Notes

1 Introduction: Situating Dubai

1. The terms Global South and North are acknowledged to be problematic, as they do not take into account social and economic variations within states or regions. However, they are used as broadly indicative of geographical regions where disadvantage and poverty are more common (South) compared to where privilege and opportunity are more available (North).

2. The Gulf refers to the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE.

3. This book, however, draws only on interviews with migrants living in the emirate of Dubai although they may have worked in other areas.

4. The lack of a tradition of civil society can be seen as a partial explanation for the current apathy towards participation in civil-society processes and the willingness to let leaders make unilateral decisions.

5. Hereafter referred to as Sheikh Mohammed.

6. The conventions of Emirati citizenship and their implications for relations between nationals and migrants are discussed further in Chapter 3.

7. Other states without a past with of slave-keeping, however, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, also have a high dependency on migrant domestic workers, so drawing a direct correlation would be incorrect.

8. Labour camps are segregated by gender.

9. Interviewees who were not of South Asian ethnicity were predominantly volunteer group workers, entrepreneurs and civil servants.

10. Because of the mixture of languages used even in one interview, the original language of individual quotes throughout the book is not specified.

2 Dubai as Metaphor: Corporate Entity, Global City, Hope and Mirage


2. See Davidson (2009) for a detailed discussion of the UAE’s moves towards more democratic forms of governance and his critiques of this as more performative than indicative of any real change.

3. Similarly, Vora (2013), in a critique of Eurocentric anthropological approaches, points to the limiting nature of conceptualisations of citizenship using Dubai as an example of how long-term residents claim affective and non-legal modes of belonging to the Emirate.

4. See www.dubaiworld.ae.

5. My italics.


7. It is not just through transnational actors and discourses that desires and subjectivities of consumption manifest. The changes in India post-
liberalisation in 1991–1992 have also generated shifts in public consciousness that have implications for potential migrants. “As the neo-liberal reforms progress, supported as they are by vigorous rhetorical campaigns by business and government, increasing numbers of people find themselves being inexorably drawn towards the seductive discourses of the marketplace, and whether intentionally or not, have begun to replicate the language and/or the practices of neo-liberal ‘life’” (Scrase 2006: 3). This discourse of neo-liberalism in India legitimates feelings of envy and desire that prompt potential migrants to become mobile. This combination of factors is what Ali (2007) refers to as the “culture of migration”.

3 Migrants and the State: Structures of Violence, Co-ethnic Exploitation and the Transnationalisation of Rights

1. The opening of the Dubai Foundation coincided with the closure of the City of Hope, which had been privately run by Sharla Musabih. She had become the subject of negative publicity and charges of people smuggling in late 2008. Sharla is now a political refugee in the USA, claiming that she was persecuted for the social work activities she carried out in the UAE.

2. The restriction of the mobility of women under the guise of “care” is a theme that is taken up more extensively in Chapter 5.

3. This is perhaps ironic, as many former slaves from Africa have been naturalised as Emirati citizens. However, this is also testament to how entrenched current social divides are.

4. http://guide.theemiratesnetwork.com/living/visa.php Retrieved 9 December 2008. Other countries, such as Singapore, that are also highly dependent on migrant low-wage labour, practise similar forms of discrimination that restrict family unification based on income level and visa category.

5. This is equivalent to about US$160–US$540 based on an exchange rate of 1US$ = 3.7AED.

6. Examples of this are provided in Chapter 6.

7. Domestic workers are not protected under labour laws as their employment is within the private domestic sphere, and thus conceived of as beyond the jurisdiction of the state. This is also common in other states with large numbers of foreign domestic workers, such as Singapore.

8. There is international acceptance of the terms, “irregular migration” and “migrant workers in irregular status” in place of “illegal migration” and “illegal migrant workers”. The former terms do not criminalise migrants and are also more comprehensive in capturing different dimensions of irregularity (Wickramasekara 2008: 1248).

9. Middle-class homeowners who also do not want to incur the visa and administrative costs of hiring a domestic worker legally resort to hiring domestics illicitly.

10. This estimate was made prior to the GFC, after which labour flows into Dubai would probably have declined.

11. When the global economic slowdown hit Dubai hard in 2008/2009, many low-wage labourers had their visas cancelled as construction on many large-
scale projects halted. These migrants had to return to their home countries before the completion of the contracts they had been promised.

