

Nancy Keefe Rhodes

2009 Review of the film *Nigger*

“I don’t audible-ize the word,” says one of the interviewees, a middle-aged white man and presumably a teacher. He says that he will write “nigger” and he will refer to it, just never “audible-ize” it.



I suppose he really means “say out loud.” Generally I take a dim view of the practice of interchanging parts of speech—using “impact” as a verb is just lazy—and now here is a further alarming foray into adjectival contortion. “Audible-ize” may exist somewhere, probably as a technological term, but this is the first time I’ve heard it used. And perhaps it shows up here to illustrate unwittingly the lengths to which we’ll go in seeking linguistic escape from the snares of another word. Thea St.Omer takes on the many-shaded malignancy of that word in her masterful documentary, *Nigger*.

An instructor at the Newhouse School of Syracuse University, St.Omer screened an earlier version of *Nigger* there last spring and later at New York University. Now she’s finished the film—59 minutes and shot in digital video—and she hosts a premiere screening next Wednesday at ArtRage Gallery in the Hawley-Greene neighborhood, just a short hop north from the SU campus near James and Lodi.

St.Omer distills *Nigger* from over one hundred interviews. The majority of her interviewees are of African descent, but there are also Latinos, a number of whites including a German mother whose school-age daughter uses the term “digger” as code for the forbidden “nigger,” and several Asians including a slen-

der young man who says he's never been called a "nigger" and adds wistfully, "I'm not that cool." One thing that film as a visual medium accomplishes here, without making any fuss about it at all, is the accumulation of a pool of subjects who are astonishingly varied in their range of age, style, accent, dress, station and degree of worldliness, stance and hue. This of course makes its own point given the film's consideration of blunt-force stereotype.

St.Omer's set-up is simple and intimate: acting as her own cameraperson and shooting in closeup, she interviews subjects against a black backdrop. In letting me watch the film for review she extracted a for-my-eyes-only promise because the dvcam master was delayed, getting its final color correction elsewhere. She needn't have worried. The film's look is very nice indeed.

She has taken what are evidently lengthy conversations and edited to pull short clips which she then arranges in sections. One can imagine that these categories emerged from the interviews she filmed as well as from her questions, and the sections are simply titled with white text on black: "A look at the word." "Where did the term nigger come from?" "Is there such a thing as a nigger?" (This section is particularly intriguing, as interviewees think through aloud about the distinctions involved between a word and what it represents.) "To be called a nigger." "The cultural nuances of nigger." "Is there a difference between nigger and nigga?" "Should we use the words nigger and nigga today?" and "Are you a nigger?", which evokes perhaps deeper emotion than in any of the previous sections. It is my guess that none of the white interviewees asked this question will ever claim glibly that they "know how you feel."

While we don't hear her voice until a good ways into the film—she softly asks a young man how he reacted when someone called him a nigger (instead of answering directly, he says, "My Jewish friend Andy beat the crap out of the guy!")—and only infrequently after that, it's evident she's an excellent interviewer. Her subjects are relaxed, expressive, thoughtful, sometimes witty and frequently eloquent. I said above that she "distilled" this film; that's descriptive but also offers the temptation to draw that metaphor out, for what's here is a kind of bootleg knowledge. Clearly these enormously quotable people feel safe with St.Omer getting them on record about, as the film's tagline goes, "Arguably the most loaded word in our history."

Actually, I suppose some would argue about that assertion, and several of St. Omer's subjects do reference parallel struggles in passing. For example, one woman says that "for some people, the world is full of niggers and kikes and

homosexuals.” Another woman responds to the issue of who may appropriately use the word “nigga,” either in solidarity or as a way of claiming affection, by noting that she understands the theory of “reclaiming” and thereby transforming negative language but she can’t imagine ever actually calling her women friends by the “C” word. It seems to me another of St.Omer’s quiet accomplishments in this film is that we understand she’s not adverse to including other oppressions, but this one is what we’re talking about right now and—like the good teacher that I imagine she is in a classroom—she deftly keeps us right on point.



This review appeared in the October 1, 2009 print issue of the *Syracuse City Eagle* weekly. Thea St.Omer hosted the premiere screening of her finished documentary, *Nigger*, on Wednesday, October 7 at 7:00 PM at ArtRage Gallery in Syracuse. An earlier version of *Nigger* screened in New York City on March 3, 2009, at the NYU Directors’ Series and on April 22, 2009, at the Newhouse School/Syracuse University. The film later screened on January 27, 2010, as part of Syracuse University’s annual MLK celebration programming, *Dream Out Loud*, in the Maxwell School. ArtRage hosts a return screening of the really final 2011 cut of this film on February 23, 2016, as part of the programming for their exhibition, *Blackout: Through the Veiled Eyes of Others, Racist Memorabilia from the Collection of William Berry, Jr.*, February 6–March 19, 2016.

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