

Language, Soil, and “Jewish” Alienation in Levinas and Adorno

Edmund Chapman is an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Fellow at Maynooth University. He is the author of *The Afterlife of Texts in Translation: Understanding the Messianic in Literature* (2019).

Email: edmund.chapman@mu.ie

Along with blood, soil is one of the most common tropes in conceptualizations of national belonging—with plants, which either “take root in” or are “uprooted from” the national soil, standing for the citizen or migrant.¹ To link language to soil may thus appear a simplistic affirmation of linguistic nationalism. Yet in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Theodor Adorno, two thinkers frequently read both in comparison and opposition to each other, the linkage of language and soil can be read as advocating the moral or ethical necessity of alienation, and the concomitant disavowal of a distinction between “native” and “foreign.”²

Levinas and Adorno link language and soil in very different contexts. In a 1986 interview with François Poirié, Levinas describes how for him, “the soil of that [French] language is the French soil.”³ Adorno meanwhile describes how *Fremdwörter*, German words with recognizably non-German etymologies, “could preserve something of the utopia of language, a language without soil.”⁴ While Levinas names a “language with soil” and Adorno a “language without soil,” the ideas implied by these terms do not stand in opposition to each other. I argue that for Levinas, “language with soil” is a language that allows for the perception of the profound linkage between land and culture that defines the nation, which serves to underline the linguistic subject’s lack of “belonging” to the nation. Meanwhile, for Adorno, a “language without soil” would be a language that rejects the idea of organicism or “naturalness” in language.

As much as these ideas are distinct, for both thinkers, their linkage of language and soil can be understood in terms of alienation, via their respective conceptions of “Jewishness.” For Levinas,

Jewish alienation from soil typifies the ethical demand that I cede a place to the other. Such thinking rejects any claim to being native, as no place may be claimed as truly mine. In Adorno, Jewishness parallels the status of the *Fremdwort* in German: illustrating the need to recognize difference while, I suggest, rejecting a rhetoric of foreignness. This rejection of foreignness is key to acknowledging, and combatting, the alienation and suffering that every subject faces under capitalism. Such concerns were not purely theoretical for Levinas or Adorno: Perceived foreignness and Jewishness were major factors in both thinkers' own enforced departures from particular soils.⁵ While Adorno and Levinas are often read together as writing "in the shadow of Auschwitz,"⁶ in this essay here both thinkers may be understood as writing in the shadow of forced migration, an equally significant force in both thinkers' lives and in twentieth-century European history.⁷

Adorno's and Levinas's linkage of language and soil should be understood in light of the intense cultural and philosophical debate around "soil" in both France and Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. In France, the debate was typified by the post-Dreyfus Affair correspondence between André Gide and Maurice Barrès known as the "Querelle de peuplier", which discussed the importance (or not) of "regional . . . embeddedness" to the cultural health of the nation itself.⁸ In the German context, Martin Heidegger's focus on *Bodenständigkeit* (groundedness) is only the most philosophically significant example for a wider understanding of the (national) soil as guaranteeing the self and/as part of the *Volk*.⁹ In both national contexts, the motif of soil as a guarantor of national cultural identity was inextricable from the trope of (nation-less) Jews as "groundless." The longer history of the trope showing the Jew as divorced from land ranges from the mythical "wandering" or "eternal Jew," to the "international Jew" of Fordist anti-cosmopolitan paranoia, to the figure of the *luftmensch* as reclaimed by Hannah Arendt. In pre-World War II France and Germany, the tropes of soil as guaranteeing belonging, and of Jews as groundless, became both so omnipresent and interlinked that figures as diverse as Heidegger and Simone Weil drew from them to discuss (national) belonging. It is thus not merely Heidegger's philosophical understanding of "ground" that situates Levinas's and Adorno's evocation of soil, but a much more widespread, culturally specific understanding of "soil" as guaranteeing belonging, in opposition to soil-less 'Jewishness.' What

brings together Levinas and Adorno is that both link language to this nexus. While Adorno's and Levinas' evocations of language and soil both come long after World War II, in their linking of soil and Jewishness, it is difficult not to read their remarks as informed by these debates that raged during the period of both writers' philosophical formation.

For both Levinas and Adorno, it is an ethical or moral obligation to reject "soil"—understood as either a claim to be "native," or as organicism—physically as well as in language, and to acknowledge our alienation. While Adornian morality, a response to social conditions, and Levinasian ethics, a fundamental condition that precedes even ontology, are by no means equivalent, both address the question: How should I be in the world, in relation to others? Although these thinkers were not in conversation with each other in their use of soil imagery, this article uses Levinas's and Adorno's linkages of language and soil as a starting point for recovering a liberatory aspect that I find common to the thinking of both: a dismissal of a distinction between the foreign and the native.

>> Levinas's language with soil

Levinas's linkage of language and soil occurs during an interview, in response to a question about his arrival in France in 1923 and how he began to learn French:

For me, you understand, the soil of that language is the French soil. (*C'est le sol de cette langue qui est pour moi le sol français, vous comprenez*) . . . I often thought, at the beginning of the war of 1939, that one waged war in order to defend the French language. It may sound like a whim, but I seriously believed it! It is in that language that I feel the living nature of the soil. (*Cela a l'air d'une boutade, mais je le pensais sérieusement: c'est dans cette langue que je sens les sucs du sol.*)¹⁰

The context of Levinas's remark means that his linkage of language and soil may not appear as theoretically developed as Adorno's. Yet reading the statement in light of Levinas's wider thought allows us to identify and explore a complexity of his thinking. Levinas's philosophy and his understanding of Judaism are defined in opposition to soil or ground, and thus rely on ground in order to reject it. Such a movement leads to some of the contradictions typified in the passage quoted above: a sense that, for Levinas, language and "national culture" are indeed fixed in a soil, and that some

people are equally autochthonous—but that the “I” of Levinasian ethics, and/or Jews, cannot be fixed in soil, or rather, should not be. For Levinas, no “I” can ever claim to be native.

Levinas’ remarks in the interview at first appear to contradict much of his wider thought. The disjuncture is perhaps most evident in how Levinas’s words echo a passage from his 1961 essay “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us,” where Levinas describes how

nature is implanted in that first language which hails us only to be found in human language . . . to hear this language and to reply to it consists in . . . living in the place, in being-there. Enrootedness. . . . Man inhabits the earth more radically than the plant, which merely takes nourishment from it.¹¹

Here Levinas is sarcastically summarizing the thought of “Heidegger and the Heideggarians” (*sic*), which he mocks as both simply “the delight of camping in the mountains” and as typifying “the eternal seductiveness of paganism.”¹² A Heidegger-like understanding of *Bodenständigkeit*, being defined through a relationship with soil, appears to be everything Levinas would reject, as it prioritizes an understanding of the individual subject in relation to place, in distinction to Levinas’s vision of the subject defined by its always prior responsibility toward the other. A subject situated via attachment to soil is thus seemingly *a priori* contradictory to Levinas’s project.

