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The Dubai that I lived in did not look like the Dubai you think you know. Quite unlike the glitzy towers lining the main thoroughfare – Sheikh Zayed Road – that have come to be among the ubiquitous markers of the emirate, the bland tower block I lived in was one of a series surrounded by unpaved desert. One of my neighbours was a Human Resources manager for the Rotana Hotel, which was about to open next door to our building in one of the rapidly developing parts of the emirate. Himself a migrant from Lebanon, he was tasked with recruiting staff for the hotel. When he found out that I was conducting research on the emirate and its migrant population, he offered to give me a tour of the soon-to-be-opened hotel premises. One balmy afternoon, we walked in through the grand glass doors into a lush, air-conditioned lobby. It was decorated in shades of gold and brown with beautiful murals on the walls and glamorous lighting. Besides the fact that it was completely devoid of guests, and the remaining construction workers were making last-minute repairs, it looked like the lobby of any other large chain hotel. The rooms, restaurants and bar were eerily empty, and similarly characterised by a predictable luxury. As we walked through, my neighbour described the wealthy international clientele of businessmen and tourists who were expected to pass through its high-ceilinged halls.

The scene downstairs, though, was a striking contrast. It was teeming with activity, with a diverse range of men and women, of a range of ethnicities, colours and mannerisms; it was as if I had stepped into an alternate dimension. Various accents and languages swirled around me, as did a steady stream of busy people. This space, in contrast to the opulence above, was starkly lit with florescent tubes, and utilitarian. Schedules and reminders were tacked onto notice boards, the entire atmosphere charged with efficiency and energy. This was where the staff

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of the hotel worked, my neighbour explained, where the laundry was washed and clothes ironed. Here was where all the invisible processes of maintenance took place, in order for the hotel to function smoothly every day. Walking through the plain white corridors, we reached the canteen, where meals were provided for hotel staff. There was a variety of food to choose from – salads, curries and mezes of humous and tzatziki. On hard plastic chairs sat groups of people eating and talking. The Filipinos, mostly waiters and butlers, clustered together. The Indians who worked as cleaners and bar staff also ate as a group. A group of Arab men, who were mostly administrators or occupied managerial positions like my neighbour, were another distinct set. They waved us over. As I sat down, I anticipated what was invariably the first question in an encounter between strangers in Dubai, “Where are you from?”

Why Dubai?

This book examines the interacting processes of international labour migration and the construction of a post-colonial city-state within the context of neoliberal development. Here, Dubai’s mode of neoliberal globalisation acts as a frame through which low-wage migrants’ experiences are interrogated. Seen this way, Dubai reflects similar processes that are taking place across the globe and, like the hotel described above, is not exceptional. Although the city-state has rapidly gained international fame (and notoriety), this is largely as a result of its enormously accelerated processes of economic and material development. The setting of the above vignette, a hotel, is one expression of the neoliberal economic restructuring that Dubai has undertaken. The proliferation of luxury hotels in the emirate is indicative of the shift away from oil towards an economy based on new industries of hospitality, tourism, real estate and finance. The Rotana chain, of which the hotel is a part, was initiated by, and is owned by, Arab investors, an example of the regional capital that has been invested in Dubai, especially post-9/11, and the withdrawal of American investors to the Gulf. Also obvious from the vignette above is Dubai’s unusually high dependence on migrant labour. As is reflected in the hotel’s workforce of diverse nationalities, 90 per cent of the emirate’s residents are international migrants, most of whom are low-waged workers employed in the construction and hospitality sectors.

Dubai is a place where the dual processes of neoliberal development of the city-state and international migration are rapid, intense and highly visible. In this way, Dubai as a case study encapsulates themes of global
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resonance. However, this does not imply that it does not have peculiarities. The unique ways in which the emirate has combined neoliberal development with an Arab autocracy generates important consequences that this work explores. This book speaks to calls for more localised and differentiated understandings of neoliberal development, and brings together discussions of globalisation and labour migration in the context of the Global South, an as-yet understudied area of immense significance.1

Understanding Dubai’s present mode of development and labour migration requires first an appreciation of its geopolitical and historiographic context, which is detailed in the next section. In highlighting the significance of migrant workers in the construction of the modern emirate, the following sections describe how these groups have been systematically excluded from mainstream narratives of development, and then chart the changing trends of labour migration to the region and more specifically to Dubai. Finally, this introductory chapter ends with a short summary of the ways in which the book is framed within, and contributes to, key literatures, a discussion of the methodology employed in conducting this research and an outline of the following chapters of the book.

Defining the boundaries of the city-state

Dubai is one of seven emirates within the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – a federation of Arab states formed in 1971. It is flanked on either side by the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Sharjah and occupies part of the Arabian Desert. Discussing Dubai as a discrete entity is complicated. Although it does claim a unique history, geographically and politically it is difficult to divorce from the larger Gulf region and the federation of the UAE.2

It is partially a problem of geography, as the borders of the emirate were somewhat arbitrarily determined. Even today, driving through the UAE, it is difficult to tell where Dubai stops and neighbouring emirates of Sharjah or Abu Dhabi begin. Given the cheaper rents and lower cost of living in other emirates, many migrants (and especially lower-waged migrants) reside in neighbouring Sharjah and commute daily to Dubai for jobs.3 Migrants housed in labour camps in Dubai often also work in other emirates.

Discussing Dubai as a separate entity goes beyond the issue of physical boundaries. Many significant political decisions are taken at the federal level of the UAE and not by the individual emirate. Foreign policy,
for example, is under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The federal Supreme Council that is responsible for passing policies and the day-to-day running of the federation is controlled largely by Abu Dhabi, which has the largest number of members on the council (Davidson 2009: 237). Dubai’s ability to structure its own policies is limited and it is still subject to the authority of the federation in matters of defence, immigration and border control, amongst others. The 2008 economic crisis, for example, highlighted the extent to which the economies of separate emirates are intertwined. The rescue of Dubai’s debt by Abu Dhabi demonstrated that the political and economic stability of the federation is seen holistically, rather than as the responsibility of separate emirates. Similarly, Dubai’s deference to its neighbour and the ethic of solidarity amongst the emirates can be read in Dubai’s decision to rename the tallest building in the world Burj Khalifa, after the ruler of Abu Dhabi. (It was previously self-referentially named Burj Dubai.) The initial policy decisions by Dubai that created a speculative property bubble are, however, indicative of its independence in making strategic economic choices and shaping its industrial base. Economically, Dubai’s foundation has traditionally been trade, and is increasingly based in the industries of tourism, finance and real estate. This again differentiates it from Abu Dhabi, which relies primarily on the sale of oil, and the smaller emirates, which are dependent on federal funds.

