

Panel 30

Writing, Aesthetics and the Politics of Engagement

“Resistance in the material”:

Multi-modal Poetic Readings within Paisley Rekdal’s *West: A Translation*.

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In my paper, I focus on the range of aesthetic strategies, self-reflexive positionalities, and multimodal interventions adopted by contemporary A/PIA documentary poets writing alongside archival documents, to illuminate how poets model additional possibilities for readers to engage with such materials and histories. My paper specifically explores Paisley Rekdal’s *West: A Translation* (Copper Canyon Press, 2023), and the pedagogical implications of teaching documentary poems that infuse visual, digital, and sonic materialities.

Previous explorations of the “documentary” have prioritized documentary film and photography, failing to account for the importance of “document” as a noun rather than a verb (Leong, *Contested Records* 37). Not only does my paper consider the production, material composition, and distribution of the document as an object, it also focuses on multimodal objects embedded within poems that allow for multiple sites of readerly encounter, such as digital video installations, artists’ books, and visual “poemaps.”

In my paper, I engage primarily with Rekdal’s digital and print linked poetic sequence *West: A Translation*, which details the historic completion of the U.S. transcontinental railroad. I discuss different multimodal strategies that Rekdal adopts in these poems, such as reorienting reading structures through digital design, and reflecting on the material construction of reading and making documentary texts. These strategies open up what I call prismatic readings: readings that prompt multiplicity rather than a cohesive history about the transcontinental railroad, ultimately destabilizing fixed forms of engagement with historic events.

Biography

Carlina Duan is a poet, educator, and scholar. She is the author of *I Wore My Blackest Hair* (Little A, 2017), and *Alien Miss* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2021). In addition to her poetic work, she writes scholarship on documentary poetics and aesthetics. Duan’s poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Poets.org*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Slowdown*, and elsewhere. A finalist for the 2025 Ruth Lilly & Dorothy Sargent Poetry Fellowship, she has also received support from Kundiman, Hedgebrook, and the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, among others. Duan is Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where she teaches poetry.