

Tristram Wolff, *Against the Uprooted Word: Giving Language Time in Transatlantic Romanticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. Pp. 338. \$70. ISBN 9781503632769.

In *Against the Uprooted Word*, Tristram Wolff invites his readers to an ambitious reconsideration of the history of philology. At the nexus of literature and linguistic theory, he casts a select group of Romantics as influential disruptors of the process of racial categorization that had its origins in Western theories on culture. Whereas stadial narratives of civilization uprooted language from lived experience, so that speech forms were ‘remade into objects separable from the linguistic reciprocity of uptake and utterance,’ the writers Wolff has chosen resisted the ‘tightening net of association between language, nature, and race’ (48, 225). They enacted this resistance by, as his title puts it, giving language time, that is, by endowing language with ‘new temporalities more intimate, shared, and expansive than the progress-driven historical imaginary that would supplant or absorb them’ (7).

Through chapters on Phillis Wheatley, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Henry David Thoreau, Wolff pursues this understanding of transatlantic Romanticism as especially invested in a linguistic naturalism that works through temporal multiplicity. The guiding spirit here is J. G. Herder, to whom Wolff devotes most of his first chapter, skillfully presenting the liberatory potential of Herder’s linguistic theories freed from the limitations of linear development. Acknowledging that Herder’s mode of historicizing is implicated in the eventual designation of the white European as the sole subject of history, Wolff argues that Herder’s theoretical shift toward a ‘language ecology’ creates possibilities for reading—and occupying—alternate and divergent temporalities (37, 11). As Wolff goes on to show, each of his central literary figures worked against the uprooted word through a particular temporal poetics. In many texts, this is expressed as ‘gray romanticism,’ Wolff’s term for ‘an embrace of ambiguity or opacity’ (25). It also refers to the many images and concepts these Romantics extract in the field of geology, from which Wolff coins the term ‘linguistic actualism’ (118). With such felicitous phrasing (including ‘uprooted word’ and ‘giving language time’), Wolff builds a vocabulary for his work, pursuing in his own practice what he detects in the achievement of these Romantics: ‘ways to represent language as simultaneously solid (a product of history) and soluble (still actively in play)’ (7).

Such innovative erudition animates his subsequent chapters, beginning with Wheatley, whom Wolff regards as ‘an underacknowledged resource for European romanticism’ (61). His reading of her linguistic agency will garner significant attention, for in the poem ‘Niobe in Distress for Her Children’ the uprooted word is ‘etherealize[ed]’ into speech beyond death (86). Wheatley reworks the source myth to forestall petrification, a choice Wolff explores as an ‘effect of diaspora,’ a ‘geological voice’ interrogating Enlightenment notions of freedom as abstraction’ (62, 90). Turning to Blake, Wolff centers three texts (‘The Clod and the Pebble,’ *The Book of Thel*, and *The Book of Urizen*) in which ‘deep time is a way of thinking against empire’ (142). This presentation of Blake’s gray romanticism animates the near imperceptibility of temporal change on the level of geological strata, which in Wolff’s account enhances our own ability to ‘expand or contract, feel in different tempos, or hear in new ways’ (137). His chapter on Wordsworth begins with the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and the Romantic era’s broader investment in vernacular language, and here John Horne Tooke enters Wolff’s informative discussion of the political implications for individual speech acts. Pursuing the question of whether a common language can be stabilized over time, the chapter moves on to a geologically oriented reading of ‘Hart-Leap Well’ and then turns from the

local to the transatlantic by pairing Wordsworth's sonnet to Toussaint with a responding poem by Antoine Dupré (180). The final chapter, on Thoreau, takes up the transcendentalist's 'regard for variation, mixed durations, and regeneration in the natural world' (14) while acknowledging troubling aspects of his temporal dislocations. Thoreau's fascination with etymology sits in tension with his inability to perceive Native Americans as being fully present; perhaps Thoreau remained 'beholden to increasingly sedimented forms of racial time' (187).

Throughout, Wolff assembles, disassembles, and reassembles multiple themes and disciplines: linguistics, ethnography, geology, postcolonial studies, critical theory, and more. He keeps these aloft, bringing each in when relevant, to pursue the important matter of how 'literary language shape[s] racial time' (15). Never willing to gloss over contradiction, Wolff certainly succeeds in his aim 'to foreground the vicissitudes of linguistic subjectivity as surprising openings for creativity' (31). Indeed, he himself offers many a literary or critical surprise, often through the inclusion of an unexpected interlocutor whose presence enriches the given context without ever fixing the central figure. *Against the Uprooted Word* is a subtle, erudite, and lively study that richly rewards engagement.

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