Although it is a separate emirate, it is thus highly problematic to speak of Dubai as an autonomous state. However, in the creation of a unique global cultural identity, Dubai has been very successful in branding and distinguishing itself. In popular and media discourses, it is in fact a far better known entity than the UAE. The city-state has been extremely skilled in exploiting the cultural sphere in creating and shaping an image attractive and amenable to global consumption. Culture has thus become a resource in the globalisation project; a means of ideological dissemination and economic expansionism (Yudice 2003: 9). Dubai’s cultural identity marks itself out as different to the other emirates and disassociates itself from the larger UAE. It is on this basis that the city-state of Dubai is interrogated as a separate and unique unit in this book.

Historical background

In acknowledging that sociology is often criticised for being ahistorical, this book sees the need for a long-term perspective to help in understanding the rapidity and scale of change that Dubai has experienced in recent years. The following section places Dubai’s liberalisation and
restructuring within longer trajectories of globalisation and migration that have taken place in the emirate and within the region.

Early globalisation and foreign influence

The mobilities of people, goods and capital on which Dubai’s recent growth has been built have pre-colonial roots. Because of its location between Europe, Africa and Asia, Dubai has for centuries been a trading post, and was initially part of traditional Oman, records of which date back to 2000 BC and mention trading activities in “Magan” as the UAE was then known (Elsheshtawy 2004: 173). This advantageous geopolitical positioning is arguably also the basis for Dubai’s continuing prosperity today. The industries of trade, travel and finance on which it has built its recent economic success are heavily hedged on the fact that Dubai is placed between popular international trade and travel routes and the time zones of major financial markets.

Dubai’s reputation as a centre for trade attracted not only Portuguese colonisers and transnational merchant families (Onley 2007), but also tribes from neighbouring Persia and what is now Saudi Arabia. These were the Qawasim and Bani Yas respectively. The former established control over much of what is now a significant area of the UAE, a move that the British and Ottomans came to see as a threat to their dominance of the control of trade routes in the Gulf. As a result of a British attack on, and subsequent defeat of, the Qawasim tribe in 1819, colonial rule was established in the region (Elsheshtawy 2004: 173). The main purpose of the British in asserting dominance in the region was to secure the trade route to India, thus allowing their ships passage without having to pay navigational taxes. The need for actual physical occupation, with all the responsibilities it entailed, was deemed unnecessary (Elsheshtawy 2004, Pacione 2005). Instead, treaties were negotiated with the tribal leaders or sheikhs of the Bani Yas, who now form the “indigenous” core of UAE citizenry (Zahlan 1989). This negotiation was made easier by the fact that there was no unifying state entity or “functioning civil urban society” to contend with (Elsheshtawy 2004: 174). Inhabitants of the area were largely nomadic Bedouin, with little conception of private ownership of land. British intervention is especially significant with regard to the subsequent geographical demarcation of the region, as it laid the groundwork for the initial structure of individual emirates that became unified as the UAE in 1971, after the end of British rule. The signing of the treaties also structured the social hierarchy of individual emirates. By designating the mercantile and trade families as the treaty signatories, they and their descendents were selected as de facto rulers.
This power base, legitimised by the British, forms the basis of the hierarchical relationships that dominate the UAE’s government and society today. The colonial British presence also meant, however, that the UAE stayed largely outside of conflicts in the region, as the British dealt with all foreign affairs matters. This close and dependent relationship with a colonial power continues today, with the UAE sharing strong ties with the United States of America (USA), which has maintained military bases in the country for many years.

**Early links with India**

In charting Dubai’s historic links with India, this section puts into perspective the phenomenon of Indian migration to the UAE. Understanding the unique connection that these two countries share also provides a basis on which to understand the relationship between the Dubai’s largest ethnic group, Indians and the citizens, Emiratis.

While the boom of Indian migration to the Gulf occurred during the 1970s, economic migration from South Asia has roots going back at least to the British colonial era. During this period, the trade routes between India and Dubai were secured, solidifying the economic relationship between the two states, both of which were under British jurisdiction. It is significant here to note that even in the early twentieth century, when the population of Dubai was a mere 10,000, there were already Indian merchants settled in the urban area amongst Persian and other businessmen (Pacione 2005). This also suggests that a dependence on a transnational population in the commercial sector is part of Dubai’s historical legacy and a result of both the relatively small size of its indigenous population and its geopolitical location. Here it is also important to note that it is Dubai, where the port was located, rather than to the UAE as a territory that initial links were established. Dubai’s links with India are further evidenced by the fact that in the early decades of the twentieth century, Dubai was the key entrepôt centre for goods from India, which were then re-exported to Persia and neighbouring states. This was in part due to the imposition of trade tariffs by the government of Persia, which resulted in the movement not just of Indian trade, but also of merchants, craftsmen and their families to Dubai, where the economic climate was perceived to be more liberal. “The growing regional economic importance of Dubai was reinforced in 1904 with the introduction of a regular steamship service to Bombay” (Pacione 2005: 256). Indian currency and stamps were used within the British-administered Gulf and early Indian influences can be seen in the use
of many Urdu words in the Arabic dialects of the coastal areas (Zahlan 1989: 13). In addition, tight British control in terms of foreign policy and immigration matters, meant that

the people of the Gulf, including Dubai, were cut off from the rest of the world except India. They had little to do with fellow Arabs until the advent of oil, with the exception of a tiny group of Egyptian, Lebanese and Palestinian schoolteachers in Kuwait and Bahrain. (Zahlan 1989: 14)

