

CAROLINA OUTLIER:

An Interview with María DeGuzmán

BY JOAN CONWELL

with photography by María DeGuzmán



Sounding Albemarle Sound, 2010 (digital photography)
by María DeGuzmán

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Dr. María DeGuzmán is a professor in the English and Comparative Literature, Department, the Director of Latina/o Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the author of *Spain's Long Shadow* and *Buenas Noches, American Culture*.¹ She has written on Latina/o literature and Queer Latina cultural production. In addition to being a scholar-activist and founder of the first Latina/o Studies program in the Southeast, she is a poet and conceptual photographer whose work has been exhibited locally, nationally, and internationally. Unapologetically political, her photographs depict constructed scenes featuring small figurines (less than a few inches tall) illuminated with light manipulated through refracting objects such as prisms.² Accompanied by fictional text, the word-image experiments offer the viewer a sequence of narratives focused on the historic "other" – the faceless immigrant, the exiled child, the woman without, the perpetual outsider.

DeGuzmán's wide range of accomplishments impresses, but her ability to integrate such an array of identities into a single persona, refracting experience into both scholarship and art, intrigues. Born in Spain, DeGuzmán spent part of her childhood in Madrid and her teen years in the American South. She graduated from Brown University and received her MA and PhD degrees from Harvard University. She has lived in Chapel Hill since 1999 when she joined the faculty at UNC.

On August 22, 2012, I met with DeGuzmán for an extended lunch interview at a Thai restaurant in Cary, North Carolina. My goal was to elicit DeGuzmán's perspective on the changing state of North Carolina literature and culture. Following the interview, we spoke by phone and corresponded via email. A month after our initial interview, I attended an undergraduate lecture she gave at UNC on "Polaroids," the Achy Obejas story mentioned in the interview. During the lecture, DeGuzmán drew on Roland Barthes's theory that every photograph intimates death, to establish a link between photography, the spectral remnants of the South's segregated past, and the device of "ghosting" in Latina/o literature. What appears here has been edited for clarity, style, and length. Although our conversation meandered from photography to literature and back, I organized the interview to begin with our lengthy coverage of Southern and North Carolina literature and culture in the context of DeGuzmán's experience and ended with our discussion of her motivation and creative process in her conceptual photographic work.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARÍA DEGUZMÁN

ABOVE María DeGuzmán

¹ María DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2005); *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latina/o Aesthetics of Night* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2012).

² For an example of her conceptual photography essays, see María DeGuzmán, "A Sequence of Refracted Images of the Americas," *Mandorla* 12 (2009): 291–301.

JOAN CONWELL: *The earliest reference I can find on you is that you wrote an undergraduate thesis at Brown on obedience and rebellion in William Faulkner's A Fable.³ I was going to note, therefore, that your academic career in Providence began with Southern literature, but when I looked up A Fable I found that it's set in France during World War I. What drew you to study that work?*

MARÍA DEGUZMÁN: Very interesting question. Well, a whole bunch of things. One, it was a work that Faulkner scholars skirted around or considered to be his grand, tenured experiment that was sort of a failure. I think I was drawn to it precisely for the reasons implicit in the way you set up this question – that it was an outlier. It was not set in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County; it was set in Paris. And not only that, it does something very strange. It is a re-telling of the gospels so it's opening up certain philosophical and religious questions in relation to political questions. The basic drive of the novel, it seemed to me, is: When should we rebel? Under what circumstances should we rebel? Should we always obey authority, or are there times when we certainly should not obey authority, and how does that work? Those questions really drove my interest in the novel. And for those reasons, I tackled it. A lot of the critics had gotten caught up in whether it is a Christian story. It is and it isn't. It's this thing that keeps traversing boundaries back and forth and back and forth. You have to keep peeling away at the layers. So that is what drew me to it, the fact that it was traversing all these realms, spatial and disciplinary.

Would you consider it a transnational novel?

Absolutely. Transnational, in terms of time, too, because it goes back to World War I, not World War II, even though he was obviously writing through that time.

You double majored in American Studies and Hispanic Studies?

I double majored in English and American literature and then Hispanic Studies because, ultimately, what I wanted to do and what was driving me was to try to bring together all my realms of experience. I'd been raised in Spain, I lived in the South of the United States, I had studied Latin American literature and Spanish literature at Brown. I was also keenly interested in US culture. How do you bring all these things together?



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Undocumented Bill of Rights, 2011 (digital photography) by María DeGuzmán

³ María DeGuzmán, "The Theme of Obedience to Authority and Rebellion in the Contents and Form of William Faulkner's *A Fable*," BA thesis, Brown University, 1986.

JOAN CONWELL received a BA in Cultural Anthropology from Barnard College, Columbia University and an MA in English from ECU. She lives in Cary, NC, and is co-editing a collection of essays on transnational literature, gender, and power. Her writing has appeared in *Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora*, *Cary Citizen*, *Independent Weekly*, *Columbia Spectator*, and *Carolina Parent*. See her essay on North Carolina Latino/a Writers in *NCLR Online* 2013.