

Nina Almayer, Aurora Marion and ‘The Cultural Air We Breathe’: Character Status and Embodiment in Joseph Conrad’s *Almayer’s Folly* and Chantal Akerman’s *La Folie Almayer*.

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Abstract:

The work of Joseph Conrad has been canonised in very specific ways, so that *Heart of Darkness* – a text which inarguably privileges the narratives of white men – has ‘become part of the cultural air we breathe’ (Armstrong, 2006, ix). However, turning towards Conrad’s lesser-known first novel *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), we find at its heart an articulate, desiring young woman of colour, Nina Almayer. The way she eloquently voices the overdetermination of her race and gender in colonial patriarchal culture functions as a pocket of resistance, a breathing space, in this ‘cultural air we breathe’ when we perpetually recirculate white male bodies as the only characters worthy of our readerly investment. Tracing first these breathing spaces in Conrad’s novel, this paper then focuses on Nina’s afterlife in Chantal Akerman’s 2011 adaptation *La Folie Almayer*. In her last narrative work, Akerman stages Nina’s experience of epistemic colonial violence and racial prejudice at the centre of her film. Nina’s character status is actualised through the resonant performance of the actor Aurora Marion, who brings her own cultural poignance to the text and the Conrad canon. By following Nina’s power on the page to her embodiment on the screen, I work to retool the colonial literary archive for feminist, postcolonial readers, to circulate a different, more inclusive kind of ‘cultural air’ in literary scholarship, in which the meaning-making character status of women of colour is properly recognised.

Keywords: *La Folie Almayer*; Aurora Marion; Chantal Akerman; Nina Almayer; Joseph Conrad