This early Indian influence is still apparent in everyday life in Dubai; many older Emiratis speak Urdu fluently and have spouses from India. However, the privileged place that Indians occupied in Emirati society was lost with the shift to oil economies and the waves of low-wage labourers who came to service the development that oil enabled. The shift in allegiance towards the UAE’s Arab “brothers” was quick after the discovery of oil deposits, leaving relations with India in “second place” (Zahlan 1989: 19). A range of factors could have led to this shift, including the rise of pan-Arabism promoted by President Nasser of Egypt and the need to protect territorial interests and formal citizenship – elements of sovereign power that took on a new significance with the discovery of oil. The push for maintaining a distinctly Arab Gulf can be seen in recent “Emiratisation” and “Arabisation” campaigns by various state governments aiming to reduce reliance on foreign (but mainly South Asian) labour and increase recruitment from within the region. The early Indian influence in Dubai is, however, still visible today along the banks of the Dubai Creek, where the souks (markets) house the shops of many Indian merchants, and the dhows that ply the river carry predominantly South Asian migrants. The two areas flanking the creek, Deira and Bur Dubai, are home to a Hindu temple and many Indian shops and restaurants. It is also where many low-waged South Asian migrants live. It is significant then, that in popular tourist imagery, it is the area around the creek that is often portrayed as distinctive to Dubai, and the heart of the old city. It is, in fact, an area of the city-state that is largely populated by South Asians.

Dubai prior to oil

Much of the history of Dubai has been closely intertwined with that of Abu Dhabi and the larger UAE. However, in many respects, Dubai has carved out a global reputation of its own; its recent development as a
modern city-state can be charted independently, and is largely of its own making. A significant point in the development of Dubai as a separate entity occurred in 1833, when a section of the Bani Yas tribe broke away from the majority in Abu Dhabi and asserted themselves as rulers of Dubai. This group of about 800 effectively doubled the reported population of the settlement at that time (Elsheshtawy 2004: 174). A member of the Al Maktoum family ruled this community and all subsequent leaders of Dubai have been descendants of this family, including the present leader of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. This position, gained by force, means that Dubai has had to negotiate carefully its position between Abu Dhabi, ruled by the Bani Yas, from which it broke away, and Sharjah, governed by the Qawasim, which it usurped. Elements of this old rivalry still exist today in the way each emirate holds on to a distinctive cultural identity in attempts to differentiate itself from its neighbours. Sharjah, for instance, has chosen to emphasise its Arab and Islamic cultural heritage through the construction of numerous museums, in contrast to Dubai’s focus on tourism through the development of hotels and theme parks. These divergent interests have also sometimes initiated laden discourses of morality and cultural appropriateness between the different emirates. The formation of the federated UAE however, has on the whole united interests and strengthened solidarity.

The initial physical development of Dubai as an independent emirate was slow. In 1955 the urban area was 3.2 square kilometres, most homes were still built from palm fronds and drinking water was available only from four public wells (Pacione 2005: 6). This state of under-development can be attributed partially to the relative neglect of the British administrators, as they did not introduce much-needed socio-economic reforms as part of the policy of non-interference that they adopted in the Gulf. This lack of urban infrastructure or services puts into perspective the rapidity of Dubai’s development into the highly urbanised city that it is today. Much of the impetus for this development can be attributed to the ruling Al Maktoum family’s enterprising nature. Their part in sustaining the liberal attitude towards commerce that has been a hallmark of Dubai’s continued success as a trading post is also significant. Evidence of this can be seen in the establishment of the first Chamber of Commerce in the (now) UAE in 1965, the building of an international airport, the evolution of a modern banking system and the construction of the largest dry dock in the world at Jebel Ali (Zahlan 1989: 96). Much of this infrastructure building was enabled through revenue generated from the sale of oil, deposits of which were discovered in 1966. More
recently, however, with oil accounting for less than 3 per cent of Dubai’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Al Maktoum 2008), development has been financed through tourism, trade and foreign capital investment in real-estate projects.

This rapid growth in infrastructure was also due to the necessity to keep up with an expanding population. The UAE’s population increased by almost 40 times in less than half a century, primarily because of oil-fuelled migration. The biggest leap was between 1970 and 1980, when the population grew from 223,000 to more than one million, an average annual growth of 16.4 per cent (Kapiszewski 1999: 45–8). Dubai’s small indigenous population necessitated this reliance on foreign labour for its development. This is still the case, with just one in ten residents in the UAE being a national. This dependence on migrants is now built into the system of employment in the UAE, discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

In sum, we can ascertain the interplay of three interlinked factors in the early development of Dubai as a city-state. First, its strategic geopolitical location. This has undoubtedly been the predominant element that has shaped not just the early success of Dubai as a trading post, but also its continued importance today as an entrepôt point between Asia, Africa and Europe. Dubai today carries on its historical legacy enabling the movement of goods and people through trade and labour migration. Expanding its reputation, the emirate is also facilitating new mobilities of peoples and capital. This is most evident through the establishment of Dubai as a regional hub for tourism, as well as through initiatives that will secure its position as the primary financial, media and health centre in the Middle East. This can be seen most clearly in the construction of various free zones such as the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Media City, Healthcare City and Knowledge City, all attempts to draw international companies and capital to the emirate.

The second factor that has had a significant impact on Dubai’s development is its involvement with British colonial powers. Its relationship with Britain served to protect Dubai from invasion and potential occupation by the Ottoman Empire and other colonial powers intent on securing access to a profitable trade route. The British presence in the region also ensured that India’s links with Dubai were strengthened by virtue of them both being colonies of the Crown, and for a period of time, both being administered by the British Government of India (Zahlan 1989: 10). This unique relationship facilitated close cultural links and the movement of migrant traders. Today’s exodus of large numbers of migrant workers from South Asia into Dubai can thus be
seen within the context of the movement of peoples and goods between these two regions over centuries.

The third and final factor that has had a large influence on the mode of Dubai’s modernisation is the system of governance that was put in place with foreign rule. As alluded to before, the present structure of the UAE, with its division into separate emirates, is a direct outcome of the signing of General Treaties of Peace by the ruling Sheikhs of tribes who inhabited the then Trucial States. This, in effect, cemented their authority as independent rulers (Zahlan 1989: 8). With moral and political support from the British during the period in which the emirates were under colonial rule, the position of the sheikh of each emirate as leader was cemented – not as head merely of the tribe, but also of a political and territorial unit. The signing of treaties granting oil concessions to British companies only also institutionalised the power of the sheikh – he signed the treaties and was personally responsible for the implementation of all their clauses (Zahlan 1989: 19). This, in turn, formalised the relationship between rulers and their tribes, who had become citizens of the newly created states. The system of reciprocity between sheikhs and their subjects has developed into the current system of welfare and benefits that are guaranteed only by virtue of citizenship, passed on through the paternal line. This exclusive definition of citizenship and the institution of a welfare state have also necessitated a large and long-term supply of migrant workers. Because of the national population’s reliance on high-paying government jobs, and the reluctance to grant citizenship to outsiders, much of Dubai’s development has been the result of migrant labour and knowledge. This is largely overlooked in analyses of Dubai’s history, as the next section demonstrates.

