

Nancy Keefe Rhodes

Moving Images Introduction:

Thea St. Omer (May 12, 1973 – April 3, 2015)

When the celebrated Harlem Renaissance writer, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston died in a welfare nursing home in Fort Pierce, Florida, in 1960, her work was largely unknown to those into whose charge her few belongings and several boxes of papers had fallen. So poor that former neighbors took up a collection for her funeral, she was buried in an unmarked grave. Those boxes of papers, with little ceremony at all, went into a bonfire. An old friend, coincidentally walking past, put out the fire and retrieved some of the papers. By the time the writer Alice Walker went searching for the grave thirteen years later—she told the undertaker she was Hurston’s niece—the cemetery was abandoned and Hurston’s books were all out of print. Walker recounted this trip in a March 1975 essay in *Ms. Magazine*, still available in her *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1989), along with the introduction she wrote to Robert Hemenway’s 1979 Hurston biography.

I don’t recall where I first heard this story, but it’s what I found myself telling Thea’s landlord when he called me shortly after her death early last April. There were five hard drives, he said, and boxes of cassettes and DVDs, and a quantity of notebooks, all of which he was unsure what to do with. I told him it should not be broken up or thrown away, adding the story of Hurston’s burned papers for emphasis. Thea’s death in her loft space shop in the Armory Square district of Syracuse, a downtown collection of shops and galleries and restaurants, had attracted local media attention for both the mystery and her relative youth, and her landlord went to great lengths to dispose of what was left in the loft for her elderly parents, who could not come east from Santa Barbara. When Joe asked if I would take this material, I said yes, and undertook to sort and archive what was there.

I am not a film historian or filmmaker. I write about film and I teach film history and culture. The near loss of Thea’s work is a common issue among

artists. Painters trade their work for rent or lose it to unscrupulous dealers and agents. Filmmakers lose the original prints and licenses of their movies and can't afford restoration. Writers leave boxes of manuscripts behind. Most move often and most spend years poor or doing other work to support their art. (Both Hurston and Thea had a variety of jobs to support their art that some call "menial.") Add the vicissitudes of any artist's own self-regard: Thea stopped making film "for good" at least twice, because she felt she'd failed as a filmmaker, and each time destroyed or gave away work to be rid of it. But what she saved she meticulously catalogued. Included in this section is an essay originally jotted in her journal on New Year's Eve 2011 that recounts that struggle over her final completed film, *Vodka in a Glass*.

I knew Thea not quite a decade when she died, introduced by a mutual friend, and from time to time she would invite me to watch rough cuts of whatever she was working on at her various apartments—always at the top of steep flights of stairs—or to a meal elsewhere, to screenings and various events, and sometimes she and her dog Javi and I walked. I did not go looking for her film material, but when it came to me, I understood that you pick up what is offered.

Many people have been extraordinarily generous in this effort, giving hours of their time and attention, and donating access to equipment and skills that I don't possess. One must begin with Thea's parents, Lucy and Garth St.Omer, without whose trust and support this project would have gone nowhere fast. An important novelist from St. Lucia in his own right who has just had a new novel released in October, Garth St.Omer moved to the United States the year before Thea was born to pursue a university career. Lucy St.Omer named Thea for a major character in her husband's novels. A favorite passage of Thea's from one, *Shades of Gray* (1968, 2013), about the character Stephenson Laurent, is perhaps self-descriptive at least in aspiration:

He walked on. No crisis, no disappointment, nothing that had happened to him had stopped the flow of his life. Like a river overcoming all opposition by its inherent fluidity, it rolled on. Always it found its own channel, its own level. It rolled on, he thought, no longer the amplified voice, as history, Federation or not, would roll on.

Among Thea's unfinished projects is a feature-length film titled *Snow*, which appears to lack only a soundtrack (though she's listed the sound designer in the credits), in which Lucy and Garth St.Omer allowed Thea to direct them as the

two main characters. One copy of *Snow* is especially illuminating because the ambient sound reveals how Thea worked with her actors, the sort of instructions she gave as a director and in particular how her ease with long takes and the intimacy of direct eye contact may have originated as a childhood game with her father. At one point, you hear her say, “Just look into the camera—look me in the eye, Daddy, the way we used to do.”

Initially the project to preserve Thea’s film material meant sorting it and transferring as much as possible to safer, more durable media. Her five old LaCie hard drives had become creaky and sticky, and the final cuts of three of her earliest films had to be taken off old BetaMax cassettes, which meant finding a deck in Syracuse that could play them and a system that could digitize whatever came through. Despite advice that I would have to go to Rochester or New York City, I had a hunch there must still be such a deck on a shelf in some office in this city, and I was right; the real good fortune was that the people there knew Thea and were happy to help. There is a separate Acknowledgements section here that names names, but know that you sometimes come to feel a project has somebody looking out for it.

The idea of a special section in *Stone Canoe’s* online Moving Images section occurred fairly soon, and managing editor Phil Memmer was at once enthusiastic, adding that Thea has conducted some of her own interviews at the YMCA’s Downtown Writers Center. The goal has been to create one spot online where those who knew Thea and her work could comment on how come it is important not to let her films fade into oblivion. This plus the more recent decision to also make her finished films available here via online links will hopefully provide a context in which her work survives and gets seen. Local contributors join those from as far as NYU, Paris and Spain, and include co-workers, artists, teachers and filmmakers.

We are fortunate that so far two local public screenings will occur in February: *Vodka in a Glass* on Feb. 5th as part of the Caribbean Cinematic Festival at the Community Folk Art Center, and *Nigger* on Feb. 23rd at ArtRage Gallery in conjunction with the William Berry, Jr. exhibition *Blackout: Through the Veiled Eyes of Others* (a homecoming of sorts; *Nigger* screened at ArtRage in 2009).

Alice Walker wrote for Robert Hemenway, “*A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as*

witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone.”

More work remains, but this is a good start.



Nancy Keefe Rhodes is founding editor of Stone Canoe’s online Moving Images section. She is a writer, editor and curator whose work covers film, photo and visual arts. She teaches film history and culture in Transmedia Studies, College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University, teaches non-memoir non-fiction at the YMCA’s Downtown Writers Center, and serves on the Syracuse Public Arts Commission. She is an alum of the Goldring Arts Journalism Program at the Newhouse School.