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Forever Foreigners: The Temporality of Immigrant Indebtedness

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I offer a critical phenomenological investigation of immigrant indebtedness, with special focus on its temporality. I understand immigrant indebtedness as a relation of debt where what is owed is gratitude, and which takes on a special meaning when the debtor in question is racially construed as immigrant. Understood as such, immigrant indebtedness has the power to function as a social structure that organizes, conditions and impacts people's lives. By analysing writer and poet Sumaya Jirde Ali's descriptions of immigrant indebtedness in dialogue with Marianne Gullestad, Alia Al-Saji and Maurizio Lazzarato, I argue that the harm of immigrant indebtedness becomes visible once we pay attention to its temporal structure—involving the permanence of the debt-relation, the freezing and distortion of the past, as well as their limiting effects on future and present.

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1. Introduction

In the essay "How long do I have to be grateful?", Norwegian-Somali poet and author Sumaya Jirde Ali reflects on "the never-ending demand for gratitude" she and other people with immigrant backgrounds are constantly faced with in Norway, and the underlying racism it reflects.[1] Jirde Ali came to Norway when she was seven years old. Having actively participated in public debate from a very young age, she describes the experience of being attacked and criticized for taking the liberty of publicly uttering her opinions—especially if her utterings are critical with regards to various aspects of Norwegian society. Dwelling on this experience in an interview shortly after the essay was published, she describes how, after having made certain public statements regarding the upcoming Norwegian parliamentary election in 2017, she was told that the elections did not concern her and that she should therefore shut up about it.[2] More generally, Jirde Ali describes in several texts how her background as a Black, Somali immigrant woman constitutes her

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[1] Jirde Ali, "Hvor Lenge Må Jeg Være Takknemlig?", 27.

[2] Jirde Ali, "En Utdatert Måte å Tenke På".

as a perpetual guest who is expected to be perpetually grateful for being allowed to live in Norway. Moreover, this expectation quickly transmutes into a demand to remain humble and shut up, ultimately constricting her available space of utterance: as a Somali immigrant woman it is assumed that she is much better off "here" than "there", and she should therefore have no reason to complain about Norwegian society. As she puts it:

> As a Somali immigrant I am a "guest," whereas ethnic Norwegians and Norway are "the host" and the "host country." I do not have the same space of utterance [*ytringsrom*] as the host. I must be humble and grateful like a dutiful guest, not critical. I must bow deeply, for my "host" has after all taken me in and given me a home, an education, and a future. What gives me the status as "guest" is my background and my skin colour, I think.[3]

Interestingly, we see that what Jirde Ali is describing here is a form of implicit contract: the "host" has provided "a home, an education, and a future", and in return, it is the duty of the "guest" to "be humble and grateful"—presumably forever. However, the central issue, of course, is that Jirde Ali does not perceive herself as a guest in Norway, but as a Norwegian: she is a Norwegian citizen, has lived in Norway most of her life, is a published and acknowledged poet and writer, and has her social and professional network in Norway. Nevertheless, the guest status somehow seems to stick: "[a]s a minority you remain in the guest role. Even if you contribute to society, you never get out of this role".[4] As Jirde Ali points out, "[h]ow Norwegian you are does not concern your contribution to society. It only concerns your identity, how you look, what you wear and what you signal".[5]

What does it mean to constantly remain in the guest role because of, in Jirde Ali's words, "your identity, how you look, what you wear and what you signal"? What does it mean to experience a never-ending demand for gratitude for being allowed to live in your own country? In this article, I approach these questions as aspects of the fundamental experience I call "immigrant indebtedness", with particular focus on how this experience is lived in time. Whereas indebtedness generally speaking can refer to a feeling, namely a feeling of gratitude toward someone to the extent that you feel like you owe them something in return, indebtedness can also simply refer to the relational state of *being in debt*, i.e. to the fact of owing someone something. It is indebtedness in this latter sense that interests me here, and especially when it becomes what Maurizio Lazzarato calls "infinite debt"; i.e. when—according to Gilles Deleuze—"debt becomes the relation of a debtor who will never finish paying to a creditor who will never finish using up the interest on the debt".[6] What makes the host–guest dynamic so troubling in Jirde Ali's case is precisely that it situates her, unwillingly, in a relation of indebtedness towards (in her own words) "ethnic Norwegians and Norway" that she cannot seem to escape. In line with this observation, I understand immigrant indebtedness not as a feeling of gratitude, but as a relation of debt where what is owed is gratitude, and which takes on a special meaning when the debtor in question is racially construed as immigrant, independently of their legal or civic status. Moreover, I understand this relation of debt working as a social structure that organizes, conditions and impacts

[3] Jirde Ali, *Ikkje Vær Redd Sånne Som Meg*, 64 (my translation). In the following, all translations of Sumaya Jirde Ali's quotes from Norwegian to English are my own.
[4] Jirde Ali, "En Utdatert Måte å Tenke På".
[5] Jirde Ali, "Hvor Lenge Må Jeg Være Takknemlig?".
[6] Cited in Lazzarato 78.