An elitist history: discounting migrant contributions

Jane Bristol-Rhys (2009), a historian of the UAE, visiting history sections of bookshops in Abu Dhabi, was struck by the Orientalist overtones in the literature, due to the numerous personal remembrances and photographic collections that celebrate the British as friends and allies in the UAE’s history. Bookshops in Dubai in the late 2000s presented another narrative. The large selection of pictorial collections of Dubai and personal narratives of social mobility all expressed the same themes of success and prosperity – embodied either in the visual spectacle of Dubai’s architecture or through photographs of Dubai’s (and the UAE’s) rulers of the preceding three decades.
In the plethora of coffee-table books and biographies, a recurrent and causal link is repeatedly emphasised – that Dubai’s (and the UAE’s) overwhelming success is due wholly to the vision, hard work and skill of its tribal leaders and ruling families. Bristol-Rhys (2009: 115) terms this discourse “Building Our Past”. It is one that is not just prominent in the popular literature of the UAE, but is also reflective of dominant Emirati understandings of a collective national past.

This is a narrative of building, of luxury, spacious homes, maids, summer travel in Europe. It is a narrative of unqualified success, no doubts, no misgivings and the promise of an even brighter future. This narration elevates Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid, the founding fathers, to extraordinary status; their like will never be seen again....Their names adorn city streets, ports, highways, housing development projects and universities. All that the nation has achieved is directly attributed to the wisdom of those two men, with Sheikh Zayed in the lead. (Bristol-Rhys 2009: 115–116)

In these narratives, Dubai’s leaders, from the Al Maktoum family, are portrayed as enterprising, capitalising on Dubai’s strategic position as a port. Their concern with maintaining an environment conducive to commercial enterprise is primary. Besides being important in the project of nation-building, this account is conveyed to a global audience in depictions of Dubai’s meteoric ascent onto the world stage. These discourses are not just embedded in books that tourists bring back but also in popular programmes such as 60 Minutes. They repeat these nationalist narratives of development and bring them into the present through the figure of Dubai’s current ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, as the single force behind the pace of development that Dubai has achieved (Krane 2009: 183–184). Sheikh Mohammed’s visibility in the global media because of his personal wealth also means that he has come to stand as a metaphor for Dubai. It is a position that he does not refute. Dubai has sought to differentiate itself from the success of neighbouring Abu Dhabi and the larger UAE through an emphasis on its trade links, initiatives like dredging the Dubai Creek and the construction of Port Rashid, which have paved the way towards non-dependence on oil revenues. Here, there is a subtle deviation from the overarching national narrative of development. It proudly maintains that Dubai and its leaders have actively created its success; it has required more than the luck of oil. It is a hard-fought-for achievement.
This narrative of nation-building attempts to be largely apolitical, not alluding to the various struggles within tribes over leadership or to the negotiations of the British presence in the region (Bristol-Rhys 2009: 108–109, 114–115). This depoliticisation of Dubai’s history is coherent with the emirate’s recent attempts to assert public dominance within the cultural sphere and refrain from displays of overt political ambition. The popular historical narrative forms a clear linearity from the pre-colonial past to the twenty-first century present, of a state interested only in economic growth, without any historical precedent of upsetting the status quo or challenging “Western” power.

What is missing from these depictions of Dubai’s development into a modern city-state is the contribution of migrants. From the early days of the emirate’s establishment as a trading post, foreign traders and migrant labourers played a pivotal role in Dubai’s development. Without the knowledge, skills and manpower that foreign workers have provided over decades, Dubai’s development trajectory would have looked very different. Besides passing references to the cosmopolitan nature of Dubai’s population, however, any real acknowledgement of migrants’ contributions is neglected. This omission of migrants from Dubai’s development narrative serves the exclusionary project of national identity construction, especially in a young state such as the UAE. It has, however, contributed to the formation of institutionalised hierarchies and everyday forms of racism in the emirate, as later chapters show.

**Trajectory of labour migration to Dubai**

An extended analysis of Dubai’s development after the discovery of oil deposits has been undertaken elsewhere (Abdullah 1978, Peck 1986, Davidson 2008, Krane 2009). Here, I will examine Dubai’s more recent history in relation to the role that the processes of labour migration have played in the construction of the modern emirate.

Dubai has had a long history of migration linked to trade and the settlement of trading families and merchants in the emirate (Onley 2007). These early links with Indian and Iranian traders are still very visible today. Many Emiratis are descended from Iranians who settled in the city-state in previous generations. “In the UAE, according to the first population census, which was conducted in 1968, foreigners constituted 36.5 per cent of the total population” (Winckler 1997: 481). This history of migration is an important part of the identity of the emirate, often cited in government-sponsored publications as the reason behind the tolerance of other cultures for which Dubai is
celebrated today (Masad 2008). Tourist advertisements of the emirate also depict it as a melting pot of peoples. Dubai is relatively tolerant of foreign cultures and practices – unusual in a region often portrayed as suspicious of Western (and other non-Arab) influences. With a traditionally small local population, the emirate has cultivated a need for imported knowledge as well as labour to sustain its position as a viable independent entity. Migration to Dubai has been, for decades, an integral part of its political and economic development, although this is not always readily recognised.

