

Trans(form)ative Language: Asian American Poetry and Racial Difference

Presenter

- Rebecca Mark, Senior, English Mary Gates Scholar

Mentors

- Francisco Benitez,
- Rick Bonus,
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Session

- [Session 1L: Thinking within and across Cultures: A Classic Debate](#)
- Mary Gates Hall Room 258
- 1:00 PM to 2:30 PM

When speaking of race, the task put to Asian American poets is not to make readers comprehend that they *are* different, but rather *how*. The question of how racial difference can be understood is really a question of literary form, and one which Asian American poets take up with great frequency. But when reading Asian American poets, the institutional tendency has been to interpret them in terms of literary criticism's more material interventions, i.e. readings which focus on existent racial conflict, class conflict, or gendered conflict. Within the field of literary studies, the partitioning of institutionalized reading practices generally occurs along racial lines, with formalist analysis being used to understand white writers and cultural criticism being reserved for racialized writers; I argue that this limits the recognition of the racialized writer's transformative possibilities by ignoring the specifically literary freedom to imagine otherwise. I do not contend that literary form is the transcendent means to enter a universal space, but rather that form is deeply enmeshed within material systems and yet provides the means of altering their parameters. With these methodological considerations in mind, I have refocused on the poetry of Arthur Sze, because speaking about criticism is empty without offering an interpretation. There I have found that his formal decisions allow us to conceive of the possibility of a universality of difference, rather than one which homogenizes toward unification.