different people's lives in different, but concrete ways. Indeed, as a powerful governing structure, immigrant indebtedness has the power to shape one's existence, feelings, life choices and horizons of possibilities. It tends to both rely on and reproduce social, economic and racial divisions and hierarchies. Understanding immigrant indebtedness as a relation of debt specific to people construed as immigrants and as a governing social structure does not, however, imply that the meaning this relation takes on in individual lives is a universal one. Nor is the way it weighs on people. On the contrary, immigrant indebtedness tends to take on different meanings for different persons in different contexts and situations. That is also why the meaning of immigrant indebted existence cannot be defined once and for all. In this article, I focus on Norwegian citizens with immigrant backgrounds. What does it mean to live life informed by immigrant indebtedness in the particular Norwegian context?

The method I work with is critical phenomenology. I take critical phenomenology to mean a philosophical method that takes descriptions of first-person experience as its point of departure in order to interrogate their lived meaning, while at the same time staying attuned to the particular political, social and economic structures that condition those experiences. In order to do this, it mobilizes concepts and insights not only from phenomenology, but also from other disciplines, in order to account for how structures like class, gender and race take a part in shaping individual experience—while nevertheless striving to stay faithful to the richness, ambiguity and possible tensions and ambiguities of those experiences themselves.[7] With this article, I propose more specifically to turn our critical phenomenological attention to the phenomenon of immigrant indebtedness. So far, the lived experience of migrants and immigrants has tended to evade the explicit attention of critical phenomenologists, with some exceptions.[8] Yet migrant and immigrant lived experience has great phenomenological interest because it has the potential to immediately and concretely situate the critical phenomenologist in the very heart of the multiple intersecting structures and power-relations that make up our contemporary world: state borders, nations, class, colonial histories, race, gender and language, just to mention a few. Inspired by the critical phenomenological method, my first aim is to follow testimonies of immigrant indebtedness where they take me, especially as I have found this experience described in the writings of Jirde Ali. Second, my aim has been to establish a dialogue between these testimonies and relevant theoretical bodies of work that can help get to the philosophical or phenomenological meaning of immigrant indebtedness. In the following, I argue that immigrant indebted existence is characterized by a temporal permanence of the immigrant's status as guest which renders it harmful, and which can be traced back to the frozenness of what Alia Al-Saji describes as caricatural, colonial past. Drawing also on Maurizio Lazzarato, I show how this frozen past in turn affects the subject's lived experience by occupying the future and emptying the present of its creative potential and meaning. However, in contrast with Lazzarato's quasi-deterministic view of indebted subjectivity, I use testmonies to suggest that the internalization of "debt-morality" is not the only possible outcome of immigrant indebtedness: resistance and rejection of the debt in

[7] See, for example, the ongoing debate on critical phenomenology's method as discussed by Salamon; Mann; Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, "Six Senses of Critique"; Laferté-Coutu; Oksala.

[8] See Billingslea; Cisneros, "'Alien' Sexuality", "Borderlands and Border Crossings"; Gündoğdu; Sánchez, "On Documents and Subjectivity", "Towards a Phenomenology".

question, and with that a (partial) taking back of one's lived past, future and present, is indeed a possible, while often costly, response.

2. Being a Permanent Guest

What is immigrant indebtedness? In her work on indebtedness among Filipino-Americans immigrants on the American east coast, anthropologist Aprilfaye T. Manalang argues that for this group of immigrants, American citizenship tends to produce a feeling of indebtedness that is very strong. Immigrant indebtedness is in Manalang's work presented as a *feeling*, and more specifically a feeling of gratefulness: the immigrants in question are not only "grateful for their U.S. citizenship, but feel that they have to repay this debt or 'do something' in return for the blessing of American citizenship".[9] While the study also thematizes several Filipino-Americans' frustration over how this implicit debt in practice limits the possibility of political engagement to local "apolitical" community work and charity, in so far as more explicit political engagement risks being seen as ungrateful, the relation of indebtedness in question is nevertheless perceived as a result of a deep feeling of gratitude coming from within: it's a "felt" debt, an expression of one's gratitude for having been allowed to come, live and naturalize in the U.S.

That immigrants may feel grateful and indebted to their new country is certainly true in many contexts and for many people, including in Norway. However, Jirde Ali's descriptions suggest that there is a second dimension to immigrant indebtedness, resonating with the second meaning of the term "indebtedness" and revealing a different story: immigrant indebtedness is not necessarily a result of a feeling of gratitude coming from within, but can also be understood as a debt-relation projected onto you from the outside, one that locks you into a fixed identity as "guest" in a frozen host–guest dynamic that is experienced as misplaced, racist and unjust. From Jirde Ali's descriptions, we see that gratitude indeed plays an important role in immigrant indebtedness, albeit not as much as a feeling as what constitutes the content of the debt-relation in question. She shows us that for some immigrants, gratitude may indeed be felt, but first and foremost becomes something that is *owed*. In fact, the explicit demand to be grateful that kicks in when Sumaya Jirde Ali trespasses her guest role can be understood as a form of debt-collection; as a making sure that the (never-ending) debt of gratitude keeps being paid.