Moreover, Levinas’s claim in the interview, that language, specifically French, allows him to “feel the saps (*sucs*) of the soil,” is also surprising, as language, in Levinas’s wider thought, rather confirms one’s distance from soil. The ethical encounter with the other for Levinas always necessitates response—that is, dialogue—and so any encounter with the other both presupposes and demands language: “all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.”¹³ This encounter with the other destabilizes one’s sense of self, as one is confronted with one’s absolute responsibility to the other, which precedes even one’s own existence. Indeed, to encounter the other is always to encounter the *utter* otherness of the other, and thus it is in some sense transcendent, “*beyond* the world.”¹⁴ As the encounter is always dialogue, with the other addressed as *you*, “the you is summoned as ‘exclusivity’ and as not belonging to the world,” unlike the simple apprehension of an object, which is “always against the horizon of the world.”¹⁵ The encounter with the other is necessarily in some sense “placeless.” As this encounter, as dialogue, is always mediated by language, it would thus be impossible for one to be rooted in soil through language.

Equally, however, in dialogue, not only *I* but also the other is placeless. Levinas writes that the reason “it is incumbent on me” to respond in encountering the face of the other is because the other “has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant.”¹⁶ As Jolanta Saldukaitytė notes, beyond any specific other person or their condition, the other is “extra-territorial per se,” as the “elsewhere” from which the other comes “is not captured or reduced to a specific location but refers from the first to a ‘height’ in an ethical sense, an obligation.”¹⁷ In the encounter with the other, the other is no more rooted than the *I*. I am obliged to respond to the other’s rootlessness even as my encounter with the other confirms my own being uprooted. Language, as dialogue, thus disrupts the place-ness of both the *I* and the other. It is therefore hard to see how language could ever be linked to groundedness or fixity in soil for Levinas.

It is noteworthy that in the interview, Levinas identifies French specifically as linked to soil, as a unique ambiguity of French illustrates how language unsettles any claim to “being at home.” As Michael Bernard-Donals writes, “playing on the double meaning of the French *hôte* as both ‘host’ and ‘guest,’ Levinas’s implication is that when an individual engages another in discourse”—that is, through language—“she acts at once as host and as guest.”¹⁸ Both *I* and the other are confirmed as not-at-home in dialogue, and yet it is my duty to welcome and give shelter to the uprooted stranger that is the other. Thus “when the individual engages the other, she resides in a kind of no-man’s-land, in which she is both at home and in exile.”¹⁹ Indeed, in *Autrement qu’Être*, Levinas builds on *Totalité et Infini*’s claim that “the subject is a host (*hôte*)” to claim repeatedly that “the subject is a hostage (*otage*)” in one’s substitution for the other; that is, responsibility for the other means being “put in the other’s place.”²⁰ To encounter the other, to be confronted with one’s responsibility for the other, is thus always to be unmoored from any ground. For Levinas, then, one cannot be at home in a specific language, as it is language that mediates one’s utter responsibility to the other. As the encounter with the other is always dialogue, and thus linguistic, language *as such* dispossesses one from home, making one a *hôte*—both a guest whose right to remain is always precarious, and a host who is no longer *chez soi*. Jacques Derrida’s writing that Levinas expressed “gratitude” to French as “the welcoming language, the language of the host (*langue de l’hôte*),” is thus at the very least

ambiguous.²¹ It is not that Levinas is a “guest,” “hosted” within French, but rather that he could only ever be a *hôte*, not fully at home within any language, or language as such.

One might say that Levinas positions himself as a *hôte* in the passage quoted above. He suggests that “the soil of that language is the French soil” and that in French, he can “feel the saps of the soil”; yet a term notable by its absence is “roots,” a crucial trope in the French context of discussions of national groundedness.²² The lack of roots highlights that, rather than describing his own fixity within French or France, Levinas is instead making a claim about the very “Frenchness” of French, that “the soil of [the French] language is the French soil,” that some element of the French language is deeply “French.” Levinas appears to posit a profound connection of a specific language with a specific geographical territory. The suggestion that the soil itself has “saps” or “juices” (*sucs*) conflates the metaphorical soil of nationhood with the plant that often stands for the rooted citizen, suggesting a sense of cultural groundedness so profound it bypasses the need for roots. Levinas elsewhere explicitly states that for him, “France is a country where the attachment to cultural conventions seems equivalent to the attachment to the land”, evoking a *völkisch* understanding of the nation as tied to a specific place.²³ It appears that for Levinas, the individual subject, in their irreducible responsibility to the other, can never be linguistically or philosophically grounded in soil, or reduced to merely part of a *Volk*; but a nation(-state), and a language, can be tied to specific, literal soil.

However, Levinas is not, as Judith Friedlander claims, “express[ing] his sense of patriotism in terms of linguistic nationalism” in the interview, as he does not stake a claim to his own belonging to the French nation or language.²⁴ Rather, Levinas positions himself as somewhat of a *hôte*, suggesting that the linguistic-geopolitical space he inhabits can contain a sense of belonging, but that he himself is neither fully at home nor a guest. Nevertheless, Levinas’s sense of the “saps of the soil” through French appears to be contradictory or even troubling in its echo of not merely a philosophy that would disagree with his own, but a philosophy against which Levinas defines his own. These contradictions are, if not resolved, then illuminated through Levinas’s understanding of the moral value of Judaism.

In understanding a “Jewish” ethical imperative to reject soil, Levinas inverts the stereotype of the “rootless Jew,” but continues to rely on a concept of soil in order to reject it.

>> Levinas and Alienation

After his statement about “feeling the saps of the soil” through French, Levinas returns to the earth later in the interview to suggest that a voluntary renunciation of soil is an ethical imperative. He turns to what is perhaps the key message of the Bible for him, “thou shalt love the stranger,” figuring this as a commandment to love the “strangeness” or foreignness that is the otherness of the other, to which one is infinitely ethically responsible. “After all,” Levinas continues, “everyone is a stranger. ‘I am a stranger on earth’, says a verse of the Psalms.” The movement from “everyone” being a stranger to “I” comes through estrangement from *earth*. This is, says Levinas, “not only the avowal of a people without soil, but the signification . . . of an exile behind the autochthonous, which is the definition of the pure transcendental subject and the primordial necessity of a moral law in that exile.”²⁵ We have seen that a “person without soil” must be, following Levinas’s wider thought, a *hôte*, a subject who is dispossessed of their claim to ground by virtue of their obligation to the other. Yet to love the stranger, merely becoming dispossessed is not enough; I must become a stranger by *renouncing* a claim to earth. The ethical imperative is not merely the ceding of a territorial claim, but voluntary *exile*—a self-imposed “banishment” from home—that is a necessary condition for others’ *autochthony*, a deep intertwining with the very soil.