Widely known but rarely publicly acknowledged is Dubai’s history of slavery. Details of this practice are difficult to verify, as no official records exist. It is common knowledge in Dubai, however, that when the emirate was still economically dependent on pearl diving and fishing, slavery was widespread, with slaves coming mainly from the African continent. They, too (like the Iranians), were an early immigrant population who have now been naturalised since slavery was abolished in the 1950s. In the past, slaves dived for pearls for their masters and did the domestic work of cleaning and other menial chores (Krane 2009: 54–55). This cultivated dependence on a slave population has been suggested as one reason for Emiratis’ reluctance to take on unskilled jobs that involve manual labour. In this way, the current reliance on low-wage migrant labour for low-skilled work across the Gulf is interpreted as a continuation of practices of slavery (Kapiszewski 1999: 203). Local disdain of manual labour also suggests a basis for the discriminatory practices that are discussed later in the book, where certain types of work are devalued and an indication of low status. Most Emirati families today employ multiple “servants” for the home, including a domestic worker or two who cook and clean for the family, a driver and perhaps a gardener or handyman – a practice that has been derided by Sheikh Mohammed as overindulgent (Krane 2009: 187, Ali 2010: 169). The employment of domestic workers or “maids” has also been adopted widely by the middle-class expatriate population in Dubai and necessitates the large-scale migration of women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Sudan, India and Sri Lanka amongst others. The parallels with the dependence on a former slave population are difficult to disregard.7 Although the practice of keeping African slaves has been completely eradicated, and former slaves and their descendants now have full citizenship rights, structural exploitation of populations continues in the employment of cheap low-wage labour from India and other poor sending countries. The situation of debt bondage that many low-wage migrants in Dubai find themselves in is regarded as a
form of forced labour or slavery by international agencies including the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Beyond a reluctance to take on manual duties in the domestic sphere, Emiratis have also shown a disdain for undertaking physical labour even in the formal economy. The construction boom in Dubai and the majority of infrastructure-building in the emirate has thus been peopled entirely by migrant labourers, except in certain administrative duties and management positions. Young Emiratis finishing their education today expect to land government jobs with generous salaries, resulting in an inflated civil service. The inability to absorb ever more locals into civil-service jobs has propelled moves by the state to encourage more Emiratis to join the private sector – a strategy that has been largely unsuccessful, as they are generally unwilling to accept the lower remuneration that such jobs entail (Ali 2010: 166). Private-sector jobs are then almost always undertaken by migrants (Ruhs 2002). This preference for desk-bound, white-collar jobs has also engendered a widespread and unquestioned discriminatory attitude towards the people who do low-skilled work. This lower-status position ascribed to migrants in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs forms one vector of marginalisation in Dubai.

Post-oil-boom migration

With the discovery of oil deposits in 1966, Dubai’s leaders embarked on large-scale infrastructure-building, which included ports, schools and the provision of municipal facilities such as piped water and electricity. These initiatives were the first large-scale efforts to modernise. For a state that had practically no contemporary buildings, sewage system or roads, such a scale of infrastructural development envisioned by then Emir of Dubai, Sheikh Rashid, was a gargantuan task. It required not only large numbers of unskilled labourers, but also skilled people such as engineers, teachers and architects. With the small Emirati population largely uneducated, and with low rates of participation in the workforce, an initial reliance on foreign, skilled workers was necessary (Winckler 1997: 480). The need for low-skilled foreigners to do the most low-paid and undesirable jobs, as well as well-remunerated skilled ones, is sustained today through large infrastructure-building projects such as the World and Palm islands as well as numerous other real-estate projects. Newly acquired oil wealth also meant that nationals did not have to undertake jobs seen as undesirable; these could be outsourced to a migrant population who did not enjoy the same benefits of the welfare state. Here we see the initial emergence of a two-tiered labour system, with locals as business owners and government employees, and foreign workers as the
primary labouring class. This trend, where economic growth is often dependent on a migrant underclass, is typical of states that are industrialising (Gardner and Osella 2003: xi), but in Dubai has remained a characteristic of the economy even decades later.

Post-oil labour migration to the Gulf states peaked between 1975 and 1985, representing what is probably the largest increase in labour migration in the world. Migration contributed to rapid population growth in the Gulf states, which have traditionally had small populations. In the UAE as a whole, for example, the population grew by 190 per cent in ten years (Winckler 1997: 481). Although holding only temporary migration status, many skilled and semi-skilled migrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s have stayed on in Dubai for decades, raising families and building homes and careers in the emirate. Skilled labour migrants often live in Dubai for longer periods, and typically have a greater investment in the city in terms of owning multiple properties or children’s education. It is also common for this group to use migration to Dubai as a stepping-stone towards an eventual move to more attractive destination countries, such as Singapore, Canada or Australia. These states, with less restrictive labour regimes, allow for the possibility of permanent settlement and family reunification. In the case of low-wage migrants, more circular forms of mobility are common, with many returning to the home country for a few years between stints in the Gulf. The average length of stay for low-wage migrants is about six years, although it is common for migrants to work for much shorter or longer periods (Zachariah, Nair et al. 2001: 5).

In addition to being part of changing economic conditions, the large numbers of migrants in Dubai have had a sizable impact on the social and cultural life of the city. Migrant community organisations, places of worship, schools and restaurants specific to particular language groups or nationalities are common in Dubai. The city has thus emerged as an important space for the reproduction of transnational practices for many communities, and has taken on a significant place in the imaginary of the Indian diaspora in particular (Vora 2013). Despite the role that Dubai plays in the constructions of migrant identity, migrants do not feature in conceptualisations of Emirati identity. Although the city is regularly portrayed as wholly cosmopolitan space, there is no articulation of a multicultural or multiethnic national identity in the UAE. The nation is coherent only with a distinct Emirati identity and heritage (Khalaf 2000, Khalaf 2004). This exclusive construction is a deliberate strategy to emphasise and reiterate that all non-natives are temporary residents, “guest workers”, who will never completely belong.
Global restructuring

Dubai’s recent shift to the industries of finance, real estate and tourism (amongst others such as education and healthcare), have resulted in changing trends of migration to the emirate. Migrants with different skill sets and from a wider range of sending regions now come to Dubai compared to when large-scale migration to the emirate first commenced in the 1970s. The Gulf was then a less-established destination, and Dubai was regarded as more “foreign and distant”. Migration to the region was viewed with greater trepidation; the UAE and Gulf in general were not “well-known” places and channels of migration were not as established as they are today. Links between sending countries and the UAE were not as sophisticated as they are in the present in terms of remittance avenues, air routes and cheap phone connections. Migrant workers who first arrived in Dubai in the 1970s and 1980s describe the sense of alienation they felt for example, in being confronted on arrival by a city that was mostly desert and sand – a physical landscape most were completely unused to, coming as they did from tropical Asia and with its developed infrastructure. As expressed by a long-term Indian migrant, “At least today there are buildings here. When I first came, it was just sand and sand. I was really surprised. I thought India was a lot more developed that this!”