Understood as a *debt of gratitude*, immigrant indebtedness disproportionately tends to affect people perceived as immigrants because of their identity, looks, dress and, in Jirde Ali's words, "what they signal". In other words, it affects people who are racially construed as "immigrants"—often independently of their civic status and concrete history. Recently, Amy Reed-Sandoval and Carlos Sánchez have argued that the status "undocumented immigrant" is just as much a *social* as a legal one, and that acknowledging this is important in order to think critically and thoroughly about immigrant injustice.[10] Similarly, the term "immigrant" itself has a social meaning that surpasses its technical one, to the extent that the term functions as a racial category. In the Norwegian context, the racial overtones of the term "immigrant" have been analysed by social-anthropologist

[9] Manalang 283.
[10] See Reed-Sandoval and Sánchez, "Towards a Phenomenology".

Marianne Gullestad in her study of "Norwegianness".[11] Gullestad argues that the term *innvandrer* [immigrant] is a "rhetorically powerful concept" which in everyday life as well as in the media "has become a stigmatizing way of labelling 'them'": "an implicit code based on 'Third World' origin, different values from the majority, 'dark skin', working class (unskilled or semi-skilled work)".[12] In short, "immigrants" in Norway are excluded "from the national 'we'", to the extent that being labelled "immigrant" as if by definition renders full acceptance and inclusion impossible to attain.[13] When reflecting on immigrant indebtedness, this social meaning of the term "immigrant" is important to keep in mind: immigrant indebtedness is a phenomenon that affects not only, and perhaps not even mostly, individuals who are immigrants in the technical sense of the term, but immigrants understood as a social and racial category, always already indicating a form of exclusion and resulting in a social belonging which is, at best, conditional. I suggest that immigrant indebtedness as a phenomenon and structure goes to the core of what this conditionality implies.

3. Conditional Belonging, Labour of Love and Citizenship as "Gift"

What does it mean for someone construed as immigrant to be trapped in a debt of gratitude? What is being owed, more specifically? Despite challenging the "never-ending demand for gratitude" that she finds herself confronted with, Jirde Ali never contests that she is indeed grateful, even proud, to live in Norway. She writes, for example, that she considers herself "privileged" for having grown up in Norway, that seeing Norway rank at the top of the UN happiness index in 2017 made her happy, and that Norway indeed has "made me and my family happy" in so far as the country has "offered us a bright future and something as essential as peace".[14] However, as long as Jirde Ali *also* engages in public, social critique, she is seen as ungrateful, meaning that her felt gratefulness is in fact not enough to count. It becomes clear, then, that the demand for gratitude she experiences is not as much a duty to feel or express recognition and gratitude, as a duty to show one's gratitude according to a specific standard which involves, in particular, refraining from criticizing the "host country". In so far as immigrant indebtedness allows for public utterances, such utterances are limited to expressions of praise or public gratitude to the host country, or alternatively (and maybe even better) criticism toward the country or culture of origin. For Jirde Ali, the gratitude that is being required is one that is somehow unconditional, unquestioned, without room for critique. Another way to look at it is as an imposition on people with (especially non-Western) immigrant backgrounds to "pick a side".

Gullestad points to something similar when she points out that despite the fundamental exclusion from the national "we" that people construed as immigrants experience, the lack of ancestry and a common origin can be *partially compensated for* precisely by refraining from criticism.[15] Moreover, she points out that in practice, this seems to translate into an expectation "that one should instead extol the country's virtues" or preferably

[11] Gullestad.
[12] Gullestad 50.
[13] Gullestad 54.
[14] Jirde Ali, "Hvor Lenge Må Jeg Være Takknemlig?", 23.
[15] Gullestad 54.

actively *praise* it—a demand which is "rarely made of other Norwegians, except when they are representing Norway abroad".[16] In short, people labelled immigrants have to act in ways that help them being perceived as "both loyal and proud to be Norwegian" in order to compensate for lack of ancestry and be (partially) accepted in Norwegian society.[17] Another way to understand this demand for loyalty is as what Sara Ahmed calls a "labour of love" that befalls on migrants (here in a British context):

> The over-valuation of the nation as a love-object—as an object that can reciprocate one's love—hence demands that migrants "take on" the character of the national ideal: becoming British is indeed a labour of love for the migrant, whose reward is the "promise" of being loved in return.[18]

Slightly differently from Gullestad, who understands praise and loyalty to the nation as a "compensation for the lack of belonging", we see here that Ahmed emphasizes that the immigrant's labour of love functions like an investment with a promised return: the reward of "being loved in return". Combined, the two observations suggest that conditional belonging and loyalty/labour of love co-exist within the relation of immigrant indebtedness where they form a dynamic relationship: the initial lack of (ethnic) belonging requires those labelled immigrants to partially compensate through loyalty and labour of love toward the nation—an ongoing work which in turn comes with the promise of belonging and acceptance in society, but with the crucial difference that the promise of belonging always recedes further into the future, and is never actualized or completely granted. In many ways, the relation of immigrant indebtedness *is* this movement from exclusion towards (impossible) inclusion, and can be understood both as an ongoing payback compensating for an original, infinite debt (lack of common origin), or alternatively as a continuous investment with a promised, yet unreachable outcome (belonging; acceptance; being "loved back"; becoming "truly" Norwegian). As Maryam Iqbal Tahir puts it,