The difference between the exiled and the autochthonous is not only the difference between the *I* and the other, whose difference is of “height”; the difference is one of a claim to fixity in horizontal space, that is, how to live together. The question of precisely who may be exiled or autochthonous is illuminated by a remark with which Levinas concludes his 1985 interview with Myriam Anissimov:

Someone asked me the other day if, as a Jew, I didn’t feel like an outsider in France. I replied to him that wherever I am, I feel like I’m in the way, and I quoted a Psalm: “I am a stranger upon the earth” (Ps.119:19). Strangeness is situated in relation to the earth.²⁶

Levinas's "foreignness" in France is both "as a Jew" and an alienation from ground itself as national territory. Levinas repeatedly returns to the theme of Jews as alienated from earth, and locates ethical meaning within the trope. For example, in "A Religion for Adults," he writes that

the Jewish man . . . understands the world on the basis of the Other rather than the whole of being functioning in relation to the earth. He is in a sense exiled on this earth . . . and he finds a meaning to the earth on the basis of a human society.²⁷

Here, Levinas explicitly opposes Judaic exile to Heideggerian attachment to place: "For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges."²⁸ Indeed, following Sarah Hammerschlag's suggestion that Levinas's "vision of Judaism formed in opposition to what [he] conceives of as Heideggerian paganism"—that is, focus on the suffering of the other rather than an attachment to soil—would suggest that Levinas's understanding of Judaism as a system of both thought and moral value arises entirely in opposition to a concept of *Bodenständigkeit*.²⁹ A sense of exile is inherent to Judaism for Levinas, and inherently ethical—it is non-attachment to the earth that allows for recognition of the "human face." Thus, Levinas would suggest that his own exile is not an unfortunate by-product of his Jewishness or his status as a migrant; rather, Judaism both imparts the teaching that this exile is necessary, and is itself the source and guarantor of the ethical value of the exile.

Levinas's juxtaposition of Jewishness to ground and the nation illuminates his statements in the Poirié and Anissimov interviews, while sharpening their paradoxes: soil appears to be both necessary and rejected. We have seen that Levinas posits language and by extension a somewhat *völkisch* sense of culture as profoundly connected to the nation; the soil itself has saps, as the language, culture, and land of the nation become inextricable. Simultaneously, there is an ethical imperative to reject a claim to land, an imperative that is especially "Jewish." Hence, Levinas can claim both that he "feels the saps of the soil" through the French language, and that he continually feels "in the way" in France. The ethical imperative to be dispossessed of soil in response to the demand of the other is achieved through a voluntary exile, a refusal to plant roots in the French soil. Yet in suggesting an "exile behind the autochthonous" and a grounded French nation, Levinas seemingly continues to suggest that it is possible for others to be "native." Levinas is thus not opposed

to Heideggerian *Bodenständigkeit* as such. He continues to suggest that *some* may indeed be rooted within the soil, even as Jews remain strangers as they have an obligation to reject earth. Just as some must be exiled to allow others autochthony, some must be autochthonous to allow others to take up exile. Although the other demands response precisely because he “is not autochthonous, is uprooted,” the valorization of exile means there must at least be the possibility of the other *becoming* autochthonous as a result of my ceding of ground.³⁰ While reattributing moral value to the trope of Jewish “groundlessness,” of being “in the way,” Levinas remains within the logic that demands a soil coursing with (national) “saps.”

Levinas’s evocation of French language and soil highlights the central contradiction of his understanding of soil. Positing a duty to reject soil means that there remains a soil for which philosophy must account. On the one hand, Levinas completely inverts the grounded-individual logic of *Bodenständigkeit*: my *non*-attachment to ground confirms my subjectivity as my *lack* of place shows my *unique* existence in my *relation* to the other. On the other, for all that Levinas wishes to embrace exile, he never moves past the logic that posits enrootedness as a normative state of affairs, as implied by the very valorization of exile. Levinas distinguishes exile, a voluntary ceding of ground, from nomadism, writing of “the nomadism that is as incapable as sedentary existence of leaving behind a landscape and a climate.”³¹ He states elsewhere that “nothing is more enrooted than the nomad,” clarifying that “to me, being a migrant is not being a nomad. . . . He or she who emigrates is fully human.”³² The nomad, in Levinas’s logic, remains defined in relation to the earth, while the exilee or migrant voluntarily rejects a claim to the earth. Yet an exilee by definition has a home, a place where they are proper to be, from which they are exiled.³³ The exilee thus does not reject the very possibility of attachment to the earth, but is rather entirely defined by their (non-)relation to earth. To be sure, just as one’s becoming “hostage” to the other is not a moment of capture, but a demand that precedes one’s very subjectivity, the Levinasian exilee’s home is always already lost, as the demand of the other precedes even being. Yet Levinas remains within a logic of home and thus a claim to soil, even if it is a home that is never ours to begin with.

Jewish difference marked by an alienation from soil is not an unfortunate relict trope inherited from Levinas's philosophical forebears, merely reversing an antisemitic claim without challenging its underlying logic. It is an essential element of Levinas's understanding of Jewish "responsibility," figured on the basis of Jews being "without soil." In the Poirié interview, Levinas characterizes "the chosenness of the Jewish people" as a "surplus of responsibility, . . . a surplus of obligations."³⁴ He continues by describing how the indeclinable demand that is the uniqueness of the other in turn renders the *I* unique, "inasmuch as I am irreplaceable, inasmuch as I am chosen to answer him. Responsibility lived as chosenness."³⁵ To be "chosen" is synonymous with the obligation to respond to the uniqueness of the other. This response is figured as exiling oneself to allow for the autochthonous, relinquishing a "place in the sun,"³⁶ while the responsibility to respond to the other, to be chosen, is for Levinas *the* central tenet of both Jewishness and Judaism. Thus, Jewish groundlessness is not only an essential element of Jewish responsibility, but also how that call of responsibility is answered. *I* must cede my place to the other; Jews remain groundless so that others do not. This is an understanding of "ground" and responsibility that relies on difference. Levinas's understanding of soil thus implies a strict hierarchy: others may be grounded, but *I* should not be. Such a hierarchy is in keeping with his understanding of the other's "height" in relation to the *I*, but becomes potentially troublesome in the "horizontal," political relationship between nations and Jews.³⁷

Levinas's understanding of responsibility may not fully resolve the tensions in his understanding of soil. Philosophically, Levinas understands soil as not imparting cultural or moral meaning, but allowing for response to the undeniable, unrefusable ethical demand that is prior to all else. However, simultaneously, Levinas's structure of exceptional responsibility to the other necessitates an other who is, or at least can become, "grounded," in the sense of being able to lay claim to a soil; an "exile behind the autochthonous" requires an autochthon on whose basis *I* am exiled. Soil for Levinas thus remains connected to (national) belonging, and in this is a guarantor of cultural dominance, not philosophical responsibility. Levinas thus "feels the saps of the soil" through the French language, aware of the profound linkage of language, culture, and nation to soil, but unable to—or denying himself the chance to—become part of this linkage. A soil that apparently remains

tied to the literal soil of the nation, and hence nationalism, cannot but sit somewhat uneasily alongside Levinas's philosophical soil, the distance from which confirms my ethical response to the other.