12. Organising as labour unions is illegal in the UAE – a violation of the rights of migrants to free association. However, in recent years, there have been strikes by low-wage construction labourers demanding wage increases and to be paid on time. Many of these, while gaining publicity for their cause, have not resulted in any real or sustained change.

13. This is largely true despite the fact that there are also significant numbers of middle-class skilled South Asians in Dubai. British citizens of South Asian descent also complicate these equations of race, nationality and social class. In these cases, citizenship and social class often emerge as more significant than race in official spheres such as workplaces.

14. Gamburd (2008: 17) posits that more Sri Lankan low wage migrants are choosing to work in Italy given opportunities for family reunification and permanent settlement, which are impossible in the Gulf. This was also the reason why some of my informants saw Dubai merely as a stepping-stone towards eventual migration to North America or Europe.

15. *Hawala*, an informal system of money transfer, is widespread not only because it is quick, but also because it generally pays a premium exchange rate. However, with the introduction of a market-based exchange rate by the Indian government in 1993 and stricter regulation of capital flows post-9/11, it has become less popular.

16. Recent literature (Krishna Kumar 2010) acknowledges that the entire regulation of international migration by the Indian state needs an overhaul, as current regulatory practices are inadequate in ensuring migrants’ welfare.

17. There are regulations regarding the amount that authorised agents in India can charge potential migrants but, again, regulation is problematic. Forty-four per cent of potential migrants did not know who their sponsors were prior to migration, 16 per cent were preparing to emigrate without employment contracts and among those who did sign contracts, only 37 per cent were aware of what the contracts stated. For details of this research see Rajan, Varghese et al. (2010).

18. This translates to about US$110 to US$3,100 based on exchange rates of about 1US$ = 45 Indian rupees.

19. Issues of co-ethnic exploitation and friendship networks that enable migration will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 6.

20. Indians own more than 11,000 UAE businesses; only local Emiratis own more (Krane 2009: 199).

21. The management of female Indian migrants to the Gulf is the exception. Indian women migrating as foreign domestic workers (FDWs) and caregivers have to be above the age of 30 – a policy designed to protect younger and more naive migrants from the physical and sexual abuse that has been reported as widespread among migrants working in such positions. The implementation of this age cap, however, is not universally effective.

22. They include the Migration of Employment Convention of 1949 (ILO Convention No. 97), the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention of 1975 (ILO Convention No. 143) and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and the Members of their Families, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1990.
(MWC). ILO Convention No. 97 (which came into force on 22 January 1952) has been ratified by 42 member states, while ILO Convention No. 143 (which came into force in 1978) has been ratified by only 18 member states. The work of NGOs and informal networks will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 6. For description of a case of how an Indonesian domestic in the UAE was rescued from being stoned to death by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights see Keane and McGeehan (2008).

4 Neoliberal Narratives: Migrant Self-Constructions and the Performance of Empowered Subjectivities

1. The characterisation of India as a “Dark” place is not new or unique to Adiga, and has been employed by sub-continental novelists since V.S. Naipul and Mulk Raj Anand.

2. For a discussion of the development of neoliberal subjectivities in the young professional Emirati population, see Kanna (2010: 106). He shows how in the space of Dubai – through state articulations aimed at local Emiratis – they begin to frame value in terms of “individual merit, entrepreneurialism, work ethic, and willingness to self-improve”. This, however, is perhaps applicable only to a small proportion of young Emiratis. Most desire highly paid civil service jobs and are reluctant to engage in private paid work. This is evidenced by the high levels of unemployment among locals, as discussed in Chapter 3. As opposed to neoliberal attitudes to international migration that other small and resource-poor states such as Singapore have undertaken (Ong 2006), Dubai does not encourage free-market competition for jobs and resources between locals and foreigners. Vora’s (2013) discussion of middle-class migrants in the UAE makes a parallel argument. Indians, through their economic affiliation with productive practices as business-owners and entrepreneurs, or as neoliberal consumers, conceive of themselves as “belonging” to the Emirati state.

3. In the context of the Gulf, Longva’s (1997; 1999) work stands out as one of the few academic studies that attempt to understand how the destination country system of governance impacts low-wage migrants. However, her work is limited to understanding migrants’ marginalised contexts, rather than the formation of low-wage subjectivities. Vora’s (2013) work also fits within this context, but the middle-class Indians in her sample have far more extensive, longer-term connections to Dubai.