> while Norwegian is something Norwegians are—no questions asked—minorities have to deserve to be Norwegian. That is why our Norwegianness is to such a big degree connected to our achievements. And one can never be good enough at being Norwegian.[19]

What role does Norwegian citizenship play in this movement toward Norwegianness? As both Gullestad and Jirde Ali show, qualifying for Norwegian citizenship is never enough in order to qualify for full social belonging if one is already labelled immigrant. "Becoming Norwegian", like "becoming British", is a process that goes far beyond qualifying for citizenship. Indeed, research suggests that Norwegian citizenship increasingly tends to be conceived by Norwegian policy makers as a *gift* to immigrants.[20] Despite certain immigration laws and policies reflecting the more liberal premise "that people *should become* citizens" and that citizenship should hence be the norm, attitudes towards citizenship in Norway have shifted in recent years towards citizenship being perceived, more like in Denmark, as "a privilege and something that one should 'deserve'".[21]

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid 55.
[18] Ahmed 134.
[19] Tahir (my translation).
[20] Brochmann and Midtbøen.
[21] Ibid 157.

Understood as a gift or a prize, it is likely that citizenship deepens and consolidates the relation of immigrant indebtedness rather than alleviating it: for those already labelled immigrants, citizenship becomes not a proof of integration and belonging as much as a sign of (potentially undeserved) privilege strengthening the demand for reassurance, loyalty and compensation.

The relation between (conditional) belonging, loyalty/labour of love and citizenship as gift helps us make sense of the rage and backlash Jirde Ali experiences when she makes critical statements about Norwegian society in public: in so doing, she fails to be loyal to the nation or actively "love" it in the sense of "extolling the country's virtues", hence failing to fulfil her part of the implicit contract for belonging. She denies the existence of the very contract whereby her acceptance in society is conditioned upon precisely this kind of labour, and denies the fact that her citizenship and rights are a "gift" by taking them for granted. As a result, she is perceived as entitled and ungrateful. Conversely, this also explains why Jirde Ali experiences the duty of gratefulness as a curtailing of her rights: she describes the constant demand placed on her to be (more) grateful as a technique of master suppression or social manipulation which aims at silencing, ultimately curtailing her freedom of speech: "There are people in Norway who mean that the freedom of speech is a freedom that does not extend to me".[22] The duty to be grateful threatens her freedom of speech because she experiences severe backlash when she voices opinions that are a tad more critical, a tad more nuanced. A doubt, a question raised about the dominant society or culture, a concern or willingness to nuance stereotypes about one's own culture of origin can be enough to set off rage. Nuances are interpreted as a violation of the implicit immigrant contract, and with that come violent reactions and backlash.

4. Temporal Harm and Colonial Pasts

So far, we have looked at the structure and terms of immigrant indebtedness understand as a particular kind of debt-relation. Now we will turn to the establishment of this relation as a temporal phenomenon. As we see from Jirde Ali's account, the experience of immigrant indebtedness is connected to the way in which the immigrant label sticks to her, freezing her status as guest and debtor. This makes her situation differ temporally from an everyday host–guest situation, while nevertheless being dominated precisely by the singular power-dynamic that characterizes the host–guest relation. While host–guest relations in general tend to involve an implicit demand to be grateful and refrain from (unwarranted) criticism, the duties of the guest in everyday situations tend to last only as long as one remains a guest, a status that is usually temporary, often reversible, and hence *relative*, as Simone de Beauvoir would say, and therefore not felt as very heavy or problematic.[23] In Jirde Ali's situation, however, the guest status has a completely different weight to it than in an everyday host–guest situation: here, the guest status is

[22] Jirde Ali, *Ikkje Vær Redd Sånne Som Meg*, 65.

[23] Beauvoir 7. Beauvoir makes this argument concerning how the historical othering of women differs from a more harmless othering that is central to our identity formations as human beings, pointing out that othering is in and by itself not harmful in so far as it is experienced as relative and reciprocal. By contrast, the oppressive function (and enigma) of the othering of women resides precisely in its historical permanence; in the way in which the othering of women has not been understood as reciprocal or relative, but *absolute*, denying any relativity or reciprocity in the relation between the sexes.