As at other junctures between Levinasian ethics and politics, the tension implied by his understanding of soil becomes most pronounced in relation to two nations, France and Israel. In the interviews with Poirié and Anissimov, Levinas's assertion of his obligation to remain a stranger within France and French sits alongside his descriptions of France and French culture in exceptionalist terms, and his speaking as a thinker within the mainstream of French philosophy. In a later interview, when asked "Which nation most closely correlates with your concept of a State [*sic*] and democracy?", Levinas simply replies, "that's easy: France."³⁸ In the interview with Anissimov, he speaks of "French intelligence, the clarity of ideas, the perfect way of setting things apart, the elegance in the presentation of instruction, the charm of the French language."³⁹ If these are the words of an exilee, then for Levinas as for Abraham, not all exilic destinations are equal. Additionally, Levinas's complex relationship with Israel signals another point of friction to his apparent recommendation of Jews remaining "strangers on this earth."⁴⁰ He cautions against "confusing Zionism... with some sort of commonplace mystique of the earth as native soil", and understands the contemporary State of Israel as, to some extent, a question of practical necessity for Jewish safety in a post-Shoah world: "now, under the given circumstances, as a State is the only form in which Israel – the people and the culture – can survive," he states in the interview with Poirié.⁴¹ However, Levinas also appears to understand Israel as *the* possibility of a form of politics coherent with his understanding of Jewishness: "the Zionist idea, as I now see it, all mysticism or false immediate messianism aside, is nevertheless a political idea which has an ethical justification."⁴² The contradiction is thus less Levinas's support for Zionism per se – "I have personally never leaned toward an active Zionism," he states in a 1990 interview – but that Levinas assigns the state of Israel an importance unique among nations, specifically in its relation to Judaism (as Levinas understands the term), even as he argues for estrangement from any nation as inherent to both Judaism and Jewishness.⁴³

Yet Levinas's thought is structured by tensions, and does not necessarily seek the resolution his readers may prefer. Jewish "chosenness," for example, is simply not *logically* justifiable, but Levinas does not claim that it is; chosenness as responsibility to the other is its own justification. Soil is for Levinas the guarantor of both national and linguistic groundedness, and, simultaneously, responsibility and attending to the other. This tension means that Levinas remains a philosopher of groundedness. It is not just that for Levinas there is "a soil," but that I should not claim it; soil remains the philosophical basis of the subject, as my rejection of soil confirms my attending to the other. Levinas's thought remains, indeed, exilic: unrooted, making a (specifically Jewish) virtue of groundlessness, yet remaining defined in terms of "home" and the relationship to soil.

>> Adorno's Language Without Soil

In contrast to Levinas's "saps of the soil," Adorno writes of a language *without* soil, that is, an understanding of language distinct from any notion of organicism. Adorno's usage of "language without soil" (*Sprache ohne Erde*) appears in his essay "Wörter aus der Fremde" (Words from Abroad), originally delivered as a radio talk. Here Adorno discusses *Fremdwörter*, which Yasemin Yildiz describes as "German word[s] of non-German derivation whose foreign origin is still perceptible to most speakers."⁴⁴ This category includes both everyday words—*Restaurant* is a familiar example—as well as specialized or technical terms. Adorno evokes a language without soil in suggesting that

Fremdwörter should confront people with something that would be possible only if educational privilege ceased to exist. . . . In this way foreign words could preserve something of the utopia of language, a language without earth (*Erde*), without subjection to the spell of historical existence, a utopia that lives on unwarily in the childlike use of language.⁴⁵

Adorno's "language without soil" may at first appear to be simply a language transcending nationalism—utopian, literally "of no place." Early in the essay, Adorno does indeed say that as a child, he felt that "*Fremdwörter* constituted little cells of resistance to the nationalism of World War

I.”⁴⁶ Yet Adorno continues that “*Fremdwörter* no longer have the function of protesting nationalism, which in the era of the great power blocs no longer coincides with the individual languages of individual nations.”⁴⁷ The specific function of *Fremdwörter*, crucial to Adorno’s argument, therefore *is* historically determined, even as Adorno appears to wish for a language “without subjection to the spell of historical existence.”⁴⁸ What Adorno is evoking here is, in Gerhard Richter’s phrase, “a language that is irreducible to its historical overdetermination even while it is inflected by it”; that is, a form of language that does not claim its historical situatedness as an unarguable, internally coherent foundation of meaning, while that language nevertheless remains historically situated.⁴⁹ Thus Adorno’s evocation of a “language without soil” cannot be read as a hope for a nationless “language to come” outside history.

Indeed, in discussing language, Adorno’s focus is in fact a specific language, namely German. The translation of *Fremdwörter* as “foreign words” is misleading in this context, as it is entirely the issue at stake that *Fremdwörter* are *German* words of “foreign origin.” While the non-German etymology of such words may be more obvious than for non-*Fremdwörter*, *Fremdwörter* are words used in standard German.⁵⁰ An English word used in a German sentence is not a *Fremdwort*.⁵¹ Thus Adorno’s suggestion of “the levelling of all people to a schooled half culture” is not a wish for a universal language. By discussing the category of *Fremdwörter*, his focus remains German.

The wish for “language without soil” is thus rather a wish for *German* without soil, not a future language that transcends Babel. As Adorno writes in an earlier essay on *Fremdwörter*, “Esperanto is the reverse of any genuine foreign word.”⁵² A language transcending linguistic boundaries would not allow for *Fremdwörter*, which rely on linguistic difference for their effect. The differences between languages are not to be eliminated. Rather, a “language without soil” is a wish for an understanding of language that does away with any need to associate soil with language; that is, an understanding of language in no way linked to the idea of the “natural.” Adorno’s language without soil is not juxtaposed with a language *with* soil, but is a language from which the very concept of soil is removed entirely.

Many critics have noted the importance of Adorno's opposition to the idea of language as "organic." For example, Sinkwan Chen writes that Adorno describes how "foreign words create discontinuities that disrupt myths of organic unity," and that Adorno distrusts ideas of both the "internally coherent and organic nature of language" and "the concept of the nation as an organic unity."⁵³ For Chen, "organic" here appears to mean the idea of a self-defining, self-guaranteeing whole. Adorno would certainly have argued against such a conception of language or the nation. However, I suggest that Adorno's usage of "organic" in relation to language goes further—not merely rejecting the concept of language as an internally complete system, but utterly rejecting the idea of the "foreign"—while nevertheless maintaining an understanding of difference.