Today, low-wage migrants increasingly come to Dubai to work in the service and hospitality sectors as waiters, cleaners and drivers. The majority of them, however, service the construction sector as welders, crane operators, bricklayers or as “coolies” who take on a variety of manual jobs. The range of countries from which Dubai draws labour has diversified over the past four decades. Filipinos, Chinese and Koreans make up larger segments of the low-skilled and semi-skilled migrant groups than in previous years. This is partly through efforts by the government to encourage low-skilled migration from outside South Asia, particularly India. This move was a reaction to the widespread sentiment that the UAE was becoming overly dependent on migrants of one nationality – and a fear of this potential threat to the dominant position of Emiratis. Although the migrant population has diversified, Indians remain the largest group in both Dubai and the UAE as whole, outnumbering even locals seven to one (Krane 2009). The movement away from hiring Indians as low-wage labour is also linked to higher wage demands by Indian migrants – based on the weakening of the UAE dirham in relation to the Indian rupee and rising wage levels in India, even for semi-skilled work. Employers constantly on the lookout for
the cheapest source of unskilled labour have turned to other markets such as Bangladesh and China. Dubai-based companies have also started outsourcing their manufacturing and labour – opening up plants and factories in India and other developing states. Garment manufacturing, for example, which used to be a large industry in the UAE, is now in steady decline. Because of high operating costs, manufacturers have chosen to move factories to less expensive locations such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This outsourcing of high-cost industries has also caused a decreased demand for certain types of low-wage labour in Dubai. Rather than move to the Gulf where they have to be away from family, many potential migrants now choose to remain in their home countries and work in the same jobs for a small wage differential.

In comparison to the early decades of modernisation in the 1970s and 1980s, Dubai today draws many more skilled migrants – from architects and human-resource managers to financial consultants and venture capitalists – representing a wider range of occupations and nationalities than the early skilled migrants to Dubai. This is a reflection of the diversification of the emirate’s economy, as well as the opening up of various fields such as education and information technology (IT) to development and innovation. These industries draw migrants eager to make their mark and establish themselves in sectors that are in their infancy in Dubai but established in migrants’ home countries. The early professional migrants to Dubai were primarily British (due in large part to the region’s former status as a British protectorate), and came to manage the operations of the growing petroleum industry. Today, migrants from the United Kingdom (UK) still represent a large proportion of skilled migrants to the UAE. However, Indians, Americans and Lebanese also have sizable communities of middle-class expatriates in the emirates. This diversification is also indicative of Dubai’s increasing embeddedness within the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and larger Middle East. Dubai has now emerged as the preferred destination for young Arabs, preferable even to a posting in a Western developed nation (Slackman 2008b). For educated, middle-class and religiously moderate Lebanese, Egyptians and Iranians, Dubai represents a desirable mix of Islam and Westernisation, a version of globalisation that is unavailable or unacceptable in many of their home countries. Skilled migrants from outside the Arab states come to Dubai lured by the promise of tax-free salaries, year-round sunshine and a lifestyle that is not attainable in their countries of origin. Dubai’s sense of unexploited possibility and unique brand of modernity are primary reasons for its desirability as a destination.
Key contributions

This book, as an interdisciplinary text, is situated within the intersections of research on labour migration, contemporary urban studies and processes of globalisation and neoliberal development. In summary, it makes three main contributions towards these existing blocks of literature. First, it brings the ethnographic and everyday into studies of globalisation and neoliberalisation in the Gulf through the employment of what Burawoy (2000) labels “global ethnography”. This book responds to calls for studies on neoliberalisation that focus on “diverse engagements” rather than add to the already vast literature on “the global scale of the project and its adoption by powerful global institutions” (Stenning, Smith et al. 2008: 229). While studies focused on Dubai and the Gulf have generally been limited, existing analyses adopt either a macro-scale, political-economy perspective or read the city through architectural symbols and material culture. Through joining more embodied analyses, this research supplements understandings of Dubai and portrays it as a lived space, rather than one of unpeopled architectural monuments or only as an effect of global capital. In doing so, this book comprehends migrant employment and exploitation, in addition to larger economic forces, as markers of global cities of the “South”.

Second, this research addresses a gap in the literature on male low-wage migration experiences. The great majority of research on labour migration in the Gulf has focused on consequences of migration for the sending state and aspects of reintegration into the home village. This gives only one side of the picture of the migration process. In investigating labour migrants’ everyday lives in the host country, this research also contributes to the push for greater responsibility on the part of host nations in guaranteeing basic rights and ensuring social justice for migrant workers. In representing male migrants’ experiences in the context of the receiving country, this book provides a more rounded analysis than previous accounts focused on domestic workers’ experiences. In doing so, it represents an important contribution to the study of South-South migration.

Third, this book contributes significantly to the literature on both labour migration and global cities by broadening conceptualisations of the migrant worker. Low-wage migrants are typically portrayed merely as victims of forces of global capital and lacking significant forms of agency. This book demonstrates that they also display remarkable modes of human agency and empowerment. In doing so, important possibilities for challenge and resistance to unjust discrimination are left open.
A note on research methodology

It is widely acknowledged that the Gulf is a difficult place in which to do research (Al-Rasheed 2005, Hvidt 2007a). This has been attributed primarily to the closed nature of its governments, who have placed restrictions on ethnographic field research. There is also a lack of availability of information such as census data or accurate statistics on the numbers and percentage of foreigners. Kapiszewski, for example asserts that “the official figures often leave out the large numbers of illegal workers living in the GCC countries and do not deal successfully with the problem of who should be counted as national and who should not” (1999: 37). Information in newspapers and other popular media is also potentially unreliable as most media is state monitored or owned. However, information from mainstream media sources is often the only data available on subjects such as the underground alcohol and sex industry. In particular, ethnographic research in the Gulf region has been limited due to the difficulty of obtaining permissions and visas to conduct fieldwork. This situation is improving, however, with greater global integration of the region, increasing foreign influences and the resultant opening up to more critical analyses. In recent years, these have not just been from the academic sphere, but by journalists, artists and the film community. However, a reluctance to accept criticism remains. Gulf governments are, for example, extremely sensitive to negative portrayals of their treatment of foreign workers. Access for researchers and media to such populations is thus limited and monitored. As a state attempting to align itself with other global cities, Dubai is particularly wary of unflattering representations.