experienced as a kind of trap, and the duty to be grateful seems to be permanently attached to her as a person. She becomes a forever foreigner, and therefore indebted forever, and the debt of gratitude extends for all time. In Beauvoir's terms, we can say that the immigrant indebtedness at work here is characterized by the way in which the guest status becomes irreversible, nonreciprocal, permanent; how it reduces the person construed as immigrant to "pure alterity".[24] This absolute othering and the inequal status it implies is masked, legitimized and naturalized by the otherwise non-controversial ethics of the host–guest relation, which in everyday situations is not experienced as problematic. It is only by taking into account the temporal specificity of the host–guest relation in question that immigrant indebtedness emerges as an oppressive structure.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir struggles with the question of *how* the permanent othering of women came to be consolidated. Similarly, to understand immigrant indebtedness, we must ask: how do people racially construed as immigrants become permanent guests in the first place? Gullestad suggests that the term immigrant "locks [the person labelled immigrant]" conceptually into a position she thought she had long since left, and it does so for "all her life. It thus ties her to a perpetual present based in the past. She is not somebody who once entered, but is perpetually entering".[25] In other words, being labelled immigrant means to get stuck in a "perpetual entering" which constitutes the subject as "immigrant" in the social sense, hence establishing her as permanent outsider. Interestingly, Gullestad's analysis resonates with what Megan Burke, Martina Ferrari and Bonnie Mann have recently called "a feminist phenomenology of temporal harm".[26] They argue that temporal harm, i.e. harm rooted in the lived experience of *time*, "is a key dimension of 'historical modes of domination and subordination'". More specifically, while "rooted in the historical past, [temporal harm] causes intense suffering in the present in both chronic and acute forms".[27] Especially, the authors are interested in using phenomenology to gain insight into how "the historical past shows up in an individual's present and alters, ruptures even, the shape and movement of her time *as she lives it*, […] in what the presencing of the past means for and does to a particular subject". What both Gullestad and Burke, Ferrari and Mann suggest, then, is that there is a way in which the past has a tendency to become present and *alter* the lived time of the subject: the past freezes and gets reduced to a certain aspect of the past, and this "frozen past" comes to dominate not only the past, but also the lived present of the person in question. It is my claim that this is also that case for the relation of immigrant indebtedness, its harm originating precisely in the permanence of the guest status established through a freezing of the past which comes to dominate the person's actual past *and present status*, constituting her as "forever foreigner" or "perpetually entering".

How can we understand, more specifically, the frozen past that the status of "perpetual guest", is rooted in? We have to be careful not to think of this past as one's actual, individual past. While Jirde Ali has at some point actually immigrated to Norway, this is *not* the case for everyone being subjected to immigrant indebtedness. Mahmoud Mohammad Mansour, born in Denmark and speaking from a Danish context, which in many ways is comparable to the Norwegian one, recounts:

[24] Beauvoir 7.
[25] Gullestad 50–51.
[26] Burke, Ferrari, and Mann.
[27] Ibid.

> I am often told that I should be happy that Denmark wishes to admit me. That I should be grateful that Denmark has shown such great generosity by offering me Danish citizenship. And that is the root of the problem: Even if you are born in Denmark and don't have any connections to your parents' home country, and the only home you know is in Denmark, you still get to know that you need to have a home somewhere else.[28]

In Mansour's case, the frozen past in question *cannot* be said to be his own past moment of entering that is then turned into a "perpetual entering", as Gullestad puts it—for the simple reason that he has never entered, but is born in the country. The notion of frozen past therefore has to be further problematized in the case of immigrant indebtedness, as the past in question is not necessarily the subject's own, but seems to be an *inherited past*, or even an *imaginary past*. Looking more closely, the same seems to be the case of the past invoked in the case of Jirde Ali, even if she has indeed at some point immigrated to Norway. In the assumption that she's "better off here than there" which motivates the demand that she should be "more grateful", a presumed, an imaginary, projected past is disconnected from and takes precedence over her actual past: the idea that whatever her life was like before, down "there", must have been bad or at least "worse" than it is here, now. Revealing no interest in Jirde Ali's actual past, this distorted version of her past nevertheless serves as a justification for the demand that she be grateful.

What is this inherited, imaginary, frozen past that inserts itself in the place of Jirde Ali's actual past? Alia Al-Saji argues that racialization—"the historical, social and epistemological process by which races are constructed, seen, and, when interiorized or epidermalized, lived"[29]—is not only something that takes place in the present, but also happens "at the level of the past".[30] More specifically, racialization is here understood as a process of othering involving a projection "of what is undesirable in the self […] onto the other", resulting in "a negative mirroring whereby the other is constituted as that which the self is *not*, or does not take itself to be".[31] These projected differences thereafter become naturalized as "race is perceived as belonging to visible features of the body (such as skin color)".[32] What Al-Saji draws attention to, drawing on Frantz Fanon and Aníbal Quijano, is that this othering, projection and naturalization are also *temporally charged*, building on and reproducing an "othering" also in the representation of the past. Indeed, European and Western conceptualizations of the past tend to be colonized and racialized, to the extent that the past is split into two frames of reference, the "white past" and the "colonized" or "racialized" past:

> There is a form of othering within the past that splits it into "two frames of reference", dichotomously constructed. While the dominant frame is that of white "civilizational" history, the second frame positions colonized and racialized peoples as foils to this history, as swept up in it without contributing to it.[33]