In several texts, Adorno cites an image he takes from Walter Benjamin: "the author inserting the silver rib of the foreign word into the body of language."⁵⁴ In relation to *Fremdwörter*, this image appears to figure the *Fremdwort* as a prosthesis, surgically attached to the "natural" body of language. Yet language (both specific languages and language in general) is anything but natural for Adorno; he bluntly states, "no language . . . is organic and natural."⁵⁵ Language's "customary ring of naturalness deceives us" into overlooking that "language participates in reification, the separation of subject matter and thought."⁵⁶ Language does not contain or allow for "natural" connections between concept and word, and therefore the communicative ideal is illusory: "the universal system of communication, which on the face of it brings human beings together and which allegedly exists for their sake, is forced upon them."⁵⁷ Rather than language being a natural function of humans expressing their "selves," communicative language is a system of manipulation: "The word that is designed to be understood becomes . . . a means to degrade those to whom it is addressed to mere objects of manipulation."⁵⁸ Language is no more natural or organic than any other system of domination, either in the sense of being self-complete, or in the sense of being part of the natural order of things. It is therefore a category error to distinguish between the supposedly "natural" body of the German language, and the "inorganic" or "unnatural" silver rib of the *Fremdwort*.

The importance of *Fremdwörter* for Adorno is their ability to jolt the reader out of linguistic complacency. The *Fremdwort* can "effect a beneficial interruption . . . of language," as it "stand[s] out

from the continuum of language.”⁵⁹ As Samir Gandesha summarizes, “by functioning as something that is clearly ‘nonidentical’ with the thing it purports to name, the foreign word [i.e., *Fremdwort*] offers insight into the nature of language per se.”⁶⁰ *Fremdwörter* smash the illusion of a language—specifically, German—as a self-contained, “natural,” entirely communicative system. Adorno writes that *Fremdwörter* should “shock with their obstinacy,” “confront people,” “allow a spark to flow in the constellation into which it is produced.”⁶¹ Such shock allows the *Fremdwort* for Adorno to rupture radically our (mistaken) sense of continuity and conformity in language. However, the *Fremdwort* achieves this effect through its *difference*, not through its “foreignness.”

The *Fremdwort* acts as a “silver rib”: rather than illustrate the coming together of the prosthesis and the body, the “unnatural” and “natural,” it shows that the distinction between these categories in relation to language simply does not make sense. “What seems inorganic here is in actuality only historical evidence,” writes Adorno, “evidence of the failure of that unification.”⁶² There is a failure of unification as there remain differences between languages, differences which according to Adorno should not be erased, as this would nullify the *Fremdwort*’s effect. What can be erased is the distinction between the organic and inorganic in relation to language—or, indeed, between the foreign and the “native.” The *Fremdwort*, as silver rib, certainly originates outside the “body” of language, but is no more or less “naturally” part of that language than any other word.

For language to be “without soil” would remove any notion that the distinctions between languages—which for Adorno should continue to exist—could be the basis of judgement as to which words are more natural or foreign than others, in the sense of “not really belonging here.” Language is not organic because it is not a plant rooted in the soil, fixed in a certain place. Language does not have a *home*. This is not meant in a way that would directly contradict Levinas’s apparently national “saps of the soil.” Rather, it is the sense that while there may be differences between languages, it is nonsensical to think of these differences in terms of relative values of foreignness’ or naturalness. A concept of foreignness relies on the idea that one has stepped outside of one’s usual, or natural, boundaries, that one is in fact really at home *somewhere else*. A language without soil, which refutes

any notion of having a bounded, defined home, denies such a distinction between the foreign and non-foreign, even as it continues to acknowledge the differences between languages.

The “shock effect” of *Fremdwörter*, their revelation that our sense of continuity and completeness in language is mistaken, is not due to their foreignness. To argue that the power of the *Fremdwort* lies in its foreignness would be to assume that a language is indeed “whole,” and that the *Fremdwort* is an extra word that enters the language. As Adorno notes in the earlier essay on *Fremdwörter*, to understand *Fremdwörter* as words that enter a language from outside, whether or not we are sympathetic to such a process, accepts the premise of language’s “organic growth,” and thus continues to accept the “ideal of an immanent, closed organic language.”⁶³ *Fremdwörter* thus should be thought of certainly as difference, but not as foreignness. The translation of *Fremdwörter* as “foreign words” is thus misleading, since such an approach clings to the soil of language, the distinction between the foreign and the not-foreign. By contrast, Yildiz argues that Adorno understands the *fremd* in *Fremdwort* as connected less to *Fremde* (abroad, foreign lands) or *Fremder* (stranger, foreign person), and more to *Entfremdung* (alienation), “a condition afflicting all subjects in modernity.”⁶⁴ It is this alienation, rather than foreignness, with which the *Fremdwort* confronts readers—an alienation that obligates a rejection of the concept of soil.

>> Adorno and Alienation

The linkage between language, soil, Jewishness, and alienation has been made more frequently in relation to Adorno than Levinas, largely thanks to Adorno’s aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, “*Fremdwörter sind die Juden der Sprache*”: “German words of foreign derivation are the Jews of language,” in Edmund Jephcott’s translation.⁶⁵ This aphorism has often been understood in terms of the (perceived) “foreignness” of both Jews and *Fremdwörter*. However, understanding Adorno’s texts as *disavowing* a rhetoric of foreignness means that this aphorism can instead be understood as indicating the possibility of an acknowledgement of alienation. While for Levinas, (Jewish) ethics necessitates alienation, for Adorno acknowledging alienation is a matter of morality.

Regarding the understanding of “*Fremdwörter sind die Juden der Sprache*” in terms of the foreign, Jan Plug writes of how

foreign words [i.e., *Fremdwörter*] are no longer even designated as a part of language . . . but have already been marked off from language by language, which excludes them from itself as nonlanguage, foreign, Jewish. . . . To be the Jews of language is not only to be impure, a contagion. It is to be . . . that part of language that is nonetheless outside language.⁶⁶

This would mean that, like Jews for fascists in the 1940s, *Fremdwörter* are designated by linguistic purists as *utterly* foreign to the system of which they are nevertheless a part.⁶⁷ Thus for Plug,

the phrase is relevant to a consideration of anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in that it describes the process of exclusion and equally turns this process and that language upon themselves to disclose how a discursive or political “outside” interrupts its own totalizing gesture, even in allowing that field to constitute itself as such.⁶⁸

This persuasive reading, which would mean that both *Fremdwörter* and Jewish people as “Jews” reveal the underlying hypocrisies and incompleteness of the systems that designate them as foreign, nevertheless overstates the case by suggesting that *Fremdwörter* are conceived as foreign to language itself. As a specifically German category, *Fremdwörter* are conceived as foreign to *German*. While the *Fremdwort*’s “shock” that Adorno describes may help illustrate the nature of language as such, the *Fremdwort* cannot be understood as by definition foreign to language *as such*, because the category of the *Fremdwort* relies on linguistic difference. This means that, although Plug’s reading is useful in understanding how the rhetoric of foreignness may be equally applied to both Jews and *Fremdwörter*, an alternative reading of Adorno’s aphorism would read it not as a description of how this rhetoric is enacted within totalizing systems, but instead as a recommendation of how the position of both Jews and *Fremdwörter* could be seen from a potentially liberatory perspective—a reading focusing less on the foreigner (*Fremder*) than on alienation (*Entfremdung*).