4. Emasculation rather than demasculation is used here as it implies an active process of the deprivation of masculine markers of self rather than merely a lack.

5. Asian in this case is read as Indian, as they are the largest component of Asian men in the Gulf and UAE, by a large margin.

6. Abayas are long robe-like garments worn over other clothes by women. They are considered national dress in the UAE.

7. Hindi is only an optional third language in many state schools in Tamil Nadu, after Tamil and English. This preference is commonly attributed to the strong Dravidian sentiment in the state.

8. Other recent studies that deal with the importance of dignity at work include that by Hodson (2001) and Lamont (2000). They both develop frameworks
to understand dignity, looking at class and gendered aspects as well as how co-workers affect dignity in the workplace.

9. This is discussed in Chapter 5.

10. This implementation of strict routine corresponds to older conceptualisations of work where tasks are repetitive, work time is fixed and the trajectory of work life can be predicted. Low-wage migrants generally do not have access to the flexible economy of adaptable time schedules and continuous learning for which many white-collar workers are drawn to Dubai.

11. Somewhat ironically, low-wage migrants have access to an underground sex industry.

12. Middle-class workers in Dubai were more likely to emphasise the ease with which business and work is conducted in Dubai (as opposed to India) than a changed subjectivity or sense of self-worth: “You can access everything. There are no political problems here, there is no strife. That kind of headaches you don’t have. It is a good place for business – that is the main thing”. This was how relationships to the neoliberal discursive space of Dubai were often articulated.

13. This desire to narrate and perform masculinity in the migrant context (to both researchers and others) might be enhanced by migrant men’s absence from the home context and thus inability to perform patriarchy there, as Osella and Osella (2006b) point out.

14. The relationship between work and the shaping of subjectivities has been widely researched. However, much of this has been of work cultures in post-industrial Western societies (Beder 2000; Casey 1995; Strangleman and Warren 2008). The impact of migration and migrant work on working-class subjectivities in the Global South is less known.

15. Critics of Weber point out that consumption is missing from his discussion of the capitalist work ethic and that he focuses exclusively on the production aspect.

16. Khalaf (2010) describes how migrant camel trainers similarly never visit the city’s malls or shops, with their lives confined to the camel market. This was a strategy to avoid spending money as well as a result of the social distance they felt as low-wage migrants.

17. Chin (1997) reports how FDWs from Indonesia and the Philippines were also reluctant to tell their family and friends back home about their negative experiences in Malaysia. This is a “face-saving” measure, where a disclosure of hardship will affect social standing and status in the home community and the mirage of migration as a utopian solution will be spoiled.

18. Calling an Iranian an Arab is of course a misnomer. But among Indian low-wage workers, it was usual for Iranians to be lumped into the same category as others from the region.

19. Indian low-wage workers in Dubai in this way are compared to a stereotype of the inefficient and lazy labourer in an India that is also often typecast as backward and underdeveloped.

5 The Divided City: Gated Communities, Everyday Mobilities and Public Space

1. Emirati citizens also live in exclusive neighbourhoods, in villas with high walls, and interact predominantly with members of their own community.
Dresch (2005a: 10) suggests that, as opposed to the situation of domestic workers, this mode of “confinement of foreigners to camps or quarters attracts less attention, yet provides an obvious complement to citizens’ exclusivity. The modes of separation and control are effective, and...complement a history of what in fact is a growing social isolation”.

2. This blurring between public and private has historical precedents in Dubai. In the pre-oil era, merchants depended on sheikhs for protection in return for subsiding rulers. This model is one that is common through the Gulf (Hvidt 2007).

3. With Emaar, Dubai’s brand of neoliberal spatialisation practices is also transported abroad (refer to Chapter 2’s discussion of the dissemination of the Dubai brand through these developments). It is a part of the neoliberal modernity expansionism that is enabled through freewheeling capital that was available in the emirate, at least until the advent of the GFC.

4. The property sector in Dubai liberalised to allow foreign ownership from the mid- to late 1990s. This was in concert with other practices of neoliberal restructuring that the emirate undertook.


6. It is interesting here to note again how the mobile phone becomes the most important vehicle in transnational relationships (as highlighted in Chapter 4).