Al-Saji draws attention to Fanon's insight that for the colonized, racialized person, one's actual past tends to disappear behind a secondary temporal reference frame. This is what Quijano calls "colonized" or "racialized time", which by definition is understood by

[28] Mansour.
[29] Al-Saji 4.
[30] Ibid 6.
[31] Ibid 4.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid 6.

opposition to the dominant "white civilisational time". In this dualist logic of time, there is no room for the "actual past" of the colonized and racialized, which has been repressed, but only for a *stereotypical past* that is closed, "ahistorical" and "prehistorical", doing the work of justifying "colonial domination and paternalism".[34]

What Al-Saji shows us, is that Jirde Ali, racially construed as immigrant, comes to carry with her a collective construction of a frozen, ahistorical past; a colonized past reduced to a stereotype that by definition is closed, which in the encounter with the "Norwegian" tends to dominate and hide her own, individual past. Other cases confirm this imaginary past at work, like that of Ahmed Ashraf, a Norwegian citizen born in Norway in the 1970s to Pakistani immigrant parents. He points to something similar describing an encounter with a police officer at the airport. Ashraf was returning to Norway with a friend after a vacation when the officer held him back in the passport control (after waving his friend past), checked his passport, asked him "the usual questions", before handing back the passport with the comment: "Well, well. Norwegian passport. Worked out for you, too".[35] The remark not only undermines Ashraf's Norwegian identity but more specifically his past: it leaves no room for the possibility that he is in fact born in Norway and is not an immigrant, instead projecting onto him an imaginary past in which he would be stuck, both geographically and temporally, without the possibility of immigrating, and where things as if by definition would *not* have "worked out". At the same time, this projected, imaginary past constitutes precisely the necessary condition whereby Ashraf's *present* status is reduced to one of "perpetual entering" or forever foreigner, even when he is in fact born in Norway and have never "entered" or "immigrated" in the first place. The example indeed shows that Al-Saji's emphasis on the frozen, colonial past and Gullestad's notion of "perpetual entering" (describing a frozen *present*) are connected, the former conditioning the latter *independently* of the person's actual, individual past, in turn explaining the status of "perpetual guest".

Both in Jirde Ali's and Ashraf's case, we see that the frozen, imaginary past does a certain work, namely the work of justifying the paternalistic attitude implied in the implicit or explicit demand to be grateful. Moreover, in so far as they both get reduced to perpetual immigrants and hence guests, there seems to be no room for their actual pasts in all their complexity and nuances (just like there is no room for Jirde Ali's actual, felt gratitude as long as she *also* adopts a semi-critical attitude marking her as "ungrateful"). We can say that immigrant indebted temporality starts with the reduction of lived past into a frozen and closed, stereotypical past, a reduction that in turn renders one's guest status and debt of gratitude permanent and never-ending. In other words, the reduction of lived past into a frozen, colonial past constitutes the first step of the temporal harm of immigrant indebtedness. In the next section, we ask: what are the next steps of this particular harm?

5. Occupied Futures and Empty Presents

What does it mean to *live* with a frozen, caricatural past and the permanent guest status it gives rise to? What are, in other words, the consequences of immigrant indebtedness on

[34] Al-Saji 6, 7.
[35] Ashraf, "Norsk nok for de svina".

the subject's lived experience? A central element of Jirde Ali's deep frustration over the constant demand to be (more) grateful seems to lie the way in which the relation of debt stretches into an indeterminate future: "How long do I have to be grateful?" "As a minority […] you never get out of [the guest role]". Shared by many Norwegians with immigrant backgrounds, this frustration suggests that immigrant indebtedness also has effects on the subject's relation to and experience of the future, as well as the present. The temporal alteration of the future is in part caused by the kind of othering that is specific to racialization, as Al-Saji emphasizes, but I would like to add that it can also be said to belong to the relation of *debt* more generally, and especially to what Maurizio Lazzarato calls "infinite debt", i.e. being trapped in a debt-relation where the debt can never be paid back.[36]

In his work on "the indebted man", Lazzarato shows that being permanently indebted is not only a status rooted in temporality, but also has *temporal consequences* on subjective existence. Lazzarato, writing about financial debt-relations under neo-liberalism in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, emphasizes how debt is an asymmetrical power-relation which has the power to "capture" both societies and individuals. Moreover, for Lazzarato, this capture has profound effects on both individual and collective subjectivities: "[c]redit or debt and their creditor–debtor relationship constitute specific relations of power that entail specific forms of production and control of subjectivity—a particular form of *homo economicus*, the 'indebted man'".[37] Indeed, he argues, several financial crises have transformed the indebted man into the embodiment of modern day capitalism—a subject characterized by a debt-morality which is first and foremost informed by (interiorized) guilt. Citing Nietzsche's Second Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Lazzarato also emphasizes how the particular form of subjectivation that comes with debt requires the creation of a particular kind of memory, namely one "straining toward the future": "No less for the creditor than the debtor, 'a memory straining toward the future' must be made for man 'so that he […] is answerable for his own *future*!'".[38] This involves anticipating and neutralizing time and its inherent risks, making the debtor calculable, predictable, with severe temporal consequences:

> Granting credit requires one to estimate that which is inestimable—future behavior and events—and to expose oneself to the uncertainty of time. The system of debt must therefore neutralize time, that is, the risk inherent to it. It must anticipate and ward off every potential "deviation" in the behavior of the debtor the future might hold.[39]

In other words, the specific power of debt on subjectivity is to neutralize time, to "bridge the gap between present and future".[40] To a larger degree than with standard salaried labour, Lazzarato maintains, debt "subordinate[s] all possibility of choice and decision which the future holds to the reproduction of capitalist power relations".[41] For the indebted man, time itself—not only the past—seems *frozen* and the future *closed*. What the (infinite) debt-relation does is to neutralize the creative aspect of time, namely "time as the creation of new possibilities". And when the debt-relation

[36] Lazzarato 77.
[37] Ibid 30.
[38] Cited in Lazzarato 45.
[39] Lazzarato 45.
[40] Ibid 46.
[41] Ibid.

expands to all corners of social and political life, no room is left for "open time", i.e. for unpredictability, creativity or "political, social, or esthetic change". Hence, neutralizing time and closing the future, debt also neutralizes "the power of choice and decision".[42]

A similar point is made by Al-Saji regarding racialized time. Citing Frantz Fanon, she emphasizes how the lived experience of racialized time is characterized by the feeling of being "too late": "Too late. Everything is anticipated, thought out, demonstrated, made the most of".[43] More specifically, the feeling of having come "too late" is experienced in relation to a white world in which being forced to belong to a "secondary" fixed and closed past of "colonial time" affects one's sense of possibility: "the field of possibility loses its playfulness and imaginary variability [… it] allows repetition but not creation or variation, it is a closed map. This seems ultimately to mean that possibilities are not genuinely felt as *mine*".[44] Normally, we act in the present precisely by taking up the past, "reconfiguring it, and playing on its relations".[45] This is what action in the present consists in, and conversely, the past normally works as "a resource for agency". However, when the past is racialized and closed, the dimension of possibility is distorted, Al-Saji emphasizes:

> The past no longer offers an opening to reconfiguration and to reinterpretation in the present; its possibilities seem fixed. What is closed along with this past is not the ability to move and act as such, but the freedom to improvise. One feels oneself de-passed by the world and others, able only to follow lines mapped in advance and fulfill predetermined expectations.[46]

Like Lazzarato, Al-Saji points out how the frozenness of time narrows down the experience of possibility, which becomes fixed, lacking the freedom of improvisation. Whereas for Lazzarato it is the credit relation that binds the future and subordinates the possibility of choice, Al-Saji points to how the frozen, colonial past does a lot of the same work by rendering improvisation and reinterpretation of the world difficult. As Lazzarato emphasizes, the closing of the future ultimately means also that also the *present* risks to collapse, in so far as it gets emptied of its possibilities.[47] In short, the logic of debt, by closing the future, also stifles our possibilities for action in the present.[48] The temporal effect of indebtedness is hence potentially total, with the power to stifle the past, present and future.

6. Immigrant Indebtedness and Beyond

In Jirde Ali's descriptions, we can recognize both the way in which racialization implies a limitation on the field of possibility in terms of creativity and playfulness, in so far as her utterances cause extreme backlash, not as much for their content as for their content in combination of who she is or who she comes to represent, to the extent that she in periods have had to retract from public life, and more generally experiences it as a limitation of her freedom of speech. Moreover, her experience, repeatedly insisted on, of never

[42] Ibid 48–49.
[43] Cited in Al-Saji 7.
[44] Al-Saji 8.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid 8–9.
[47] Lazzarato 71.
[48] Ibid.

being "Norwegian enough", as well of feeling like a permanent guest where the ethnic or white Norwegians are hosts, resonates with what Al-Saji talks about as arriving "too late" to take part in the shaping of an already overdetermined world. Instead, she finds herself having to work constantly to follow a pre-established path toward (unattainable) "Norwegianness".