For Adorno, Jews are not alienated because they are “foreign,” but because of the power structures of capitalism. Jewish foreignness exists only as designated by antisemitism, which for Adorno has very little to do with Jews *qua* Jews, and more to do with the hatred of difference. This hatred, and the violent drive to eliminate or subsume difference into the same, is for Adorno an essential element of contemporary capitalist culture, which cannot bear to engage in self-reflection or acknowledgement of internal difference.⁶⁹ Perceived Jewish foreignness is a function of the broader

impulse that defines contemporary capitalism—the end result of an extreme example of the general condition of contemporary society. As Hent de Vries writes, “anti-Semitism, according to Adorno, could be pointedly interpreted as an exemplary phenomenon of the leveling of all difference: as the focus of every injustice.” While the horrors of Nazism became ever more apparent, “the Jews” replaced the proletariat as “the opposite pole to the construction of power” in Adorno’s writing.⁷⁰ This makes Jews, in Adorno’s analysis, both different, in that they experience the most extreme form of capitalism’s impulse, and simultaneously exemplary and comparable to any other group of people, because the suffering of antisemitism is an example of the alienation inherent to capitalism.

If Jewish people’s position as victims of antisemitism is both exceptional and exemplary, the distinction between foreignness and its supposed opposite collapses. Jewish people, considered foreign within totalitarianism and capitalism, in fact represent the ultimate example of what inheres to those very systems, precisely due to their treatment *as if* they were foreign. Such a movement is similar to that which Plug identifies in writing that the concept of a “political ‘outside’ interrupts its own totalizing gesture.” Jewish people are not alienated because of their inherent foreignness, but because alienation is the condition of life under capitalism, and Jewish people for Adorno typify this condition.

It is this *essential* alienation that is nonetheless exemplified by the experiences of a *particular* group that makes it possible for Adorno to suggest that *Fremdwörter* are “the Jews of language.” *Fremdwörter*, like the victims of antisemitism in Adorno’s analysis, are not innately foreign, and can only be thought of as such under a rhetoric of organicism or naturalness. Yet Adorno nevertheless suggests that *Fremdwörter* might “shock” and “confront.” It is not their foreignness but their *difference* that enables the shock revealing the underlying nature of our relationship to language, that is, alienation. Adorno does not assign an equal “function” to Jewish people—suggesting that Jewish people “tell us something” by their simple existence would be to reify this group and cease treating them as people—but, as with *Fremdwörter*, the specific experience of Jews reveals the underlying nature of the broader system. Antisemitism is not a unique phenomenon, but exemplifies, albeit in an extreme way, alienation under capitalism.

To remove ourselves from soil, as in the move toward a language without soil, is to dismiss the rhetoric of organicism that distinguishes between what is foreign and what is not. To hold to the distinction between the foreign and the native prevents us from acknowledging the essential alienation that affects all of us living within capitalist modernity, albeit in different ways and to different degrees (the specific violence of antisemitism under fascism is not a universal experience). It is therefore essential to reject a distinction between the natural or organic and their supposed opposites, which we can begin to work through by acknowledging the shock of the *Fremdwort*—that is, by working toward a language without soil, without a sense of “the foreign.”

The difficulty of moving toward such a way of thinking is shown in Richter’s introduction to a volume on Adorno titled *Language Without Soil*. Richter writes that for Adorno, “critical thought cannot be planted firmly in the ground in the way of a tree, static in the wake of the change of history. This thinking without the permanence of soil is a thinking that is exiled, nomadic, never at home once and for all.”⁷¹ An opposition is set up here between being “planted firmly in the ground” and being “exiled,” “without the permanence of soil.” Yet as we have seen, the notion of exile relies on the idea that one has a proper home from which one is expelled. To envision a language truly without soil is not to favor the exile side of the home/exile binary, but to reject that binary altogether. A language without soil is not “homeless,” but recognizes that there is never any home that one can lose or from which one might be expelled.

The question of “home” evokes another frequently-quoted aphorism from *Minima Moralia*: “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.”⁷² Although this phrase appears in Adorno’s discussion of the relation between private property and the “home” as building, we can understand this line in light of the move away from a rhetoric of soil. “Not to be at home in one’s home”—to reject a fixed relationship to a particular piece of land, to resist the very possibility of roots or belonging—would be to accept and acknowledge the alienation that is our condition under capitalism. To attempt to “be at home” would be to cling to soil, to the idea of a “natural,” organic connection that in turn implies that a foreign element, the not-at-home, exists. Dismissing organicism and soil,

thus dismissing the very idea of foreignness that implies one properly belongs in a specific home, is to acknowledge our essential alienation.

Thinking in terms of organicism, denying or not acknowledging this alienation, is therefore not only to misunderstand the nature of language; it is arguably, for Adorno, to further the logic that makes antisemitism possible. Thus rejecting the rhetoric of foreignness is not merely a matter of correctly diagnosing the functioning of language or capitalism behind the mists of ideology. It is to challenge actively the suffering which antisemitism, fascism, and capitalism inflict. It is thus very much “part of morality not to be at home.” To “be at home” is to accept a distinction between the foreign and the non-foreign, in language or in society. Not to “be at home,” to aim for a language without soil, is to acknowledge and confront the actual suffering that a concept of foreignness enables.

>> Levinas, Adorno, and Foreignness

Levinas and Adorno understand what “a language with soil” would be in very different ways. For Levinas, a language *with* soil appears to be a language that offers a perception of the character of a nation, the profound link between land and culture. For Adorno meanwhile, a language *without* soil is a rejection of the notion of organicism and, by extension, foreignness. For both thinkers, the linkage of language and soil suggests that there is a moral or ethical imperative to reject soil, to recognize and accept our alienation from both language and “home.” This rejection of soil is understood differently by both thinkers. For Levinas, there *is* a soil (in language as in territory) and it is an ethical duty to be alienated from it voluntarily. For Adorno, there is no soil; we are already alienated, and to reject the rhetoric of soil is to acknowledge this alienation, an essential element in combatting the violence and suffering inflicted by the system that creates alienation.

This difference as to whether there *is* a soil is reflected in the fact that Adorno’s understanding of difference, unlike that of Levinas, does not rely on any position being normative. For Levinas, an understanding of the autochthonous as normative is essential to his conception of Jewish (exilic) difference, and the ethical value of rejecting soil; it is both that groundedness is

normative, and that any subject should reject this normative position. This difference between Adorno and Levinas means that their understandings of alienation are also different. Adorno allows for an understanding of “our” alienation, as the conditions that allow for antisemitism affect all people living under capitalism. Jews, as a group, can thus be both exemplary and different for Adorno, representative of broader alienation and yet inhabiting a specific relation to both fascism and capitalism. For Levinas, always concerned with the relationship between the *I* and the other, Jews are also exemplary, but in a very different way: it is not Jews *as a group* who must reject ground, but any individual Jewish person in their relationship to the other. Whatever the apparently inherent characteristics of Jewishness, or the relationship between “Jewish” and “my” responsibility as a subject may be, alienation remains the individual’s concern for Levinas. For Adorno, collective action to tackle alienation is possible; for Levinas, individual alienation is a necessary condition of ethics. The split between Adorno’s and Levinas’s positions is thus not simply one of politics versus ethics, but a differing conception of what precisely alienation allows us to *do*: either to recognize and thus attempt to overcome that very alienation itself collectively, or to (begin to) act as an ethical individual in the world.

