

Courtney Rile

Best, T

I was working in an art gallery in an old factory-turned-art-center on Syracuse's near Westside when Thea St.Omer wandered in. She was there to hang a poster for a lecture series at Syracuse University's School of Architecture, which was then located in a renovated warehouse down the



street. As I fetched pushpins, she glanced over the other events advertised on the bulletin board. The Delavan Center was a magnet of sorts, attracting creative people who sought to know one another. Thea—or T, as she signed her name to me—had just moved to Syracuse from New York City and was searching for something new and interesting. In one of the last emails I received from her, she wrote, “You were one of the first people I met when I came to Syracuse, and one of the first people I considered a friend.”

This is how I first knew T, as a wanderer, always inquiring and intrigued. I would later come to view her as an activist, making films to point out the imbalances in our society. What stood out about her was that she really connected with people. She listened, pondered, and asked poignant questions. She was concerned about perceptions and not afraid to look honestly at stereotypes. She was intimate and personal in the way one would connect with a stranger on a bus. You know, those kinds of life-changing conversations with someone you barely know, where you talk deeply about any given subject to the degree that it transforms your perspective.

In 2007, T and I both enrolled in Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management's Entrepreneurship Bootcamp. T ended up skipping most of the Satur-

day classes and instead opened a shop in Marshall Square Mall directly across the street from the building where the class was held. It was a tiny postage stamp of a location, although centrally located. She sold imported goods and objects that made her smile. During the class, I would visit her at her store during breaks or afterwards. I would keep her informed of how the class was developing and she would tell me about the store, or whatever other projects she was developing at the time. During one visit, she had just written an article about race and asked me if I'd be willing to discuss the subject with her sometime. Perhaps this was the beginning of the thought process that led to the film *Nigger*, a series of over a hundred interviews carefully linked together to examine the contemporary meaning of the term. Or it could have also led to *A Truth about Tupac*, filmed at the same time and in the same manner, examining the man, myth and legend of the rapper Tupac Shakur.

Despite many lengthy discussions, T never revealed many personal details. Mostly, I knew about her jobs, her Akita (a dog named Javi, short for Javier), and eventually, her films. She had an MFA in Film from New York University, and after she closed the store in Marshall Square Mall, she taught a class called "Contemporary African American Cinema Studies" at the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University. She also worked in food service at a dining hall on campus, and at some point she worked at Wal-Mart. In one of my favorite stories, T was working the night shift at Wal-Mart. It was slow and she was having a long conversation with a co-worker about "the city." They talked, or rather vented, for nearly an hour about the trials and tribulations of "the city," only for T to realize toward the end that while she was talking about New York City, he was talking about Syracuse.

This was T. She was at once both worldly and grounded. She held court with people from all walks of life, always with kindness and compassion and never with judgment. I think she thrived on working odd jobs because of the variety of people she met and connected with along the way. Every person had a sacredness she would recognize and engage. She looked at the world with a raw lens. Her films were naked, with no music or imagery to entertain or detract from their core content. They were raw because that's how she wanted to present the world to itself. They were art in the sense that art is a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected. She absorbed these kinds of random honest conversations and eventually reflected them back to the world in the form of film.

When I look back through my record of emails, the oldest one I can find has the subject line, "tea?" Early on, our friendship developed by serendipity, crossing

paths on the Syracuse city streets. She was often out walking either to get from point A to B, to walk her dog Javi, or just to think. When we finally did plan to meet one evening, we met at Roji Tea Lounge. The Japanese term “roji” refers to a short walk down a garden path to a tea ceremony, meant to elevate your mind and surrender your worries to simplicity. Much of our friendship took place at Roji, and I find comfort in knowing that in the last days of her life, T was creating a teahouse.

After many hours of tea and conversation, we left to go to Little Gem Diner. In the wee hours of the morning with hardly anyone there, T became fascinated with the waitress and began investigating whether she would make a good interview subject. T would tell me about her films when I would ask about them. That night she explained she was working on the subject of disability, which manifested as the films *NorMAL* and *DIScerning disABILITY*. The following summer she asked me to participate in the film *Fruit Eating Film* that she described as purely footage of people eating mangoes. Later, she told me of the screenplay she wrote about the murder of a transgender woman that became *Vodka in a Glass*. At Little Gem that night, or rather, morning, I departed for sleep and T wrote me later that she “ended up having a very dynamic time at the diner, staying through the wee morning hours speaking with a rather engaging man about his ‘mental illness.’”

We bonded that night but, between both of our projects and travels, we lost track of each other. I wrote when I wasn’t able to attend a screening of her film *Nigger* at Maxwell Auditorium at Syracuse University. She wrote back, “Sorry for the slight delay, I’ve been a bit absent since my screening which, by the way, I really enjoyed. I spoke for 10 minutes about what I was feeling, Haiti, Hurricane Katrina, September 11th, 2001 and how we, as Americans, myself included, are all racists to some degree...” It seemed to be a pinnacle moment.

After that I continued to run into her randomly on the street but she always seemed distracted and lost in thought. After listening to a reading of her journal entry at her memorial at The Palace Theater last May, made the night she completed *Vodka in a Glass*, I imagine now that she was engrossed in editing whatever project she was working on. She wrote, “I don’t know how many more seemingly random walks alone around my neighborhood, dressed incognito in the very late night or wee morning hours I can steal, and yet I so much enjoyed them. They were not random. While editing my mind was occupied always, such that it was a distraction for me to speak in any meaningful way to people except in matters related to this film.”

She wrote about being lost and found in the editing room. For both being filmmakers, we surprisingly talked very little about filmmaking. That is a regret of mine. Had I known she was contemplating her edits I would have struck up a conversation about it, since I often find myself in the same exact state of mind. At the memorial many of T's paintings were exhibited. I had no idea she painted, but it made sense to me. Painting results in immediate gratification whereas video is painstakingly planned and processed over time. I can see how she would turn to painting out of frustration with editing.

Since T is now gone her legacy has become her films. It is only recently that I've been able to watch most of them, thanks to this project with *Stone Canoe* and the efforts of the film critic Nancy Keefe Rhodes to recognize the work of filmmakers before history consumes them with no mention. To see her films now, I see Thea in all of them. T's character and her many conversations with people in life manifested in her filmmaking. They are intimate honest experiences with close-ups on the face, sometimes no forehead and chin, just eyes, a nose, a mouth and ears. She treats everyone this way, whether it's an elderly couple at the end of their lives in *Love in an Elevator*, or people with autism in *DIScerning dis-ABILITY*. The sound of her breathing or the occasional "mmm-hmmm" reflect her presence. The earliest films I saw, completed during her time at NYU, had minimal sound design but later films had no music or effects whatsoever, just interviews.

I'm an editor, so for me watching her documentaries is like watching an assembly of interviews still in the process of editing. There's no dressing. It's just naked content. There is no entertainment factor, no way to look away. They are, at times, uncomfortable, and yet, they are riveting because the content is poignant. Each series of question-and-answer is linked together with care and intention. Together, they form a whole that makes sense and is emotionally compelling. Her films work on the power of their ideas, her calculated balance of participants, and her ability to prompt conversations by asking bold questions. Sometimes she would include her voice in the final edit: "What is it representing?" Or, "Are *you* a nigger?" she asks, simply, provocatively.



Courtney Rile is a media maker and arts entrepreneur. She is a partner in the production company Daylight Blue Media. A photographer, video editor, and curator of visual and media arts, exhibitions and special events, she is well-known as an arts advocate. She holds a degree in Art Video from the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University.