The importance of identity in Dubai was alluded to in the vignette that opened this introduction. The attempt to “place” or locate a stranger within the multiple social frames of ethnicity, nationality, class and gender is commonplace in interactions everywhere. However, this is heightened in a highly stratified space like Dubai, as this book argues. Because of the salience of social markers as immediate vectors along which persons are defined, my identity as a female researcher of South Asian ethnicity shaped the type of ethnographic research that I was able to carry out. This is important to the methodology of the book as my positionality and perceived identity enabled but also restricted access to informants and information. This discussion of positionality is also important to the interpretive paradigm that this book adopts – the researcher and object of research are linked and shape each other.
Negotiating gender, class and ethnicity

Even the presence of a woman in an area that is coded as male is suspect. “The concept of an upper-class Indian woman walking around a factory and conversing with workers... went against the grain of the social and cultural norms that define caste, class and gender. As the general manager said to me on my first day, “you can do it but it is not appropriate for you”. (Fernandez 1997: 21; see also Sen 1999)

Occupying public spaces, working, earning and spending all come out as strongly masculine activities. (Osella and Osella 2006: 14)

Throughout much of the ethnographic research for this book, I embedded myself and observed activities in what would have been coded predominantly or strictly male spaces, similar to the South Asian social world described in the above quote. They included labour camps for men, male leisure spaces such as the street or coffee shops and restaurants. I was also regularly present in male-dominated events such as migrant group committee meetings and the activities of local humanitarian organisations. My presence as an ethnic South Asian, middle-class woman in these circumstances was impossible to ignore and had to be explained.

In most male working-class environments, my presence as a researcher and co-ethnic was welcomed. Both low-wage migrant men and women were incredibly forthcoming with narratives and stories of migration. The overwhelming desire was for their experiences to be documented, and their eagerness to share their biographies and narratives came from a position of marginality, where low-wage migrant lives are frequently deemed unimportant. Both male and female low-wage migrants also regularly emphasised their position as structural victims, and conveyed a reflexivity and self-consciousness of constructions of identity.

In middle-class male environments, in contrast, my presence as young and female was seen almost as a transgression. In Dubai, young middle-class South Asian women were accompanied by either husbands or male relatives who also came as migrants. Single young women were often perceived as needing the protection or guardianship of a male relative, especially in a place perceived as licentious, such as Dubai. As a single, unmarried South Asian woman, my presence was often read as suspect and my motives questioned. In cases where I was at first viewed with suspicion, repeated involvement enabled me to “break in” to the group. I was often then treated as an honorary male member. Gender, in these circumstances, served as an initial barrier despite shared class and ethnicity. In both working-class and middle-class circumstances, I was
read as Indian or broadly South Asian. Despite representing myself as Singaporean, the visibility of my ethnicity foregrounded ethnic identity over national and other modes of affinity. Shared ethnicity and language functioned as an enabler in building relationships of trust with South Asian migrants of both genders.

Data collection

Data was gathered through a method of bricolage, in which each method is valued as equally productive (Denizen and Lincoln 2004). This combination of methods facilitated dealing with a research site in which access to certain types of information was difficult. Each chapter of the book draws on a variety of primary and secondary data sources that together generate an overall theme and argument. Most of the primary data collection was undertaken in 2008. This was just prior to the onset of the global financial crisis, when Dubai’s economic fortunes were at their peak. The task of ethnography in researching migrant experiences in Dubai was “the unravelling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?” (Appadurai 1996: 52). Informed by similar perspectives of tying together the local and global from Burawoy (2000), particular attention was paid to how processes of neoliberal development played out socially and spatially in the everyday – defined as “the recurrent and seemingly unchanging features of the social life of ordinary individuals” (Velayutham 2009: 261).

A significant proportion of this fieldwork component consisted of time spent with a Dubai-based humanitarian organisation. This association facilitated access to many low-wage migrants and provided the opportunity to develop on-the-ground understandings of how migrant welfare is dealt with by non-state actors. Working with an organisation that dealt daily with complex welfare issues related to low-wage migrants aided in the negotiation of ethical dilemmas while conducting fieldwork. I was quickly made aware, for example, of the legal and material limits of my ability to assist runaway domestic workers. My own precarious position as a non-citizen and researcher determined the extent of my ability to intervene and participate in such situations. Contact with migrants was also established through various hometown associations, which facilitated access to middle-class migrants and entrepreneurs. A small sample of low-wage male migrants were also given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of parts of their everyday lives that they wanted to document. These augmented understandings of everyday experiences of low-wage migrants that were initially developed through interviews and observation.
In addition to ethnographic observations, a total of 60 in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with both low-wage and (broadly defined) middle-class migrants. Low-wage migrants are characterised as those who do not earn above the minimum wage required to bring family members to Dubai as dependents. They were typically engaged in low-paid jobs in the construction and service sectors. They were predominantly of South Asian origin. The majority were from South India and were male low-wage workers. All interviewees were migrants and 18–65 years old. Interviews were conducted in English, Tamil, Malayalam, or a mixture of the three. Interviewees were recruited primarily through networks established via migrant groups and the placement of advertisements in locations where low-wage migrants lived. The snowballing method was subsequently applied. Two focus groups (consisting of 6–12 persons) in labour camps amongst male Indian low-wage migrants and one focus group amongst female low-wage migrants in a garment factory were also conducted. Contact was maintained with key informants after the initial period of fieldwork.

A visual database of photographs taken during the period of field research was also kept. Visually exploring and representing Dubai is an important component of the research, as it is a space where change is noticeably marked on the physical landscape. Socio-economic polarisations can also be charted through the material landscape of Dubai. A database of international news reports on Dubai from September 2007 to December 2010 was also kept and utilised as a resource for data about the emirate. This form of data collection was especially useful after the initial fieldwork period, when the effects of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) were being acutely felt in Dubai, but where the researcher could not be physically present. This database complemented the gathering of information through print media such as magazines and newspapers.