Adorno’s denial of soil is linked to material conditions: to deny soil is to deny the logic of totalitarianism and capitalism that allows the violence of antisemitism. Levinas’s rejection of soil is less concerned with physical reality, and more with how Levinas understands the relationship between ethics and Judaism. In a sense, both thinkers split from Heidegger’s understanding of ground, by becoming more or less concrete, respectively. While soil for Heidegger is a question of ontology and cultural politics, for Adorno, soil is related to lived experience under material conditions. For Levinas, it is related to the *pre*-ontological question of ethics. Yet it is the more concrete Adorno who truly challenges the structures of Heideggerian *völkisch* nationalism, by denying the very distinction between foreign and native on which the subject defined in relation to ground rests. While Levinas reverses the “value” of a nationalist, rooted approach—it is to reject soil, to “become foreign” that is most virtuous—he does not remove the concepts that posit rootedness in soil as normative. Indeed, Levinas repeatedly evokes the idea of Jews as groundless, a longstanding trope of antisemitism. In his

understanding of linguistic soil, Levinas not only continues to work within the organicism that Adorno would understand as necessary for a concept of “foreignness,” and thus antisemitism; Levinas evokes an understanding of national culture as “rooted” which, in the early twentieth-century French and German philosophical contexts from which both Levinas and Adorno came, was inextricable from explicit antisemitism.

Levinas’s use of tropes that share a history with antisemitic thought nevertheless makes clear the philosophical basis for one of his few material recommendations: the valorization of migration. Rejecting soil is for Levinas both ethical, and a necessary element of Judaism and Jewishness. Simultaneously, Levinas appears to suggest that languages properly belong to nations, that national cultures do exist, and that they are tied to specific ground, which we may comprehend (if not become part of) through “feeling the saps of the soil.” To reject ground thus appears to be a recommendation to become a foreigner, quite literally—to become a physical and linguistic, as well as philosophical, migrant. Levinas clearly practiced this element of his philosophy, moving to France and to French, yet feeling, as late as in the 1985 interview with Anissimov, “in the way.” Levinas’s valorization of exile appears to be not simply citing an Abrahamic exemplar, but enacting a logical conclusion of his philosophical understanding of Jewishness, soil, and language. This is not to suggest that Levinas’s own move to France in 1923 was a consequence of a philosophy which at that time he had not fully developed, but it shows that Levinas’s recommendation of migration is not purely metaphorical.

From Levinas’s perspective, then, it would be Adorno who was the less radical, as Adorno remained what Levinas would term a “nomad” rather than an “exilee.” Adorno returned to live in Germany after his time in the USA, and although he did write a few essays in English, he remained stubbornly committed to the German language. “The German language seems to have a special elective affinity for philosophy,” writes Adorno; “whoever is convinced that . . . what is essential to philosophy is the mode of presentation . . . will gravitate to the German language.”⁷³ For Levinas, this loyalty to his “native” land and language would not merely make Adorno chauvinistic, but would mean that Adorno failed to grasp the nature of responsibility. To remain linked to a national and linguistic soil is to claim ground, and a quite literal failure to “cede one’s place to the other.”

However, to claim either Levinas or Adorno were “truer” to their thought would return to the rhetoric of foreignness. Suggesting that Adorno betrayed the implications of his own thought by returning to Germany, or that Levinas lived more in keeping with his thought by adopting another country, is to accept the distinction between home and the foreign. It is to return to the idea that one is indeed somehow indelibly linked to the nation of one’s birth. The suggestion that living as a voluntary exile is radical remains tied to the rhetoric of home and soil, which is necessary for a conception of exile. Levinas’s thought may remain within such exilic logic. Yet reading his thought alongside Adorno shows that it does not matter where we live: either we are all already estranged, or have no right to consider ourselves anything other than strangers. What is truly “foreign” is not determined by the nation we inhabit or the language we speak. It is the fact that we inhabit a nation at all, that we speak (a) language at all.

While Levinas and Adorno are by no means in conversation with each other on the concept of a “language with soil,” they both, in different ways, allow us to discard the very idea of foreignness—whether because I can never claim any soil as “my own,” or because the rhetoric of organicism that is the foundation of ‘foreignness’ has been shown to be false. Along with the dismissal of foreignness goes the disappearance of the idea that the linguistic or physical migrant has anywhere they really’ belong. None of us belong anywhere; there is no belonging.

Lack of belonging does not equal a total rejection of home. Literal homelessness is not to be valorized. It is important for anyone to have a place of safety and refuge, as both Levinas and Adorno would have known from their own experiences. What both thinkers allow for is doing away with the idea that one should “be at home” anywhere. “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home,” writes Adorno; one should have a physical space of safety, a place to which one can return, but no sense that one is *assigned* to a particular place, or defined by such an assignation. Levinas’s and Adorno’s writings suggest that the idea of subjective groundedness is either unethical or simply illusory. This thinking moves toward developing an understanding of migrants as no more or less “native” than those who happen to never leave the nation or town in which they were born. Both thinkers insist on difference and the particular in relation to alienation (as exemplified through

Fremdwörter for Adorno, Jews for Levinas), meaning that we are not to overlook the specificities of individual histories. Rather, we are to remove any sense of “foreignness” as standing in distinction to “the native.” It is impossible to develop a hierarchy of who belongs when we are all equally foreign.

Notes

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¹ Malkki, “National Geographic.”

² Aside from works cited elsewhere in this essay, key examples of comparison between Adorno and Levinas include Smith, “Adorno vs Levinas”; Horowitz, *History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School*; and Nelson, “Against Liberty.”

³ Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” 30..

⁴ Adorno, “Words from Abroad,” 192 (translation modified)..

⁵ Levinas describes having been “expelled” with his family, in 1917, from the “border residential zone” of Kovno (Kanaus), Lithuania, to Kharkov (Kharkiv), Ukraine, “where the refugees resided.” After returning to Lithuania in 1920, Levinas moved to Strasbourg to begin university study in 1923; see Levinas, “Interview with Myriam Anissimov,” 85. On the circumstances that compelled Adorno’s migration, see Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 174–86.

⁶ For example, Sachs, “The Acknowledgement of Transcendence”; Portella, “Mediation and its Shadow.”

⁷ Peter Gatrell surmises that “every major development in postwar Europe is connected to migration” (*The Unsettling of Europe*, 3). See also Gatrell’s *The Making of the Modern Refugee* on the significance of migration for global history throughout the twentieth century.

⁸ Wampole, *Rootedness*, 114.

⁹ See Bambach, *Heidegger’s Roots*.

¹⁰ Levinas, “Poirié,” 30 ; Poirié and Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 74.

¹¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 232.

¹² Levinas, 231–32.

¹³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 206.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 147.

¹⁵ Levinas, 148.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91.

