they kicked me out", as the culmination of the cultural and social exclusion the previous wordless scenes have enacted. Over the course of her boat journey back to Sambir, Marion delivers the monologue of Nina's traumatic colonial education:

They spied on me. At the table. In my bed. My accent, my way of walking. Especially my way of walking. You had to put the heel down first, then the toes. Or the contrary. I could never get used to it. They called me Tomboy, even Savage sometimes. Not a real girl. Real girls aren't like that. Smiling, the head slightly tilted. Not straight, never straight. And never ever look into the eyes. And say yes. Not no. And the blood, when it happened, you had to hide it, not to talk about it. But be proud of it. Rosa rosa rosam, it was useless. And yet, I learned, if I'm the best, I'll manage, I told myself. And I was the best, but for that too they resented me. And there was always that beef with carrots. Beef with brown sauce. Sticky. The smell. Made me retch. *De viris Illustribus Urbis Romae*. The wars of Caesar. The Emperor who, in the end, got killed by the man he loved. I had to learn everything by heart. I didn't want to. Neither the beef, nor the salad with vinaigrette, nor the coffee with boiled milk. Rosa rosa rosam. And our Father who is in Heaven. My father was not in Heaven. He no longer existed. The beef with carrots. Every Thursday. Friday fish. That day I always said I wasn't hungry. But I was hungry. I was starving. I had never enough. All the time. And then I stained my dress. Rosa rosa rosam. And our Father who is in Heaven with the broken windows.

This monologue attests to the way Akerman's adaptation invests in the pockets of information in Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* about Nina's whitening experience in Sin-

gapore. Continuing the themes of the preceding images, there is a further emphasis here on the materiality of Nina's body. The 'full-body' in which Nina is returning, the 'filling out' of that body through puberty, is referenced not in the way Atkinson implies, but in terms of Nina's own experiences of her changing body. When she describes menstruation, she is also articulating and critiquing the attendant contradictions of shame, defilement and eroticism that overwrite this 'filling out' body in patriarchal society. Nina's feelings on her own embodiment are staged throughout the scene as she voices the performativity at stake in appearing as 'a real girl,' something that is also inflected with racial discourses, as her 'failure' to be 'a real girl' means she is branded 'Savage'. The life she describes is one in which colonial and patriarchal codes intersect at the point of her oppression, so that her colonial education in the wars of Caesar and the eighteenth century Latin textbook *De viris Illustribus Urbis Romae* takes the form of a rape, as her body is forced to contort in accommodation of alien entities: "I had to learn everything by heart. I didn't want to. Neither the beef, nor the salad with vinaigrette, nor the coffee with boiled milk". In Aurora Marion's monotone delivery, the mantra of borrowed European Christian teachings becomes a discordant vocabulary of her story of isolation, and the racial and gendered circumscription of her ambitions and talents. Marion's performance makes it clear that this trauma has damaged Nina, but given that this monologue follows the hypnotic sequence of

her animated material exploration of Phnom Penh, to which her renewed smoking is an evident signal, the speech becomes another moment in which the audience is encouraged to find resonance in her body, to piece together a narrative from the broken fragments she offers us (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Aurora Marion delivers Nina's monologue to Yucheng Sun as Captain Tom Li on the return journey to Sambir (*La Folie Almayer*, 2011)

This sequence in the film provides Nina with more narrative space than any other character, as she recounts the ordeals she has endured at the school in her own voice and provides a relatively straightforward explanation of her trajectory up to this point in the film. That we have already spent considerable time with Nina during the film's mesmeric opening sequence means that these scenes function as the delivery of Nina's backstory, fill-

ing in the blanks and working towards answering the questions posed by the mysterious prologue.

La Folie Almayer opens with an extended sequence in which we see the man who will later turn out to be Dain lip-syncing to Dean Martin's Sway, with a group of dead-eyed young women, including Nina, mechanically dancing behind him in what Schmid calls an indictment of "a global entertainment industry which relentlessly reproduces the same simulacra" (Schmid, 2014, 30). When Dain is stabbed and everyone but Nina flees the stage, it becomes clear to viewers familiar with the source text that this scene is an imagined future that Akerman has invented for Nina and Dain. Schmid argues that this vision of Nina's destiny "exceeds by far even the bleakest prophecies for her future in the book" (Schmid 2014, 30). Nina remains alone on stage for almost a minute, as the camera closes in on her, before she starts singing Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus* directly into the camera; she occupies the screen for a further two minutes, singing the motet to completion. Over the course of the film, it transpires that she learnt the song at boarding school; in one scene, we overhear her trying to sing it at the school, but she is repeatedly castigated by her teachers; in Sambir, she cannot sing more than a few words before her voice fades away.

Schmid interprets Nina's recital of the song at the film's opening as an ambivalent performance that "begs its

own set of questions: will she find her own voice and determine her destiny now that she is free from the double influence of both her father and lover? Can the subaltern speak [. . .] and does she have access to agency outside colonial and male-dominated structures of power?" (Schmid 2014, 26). For Schmid, while Nina's singing may imply the potential for a different future to that of "a dancer in a seedy nightclub-cum-brothel" (Schmid, 2014, 30), it is still emblematic of colonial and patriarchal lexical regimes that dictate who gets to speak and how.

While Nina's singing is not enough in and of itself to challenge Schmid's interpretation of this prologue as 'the bleakest prophesy' of Nina's future, Aurora Marion viewed the singing more positively, as she explains: "I remember Chantal Akerman telling me that when Dain finally dies, Nina is free. She can sing again" ('Interview with Aurora Marion', 4). This hopeful interpretation is evident in Marion's performance, as she sings through a beaming smile that we do not see again for the rest of the film. Nina's smile casts her recital as a reinscription of her colonial education, where she takes the words and culture of her abusers to find her voice on her own terms, a voice that cannot be interrupted by anyone and one that, opening the film, frames the text as a story that starts with and belongs to her. This retooling is repeated in her monologue about the school later on in the film. By beginning the film with a grim vision that is replaced

with the image of Nina's smile, Akerman assures us of Nina's ultimate happiness from the outset. This means that even when her trauma is staged by the camera and script she is not trapped in her victimhood; we know one day she will have reason to smile again. This version of Nina, happy and free, transcends the confines of the main body of the film and of course the narrative, floating through and outside her darkest scenes as a reminder of the future that awaits her. Thus, she materializes in the filmic text as a character that exists beyond the scope of Conrad's reach, with an (after)life of her own.

Conclusion

Nina's materiality in this film matters; she is made present to its viewers over and over again as a substantial person, 'full-bodied'. In *La Folie Almayer*, Almayer's Folly is immortalised in the body of a young woman coming to grips with the racial and sexual prejudices that shape her path through the world. The film testifies to the power and volume of Nina's voice throughout the original text, so that the colonial literary canon is here populated by and remembered in the form of women of colour. Those bodies of the dying white male (anti-)heroes we have grown so used to finding under the sign of 'Conrad' ('a Kurtz, a Jim, or a Heyst' (Collits 2005, 20)) lose their exclusive authority as resonance-bearers and makers of meaning. The colonial archive, instead, comes to account for different stories from different bodies.

Because of the way Nina is allowed to materialise, and how this reflects her importance in *Almayer's Folly*, *La Folie Almayer* is a crucial text for the future of a feminist, postcolonial Conrad canon, and an exemplary model for how the work of dead white men can be retooled to circulate a more inclusive cultural air.

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