7. Eight lakhs are equivalent to 800,000 Indian rupees or about US$13,000 (based on an exchange rate of 1 Indian rupee to 0.016 US$).

8. Statistics compiled by the Consulate General of India in Dubai show that suicides rose more than three-fold between 2003 and 2008. As many as 75 per cent of these deaths were attributed to debts, 15 per cent to domestic strife and 10 per cent to job-related stress (Rajan, Varghese et al. 2010: 272–273).

9. As pointed out earlier, men who leave families in the home country and migrate to Dubai are considered “bachelors” by the state and in public discourse.

10. Post-GFC, the situation altered temporarily, with rents falling by more than 50 per cent. However, the informal spatial economy still thrives, and real-estate prices have risen again.

11. For a more sustained discussion of the significance of the informal sector, refer to Chapter 3.

12. This policing of moralities is highly selective. While displays of public intimacy are frowned upon in Dubai’s malls, overt solicitations by sex workers in hotels and bars are frequently overlooked.

6 Social Networks: Informal Solidarities and an Ethic of “Care”

1. This articulation of urban informality has overlaps with Burkitt’s conceptualisation of unofficial practices of everyday life. These social relations, being
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less codified and institutionalised, are “more resistant and provide the basis for opposition and social movements” (Burkitt 2004: 211).

2. It is important here to distinguish this conceptualisation from that in other academic literature that deals with “care” in the context of the provision of health care or care for the elderly and disadvantaged.

3. Ironically, perhaps, Dubai and its ruler Sheikh Mohammed, perform “care” outside the emirate’s borders. For example, the annual “Dubai Cares” campaign, targeted to fit in with the Muslim month of Eid, donates millions of dirhams each year to charities in the developing world.

4. Khalaf (2010) describes the self-segregation of groups according to nationality within the context of a camel market in Dubai – a microcosm of divisions in the city-state.

5. Diyya is paid to the victim’s family according to Sharia law upheld in the UAE. It only needs to be paid by the perpetrator if he or she is found guilty or legally responsible for the death. However, the victim’s family need not sue for the diyya. Payment is automatically assumed as a penalty.

6. Dubai has one of the highest traffic fatality rates in the world (Bener and Crundall 2005).

7. Chapter 3 provided an example of how an activist/social worker attempted to inform the Indian embassy about the inadequacies of its helpdesk.

8. Here we can see parallels with paternalism in the provision of international aid by Western developed nations, especially to former colonies. This literature examines how aid is often contingent on certain conditions rather than in relation to the needs, opportunities and capacity of the recipient society. See Baaz (2005), Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen (2003) or Lancaster (2007).

9. This theme of the “good migrant” was brought up in Chapter 4 discussion of middle-class migrants’ encouragement of a neoliberal ethics of self-discipline. It was also highlighted in Chapter 5’s discussion of the conditional aid of NGOs in relation to spatial practices in labour camps, and surveillance of migrants by their peers.

10. This is also true of local associations with Emirati membership.

11. Women are typically seen to develop more local informal networks than men, as they are more likely to be confined to the home and neighbourhood, which facilitates the formation of such bonds (Moore 1990). This research shows that men placed in similar physically limited situations, develop analogous networks.

12. Similar practices of aid and exploitation have also been documented in the case of rural to urban migrants in Nairobi (Lyons and Snoxell 2005).

13. Employers with wasita were typically local Emiratis from merchant families or who had connections to the royal family.

14. It was in 2008 the only Telegu-language radio station in the entire GCC region, and served a Telegu speaking population of about 400,000 in the UAE. After Keralites, they are the second largest migrant population to originate from one Indian state. They are also predominantly low-wage migrants.

15. This was prior to the opening of the Dubai metro.

16. Frantz, writing in the context of domestic workers in Jordan, similarly observes that “it appeared that while friendships occasionally developed
between domestic workers of different nationalities, such alliances were rare” (2008: 626).

17. Another factor to consider here is the role of communications technologies in facilitating these random and spontaneous acts of help. Mobile phones here act as “intermediaries of care” (Amin 2009). Random dialling of mobile phone numbers, on the off-chance that a person who picks up the phone speaks a common language and is willing to help, is another strategy employed by distressed FDWs and trafficked women looking to escape.

18. Hage (2003: 25) argues that it is certain material and symbolic social conditions internalised by individuals that “activate their conatic hopefulness and allow it to flourish”. 
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