¹⁷ Saldukaitytė, “Place and Face of the Stranger,” 10.

¹⁸ Bernard-Donals, “Difficult Freedom,” 66. Levinas in fact only uses the word *hôte* once in *Totality and Infinity* (“*le sujet est un hôte*”) and once in *Otherwise than Being* (“*l’un-pour-l’autre qui, dans le sujet, n’est précisément pas rassemblement, mais une incessante aliénation du moi (isolé en tant qu’intériorité) par l’hôte qui lui est confié*”). Alphonso Lingis translates *hôte* as “host” in the first instance and “guest” in the second (Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 334; Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 99; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 299; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 79).

¹⁹ Bernard-Donals, 66.

²⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 299; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 112.

²¹ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 91.

²² See such disparate works as Maurice Barrès’s *Les Déracinés* (1897) and Simone Weil’s *L’Enracinement* (1949). Although Wampole does not explicitly make the argument, the many

examples compiled in *Rootedness* suggest that the metaphor of “roots” was more frequent in early-twentieth-century France, while “soil” was more dominant in German-language contexts.

²³ Levinas, “Anissimov,” 91. Such an imbrication of language, culture, and nation is underlined in the published English translation of Levinas’s interview with Poirié. Here, Levinas says that “I chose France on account of the prestige of the French” (“Poirié,” 28). In the French publication, Levinas’s statement is recorded as “*On a choisi la France à cause du prestige du français*” (Poirié and Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 69). The contraction *du* suggests that Levinas refers not to *les Français*, the French people, but *le français*, the language. Aside from the question of Levinas’ own intended meaning, reading between the translation of this interview and the French text illustrates a conflation of nation, language and people to the extent that the terms for each virtually become equivalent.

²⁴ Friedlander, *Vilna on the Seine*, 82

²⁵ (Poirié 63).

²⁶ Levinas, “Anissimov,” 92.

²⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 22.

²⁸ Levinas, 23.

²⁹ Hammerschlag, *Figural Jew*, 134. Samuel Moyn shows that Levinas formed his mature understanding of Judaism long after he had consciously philosophically broken with Heidegger. See Moyn, *Origins of the Other*; see also Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*; Drabinski and Nelson, *Between Levinas and Heidegger*.

³⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91.

³¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 232.

³² Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 117.

³³ Levinas often positions Abraham as the archetypal exilee, juxtaposed with Odysseus who wanders but continually seeks to return home. However, as Alford notes, “if Abraham is an exile, he is no ordinary one, for Abraham goes with God’s blessing.” If the model Levinasian exilee leaves his home on the divine promise of another home, then “the distinction between homecoming and exile, and with it openness to infinity, is not always so clear” (“The Opposite of Totality,” 241–42).

³⁴ Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” 65.

³⁵ Levinas, 66.

³⁶ Levinas, 63.

³⁷ The precise relationship between Jewish responsibility, and the uniqueness at stake in the *I-Other* relationship, is perhaps the most challenging question Levinas's thought leaves us with. The question to what extent "Jewish responsibility" is for Levinas a universalizable ethical response, or a specific condition of *Jewish people* as the legacy of *Judaism*, remains unresolved.

³⁸ Levinas, "In the Name of the Other," 195.

³⁹ Levinas, "Interview with Myriam Anissimov," 91. On France and French as destinations for Jewish migrants in particular in the early twentieth century, see Malinovich, *Heureux comme un juif en France*; Elsky, *Writing Occupation*.

⁴⁰ On Levinas and Zionism, see, among others, Bernard-Donals, "Difficult Freedom," 68–72; Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*, 159–63; Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 159–98; Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*; Butler, *Parting Ways*, 1–68 (although see Eisenstadt and Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian," on Butler's apparent misquoting of Levinas).

⁴¹ Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 296; Levinas, "Interview with François Poirié", 81.

⁴² Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 292. See also, for example, Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 216–20; Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 177–201

⁴³ Levinas, "In the Name of the Other", 197 [in *Is it Righteous to Be*, 188–99]

⁴⁴ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 68.

⁴⁵ Adorno, "Words from Abroad," 192. I have modified translations of this text throughout, using *Fremdwörter* to replace Weber Nicholsen's English rendering of the term as "foreign words."

⁴⁶ Adorno, 186.

⁴⁷ Adorno, 191–92.

⁴⁸ For a brief summary of developing attitudes towards *Fremdwörter*, see Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 72–7.

⁴⁹ Richter, Introduction to *Language without Soil*, 3.

⁵⁰ Yildiz gives the example of *Käse* (cheese), which is a *Lehnwort*, not a *Fremdwort*, as its Latin origin would not be immediately apparent to most German speakers, and no equivalent non-Latinate term exists in German (Yildiz, 68).

⁵¹ Adorno's frequent quotation of English phrases such as "keep smiling" or "up to date" is not, as Thomas Levin describes them, a use of "English *Fremdwörter*" (Levin, "Nationalities of Language," 114).

⁵² Adorno, "On the Use of Foreign Words," 289.

⁵³ Chen, "*Fremdwörter* as 'The Jews of Language'," 76.

⁵⁴ Adorno, "Words from Abroad," 187.

⁵⁵ Adorno, 188.

⁵⁶ Adorno, 189.

⁵⁷ Adorno, 191.

⁵⁸ Adorno, 191.

⁵⁹ Adorno, 189.

⁶⁰ Gandesha, "The 'Aesthetic Dignity of Words'," 156.

⁶¹ Adorno, "Words from Abroad," 193.

⁶² Adorno, 187.

⁶³ Adorno, "Foreign Words," 287–88.

⁶⁴ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 84.

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 200; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, translated by Jephcott, 118.

⁶⁶ Plug, "Idiosyncrasies," 65–6. Chen provides a less sophisticated reading that also understands both *Fremdwörter* and Jews as "foreign" or "exiled" (Chen, "*Fremdwörter* as 'The Jews of Language'," 78–82).

⁶⁷ The Nazi regime itself did not draw a parallel between *Fremdwörter* and Jews or Jewishness. Adorno ensures he corrects the misconception that the Nazis disavowed *Fremdwörter*; Adorno, "Words from Abroad," 191. Yildiz notes how many words associated with the Nazi regime, including *Nationalsozialismus* itself, have non-German derivations (Yildiz, 76).

⁶⁸ Plug, "Idiosyncrasies," 66–7. Throughout the present essay the spelling "antisemitism" is used, following Hannah Arendt's thinking in making clear that "Semitism" has never existed as a phenomenon in opposition to "antisemitism." Where alternative spelling ("anti-Semitism") has been used in quotation, such spelling is preserved here.

⁶⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 147–65.

⁷⁰ De Vries, *Minimal Theologies*, 342. Eisenstadt examines the significance of the shift from "the proletariat" to "the Jews" in Adorno's thought in "Levinas and Adorno," 139–41.

⁷¹ Richter, Introduction to *Language without Soil*, 7.

⁷² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, translated by Jephcott, 43.

⁷³ Adorno, “What is German?,” 129.

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