



UNC English Professors Erin Carlston (left) and Maria Deguzman, among others, illuminated a challenging text for their classes.

Photo by Michael Jerch

Bringing to Life Queer Lit

Professors infuse Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* with fresh multi-media

By Renan Snowden

When English Professor Erin Carlston was assigned to read Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* as an undergraduate, she hated it. She now considers it one of the best novels written in the 20th century.

Like many readers, Carlston initially was put off by the book's excessively ornate prose, Shakespearean language, heavy symbolism and lack of traditional character development. Written in 1936, the novel follows the life of Robin Vote and the women and men she romances. The story is set in Paris during the rise of fascism that would lead to the persecution of Jews and homosexuals throughout Europe. Today, *Nightwood* is considered a seminal book both in queer literature and the modernist era.

To lighten the burden of teaching such a challenging text, Carlston teamed up with UNC English Professor Maria Deguzman, Hofstra University English Professor Patricia Smith and UNC Political Science graduate student Carisa Showden to piece together the multi-media online project "A Hard Day's Nightwood." Using themselves as actors, the four they are photographing scenes from the novel.

Online, these images are formatted to change when a cursor is placed on them. For instance, a picture of a female character with her doctor changes into one with a looming shadow when users scroll over the photo. Eventually, the completed images will be used in a slide show presentation.

Both the website and the slideshow will create a more dynamic setting than a gallery wall. Deguzman says they "allow for possibilities of blending and

mixing and a heightened sense of moving through or from one space-time to another." Because the media change, they call on the viewer to interact with the piece in order to understand it.

With visuals accompanying the text, the viewer must make meaning of different forms of information in order to capture not only what is occurring, but also to step back and analyze how we create meaning from different sources of information. Especially for a text so focused on the transitory nature of identity, hypertext is a complementary medium that lends itself to making meaning by accumulation of information.

Professor Deguzman has produced conceptual photography series before, including "Theft in the Doll's House," a collaboration with Jill Casid from Women's Studies that featured staged mannequins alongside text. It is this interplay between text and the visual that has made the form of conceptual photography beneficial to her project on *Nightwood*.

Though the novel centers on queer individuals, it is not to be read as a text of marginalization. There is no interaction against a society. Instead, characters become the society, and thus the norm. *Nightwood* also deals with the clash of Jewish and French cultures. For Deguzman, *Nightwood* "foregrounds the notion of difference." Difference, whether defined as sexuality, gender, religion, or nationality, is an important element throughout the novel. *Nightwood's* characters do not seek acceptance from mainstream society.

"A Hard Day's Nightwood" can be viewed at www.cameraquery.com. •

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