On the other hand, however, Jirde Ali's testimony, work and public presence also show us a different picture: if anything, she has definitely not internalized the "debt subjectivity" that Lazzarato is talking about as a consequence of infinite debt, but is constantly working against and openly contesting and criticizing it, from and despite her social position as "debtor". Tired of always being asked to show more gratefulness toward people who "have not contributed anything to my life", Jirde Ali asks: "does really my critical, socially engaged voice imply that I am ungrateful?".[49] This resistance is part of what it may mean to live with immigrant indebtedness, and makes it necessary to nuance parts of Lazzarato's account of indebted subjectivity. As Rocío Zambrana points out in her recent reading of Lazzarato, debt-subjectivity, including that of infinite or "unpayable" debt, "is not universalizable".[50] Therefore, it is "crucial to complicate Lazzarato's account, underscoring the necessity of specifying the distinct ways in which debt lands".[51] Citing Veronica Gago's and Luci Cavallero's feminist account of debt, Zambrana emphasizes more specifically that "Lazzarato fails to take into account two 'fundamental aspects' of the operation of debt within the neoliberal context: gender and the potential for disobedience internal to the work of debt itself".[52] This observation is relevant also for immigrant indebtedness. The question of how gender impacts immigrant indebtedness is a big one, and cannot be addressed adequately within the confines of this article. For now, let us simply note that gender is a crucial part of how immigrant indebtedness lands, also in the case for Jirde Ali, and merits a more systematic investigation. The other aspect highlighted by Zambrana is precisely the potential for resistance and disobedience from within the debt-relation. This potential also needs to be emphasized in the case of immigrant indebtedness. Ahmed Ashraf, for example, states that after a lifetime of encounters where his national belonging is undermined, he is no longer interested in spending time and energy defending his Norwegian identity. When faced with the question of where he is from, rather than insisting that he "is Norwegian", he henceforth prefers simply stating that he is "born here".[53] This strategy, he emphasizes, has felt emancipating, because it has liberated him from having to "fight for belonging in a society on other people's premises". More specifically, it has been a way for Ashraf to take back control over situations where people tend to question his Norwegianness based on how he looks, and crucially, a way to take back his own *past*: now, instead of being a negative experience that tends to remind him that he does not fully belong, the question "where do you come from?" has become "an icebreaker to good conversations about my Pakistani parents' first years in Norway, and the exciting story about my maternal grandfather, who drove from Punjab to Norway in 1969".[54]

[49] Jirde Ali, "Hvor Lenge Må Jeg Være Takknemlig?", 23.
[50] Zambrana 32.
[51] Ibid 32.
[52] Cited in Zambrana 32.
[53] Ashraf, "Debatten: Nekter å være norsk".
[54] Ibid.

As is clear, the work of resistance and disobedience toward immigrant indebtedness tends come with severe costs. While Jirde Ali for years has been one of Norway's most harassed public figures, Ashraf's decision to "opt out" of his Norwegian national identity provoked massive critique and a heated national debate. Nevertheless, these counter-stories show that the temporal closure of immigrant indebtedness might only be partial.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I have offered an initial analysis of the phenomenon immigrant indebtedness, showing how it can be understood as a relation of debt where what is owed is gratitude, and which takes on a special meaning when the debtor in question is racially construed as immigrant. To this end, I have deployed critical phenomenology understood as philosophical method starting from various testimonies of first-person experiences, in order to analyse and interrogate their lived meaning. As Eva-Marie Simms and Beata Stawarska have pointed out, phenomenology is a method which "reveals the depth and complexity of phenomena which are usually covered in our habitual, unreflected attitude of perceiving and judging what we experience".[55] Moreover, recent developments in the field have indeed shown that phenomenology can be *critical* if it refrains from pretending to describe presumably universal structures of experience, and expands the scope of phenomenological investigation by incorporating into its analysis the material and historical conditions that make certain experiences likely or possible for some subjects. In order to do this, it mobilizes concepts and insights not only from phenomenology, but also from other disciplines, in order to account for how structures like class, gender and race take a part in shaping individual experience —while nevertheless striving to stay faithful to the richness, ambiguity and possible tensions and ambiguities of those experiences themselves. In my own work, I see "immigrant indebtedness" as a phenomenon that benefits greatly from phenomenological attention, precisely because it tends to be reduced to a "feeling" or understood an egalitarian, contractual relation—both of which tend to naturalize it and hide its potential to operate as a repressive and exclusionary power-structure that organizes, conditions and impacts people's lives. In line with phenomenology's "critical turn", I have wanted in this analysis to stay vigilant to how the lived experience of immigrant indebtedness is shaped and conditioned by existing social, political and economic structures such as race, coloniality, gender (although less explored), national identity and neo-liberal understandings of debt, while at the same time emphasizing that the meaning and weight immigrant indebtedness takes on in individual lives is not a universal one, but varies according to groups' and individuals' different contexts and situations. Hence also the importance of starting with and regularly returning to first-person testimonies.

Notably, the critical phenomenological approach has let me interrogate the way in which immigrant indebtedness is lived as a *temporal phenomenon*, illuminating how the harm of this particular debt-relation becomes visible especially once we pay attention to its temporal structure, of which I discerned four main aspects. First, differently from everyday host–guest situations, the guest status on which immigrant indebtedness hinges tends to be permanent, turning the person construed as immigrant into a permanent

[55] Simms and Stawarska 9.

guest or "forever foreigner". Second, this permanence is itself related to how a frozen *past* comes to dominate a person's actual past. Third, it results in a stifling or closure of the future which takes the form of a restriction of the possibility and freedom to improvise. Fourth, ultimately, in so far as this closure of the future restricts the field of action and decision-making, the temporal frozenness of immigrant indebtedness also has the power to stifle the present, emptying it of or at least limiting its meaning. At the same time, however, Jirde Ali's testimony, as well as other counter-stories, suggest that the temporal closure of immigrant indebtedness is only partial, in so far as the power-relation it implies is being constantly contested through strategies of resistance that, while costly, also function as a taking back of lived, open time.

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