Finally, a range of blogs about Dubai were analysed. These were typically maintained by middle-class expatriates in Dubai or Emirati nationals. These blogs particularly informed ideas around how Dubai is represented and were also spaces where migrants could publicly and anonymously express thoughts about living in the emirate, with little censure. Dubai-based blogs are thus seen as an active and democratic civil-society space in the absence of a parallel entity outside the virtual world. The data gathered from this mixture of methods was coded for recurrent and dominant patterns. The themes that emerged form the basis of the following chapters of the book and are detailed in the next section.
Chapter summaries

This last section of the introduction provides a summary of the following chapters as a lead-in to the rest of the book. In concert with the more political aims of this research, the division of chapters reflects both an acknowledgement of the agency of (marginalised) migrants as well as their relative lack of power within migrant contexts. Chapters 3 and 5 emphasise the salience of the structures within which much exploitation of migrants takes place, while Chapters 4 and 6 show how possibilities for empowerment and challenges to marginalising institutions exist. The way in which technologies of neoliberal development are variously embedded in discourses (Chapter 2), state structures (Chapter 3), bodies (Chapter 4) and the urban environment (Chapter 5) is one of the key conceptual threads that is woven through the book. Chapter 6, in contrast, shows how informal social networks function outside such neoliberal logics. This mode of dealing with frames or “fragments” acknowledges the impossibility of a totalising narrative.

Chapter 2: Dubai as Metaphor deals with discursive constructions of Dubai. It dissects the dominant ways in which Dubai has been represented, in both popular and migrant discourses. The chapter examines how a neoliberal development rhetoric is actively embraced by the state and performed in ways in which a desirable image is strategically crafted for a global audience. Dubai’s attempts to mould itself into a global city such as London or New York are discussed through its attempts to draw international capital and labour. Migrants are drawn to Dubai largely because of its significations of a mode of post-colonial, non-Western modernity. The chapter also demonstrates that the city’s aggressive development, evidenced in the built environment, can be read as a form of cultural expansionism. Finally, the chapter shows how Dubai’s meteoric rise and fall (post-2008 global financial crisis) on the world stage has been seized on by commentators as a cautionary tale against the excesses of greed and megalomania. By functioning as a symbol for such diverse discourses, Dubai has evolved into a metaphor for themes of global resonance.

Chapter 3: Migrants and the State examines migrants’ relationships with both receiving and sending states. It unpacks legal, political and everyday discriminatory frameworks in Dubai and how they are inscribed on low-wage migrants. Through detailed and moving ethnographic accounts, the chapter demonstrates how migrants in Dubai are stratified along multiple intersecting lines of race, class, nationality, gender and immigration status. The real consequences of these divisions to migrant workers
in terms of abuse and denial of rights are brought to light. This chapter also provides a more balanced account of the structural inequality that characterises the lives of low-wage migrants in Dubai. While most popular and academic accounts attribute the situation of exploitation of low-wage migrants to the lack of enforcement and care by the government of the UAE, as well as the lack of political pressure from the international community and rights organisations, they neglect to take into account the role of the sending state. This chapter gives a more rounded account by exploring the role of middlemen agents and embassies, as well as the need for a more transnational conceptualisation of rights, in order to deal with the problem of low-wage migrant exploitation. In the context of global neoliberal restructuring, this chapter calls for more international governance mechanisms to ensure low-wage migrant rights are protected.

Chapter 4: Neoliberal Narratives examines low-wage migrants’ constructions of masculinity, femininity and empowered selves, a reaction to their marginalised situations and the possibilities for reinvention that Dubai represents. Through analysis of regular routines, discriminatory practices and enforced discipline, the everyday infantilisation and emasculation of low-wage migrants by employers is extensively discussed. Simultaneously, this chapter shows that migrants’ subjectivities are shaped by immersion into a space of modernity and neoliberal rationality. This chapter focuses, in particular, on the ways in which these altered conceptions of self are incorporated into ways of dealing with difficult and exploitative migrant life in Dubai. These new ways of governing the self, learned by low-wage migrants, are encouraged by employers, charity workers and middle-class migrants. This chapter thus charts the creation of low-wage migrant narratives of self that subtly challenge employers’ and the state’s constructions of them as disposable, dangerous and as having no other need except to accumulate capital. The neoliberal ideology that constructs them merely as workers is thus re-appropriated in empowering ways.

Chapter 5: The Divided City uses the built environment and everyday mobilities in the city to analyse inequalities in the emirate. It understands how space and movement in the city reflect, reify and create divisions, through the exclusion of certain groups deemed undesirable. The chapter examines how these practices are sustained through state-led neoliberal actions, which result, for example, in the building of gated developments. The chapter examines two different types of gated community: a middle-class luxury development and a labour camp. They are both dominant residential forms in Dubai and are a prominent
feature of the everyday lives of migrants. The consequences for low-wage migrants of living in such spaces, such as alcoholism and depression, are discussed. It is not just in living arrangements, however, but also in movements around the city that migrants are segregated. The unintended consequences of this socio-spatial polarisation and control of space in terms of the informal practices that migrants develop are also interrogated. Finally, the shopping mall, the most important leisure space in Dubai, is examined as a public space that encapsulates and embodies hierarchies of everyday life in the emirate.

Chapter 6: Social Networks examines informal social networks amongst migrants in Dubai. A theoretical framework of informality is used to understand the social networks that develop outside the neoliberal frames of efficiency and competition that the state uses to manage migrants. Cross-cultural as well as co-ethnic networks can act in both productive and abusive ways for migrants. This chapter emphasises how these networks often function as coping mechanisms and forms of care in day-to-day life for marginalised migrants in Dubai. Through ethnographic case studies ranging from the work of hometown associations to rotating credit unions, this section of the book shows how low-wage workers in particular rely on affinities and altruistic acts of aid in order to survive the difficulties of migrant life. In doing so, the chapter maintains that possibilities for a caring city exist even in Dubai – an urban space that has often been considered shallow and uncaring, especially to low-wage migrant workers.

The short Conclusion draws the themes of the book together to illustrate how this particular study of migration in Dubai is relevant to discussions of international migrant labour rights and a wider social justice agenda. In doing so, the argument is put forth that frameworks outside the nation-state are the most productive in creating circumstances that encourage better provision of low-wage migrant rights, welfare, respect and social justice. It is also suggested that it is informal, unregulated and organic forms of sociality that make a city a liveable and pleasurable space, especially for low-wage and marginalised groups. Finally, possibilities for future research are suggested.

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